

DATE: April 28, 2008

TO: Jonathan Alexander, Campus Writing Coordinator

FROM: Natalie B. Schonfeld, Senior Research Analyst  
Office of Research and Evaluation

RE: Upper-Division Writing Student and Faculty Survey

CC: Judy Shoemaker, Director, Office of Research and Evaluation

Attached you will find both the statistical results and written comments from the Upper-Division Writing Student Survey and the Upper-Division Writing Faculty Survey distributed during Winter Quarter 2008. The Upper-Division Writing Student Survey was distributed to all 626 students enrolled in a W course during the Winter Quarter; a total of 269 students completed the survey resulting in a 43% response rate. The Upper-Division Writing Faculty Survey was distributed to all 58 faculty members teaching a W course during the Winter Quarter; a total of 37 faculty completed the survey resulting in a 64% response rate.

The purpose of this study was to gather evidence about the efficacy of W courses from the perspective of both faculty instructing the courses and students currently enrolled in these courses as part of a larger effort to assess undergraduate writing at UCI. Both surveys were modified versions of the surveys used previously by the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) for a comprehensive review of the upper-division writing requirement at UCI.

In reviewing the findings, I wanted to highlight the following results and findings for you.

### Upper-Division Writing Student Survey

Students were asked about their writing experiences in Upper-Division Writing Courses (courses with a W suffix), writing courses in their major (not taken for the upper-division or lower-division writing requirement in their major), and their writing experiences in courses outside their major (not taken for the upper-division or lower-division writing requirement in their major).

#### Student Background

- In reviewing expected graduation rates, 51% of respondents will graduate by Summer 2008 (seniors), and 40% of respondents will graduate by Summer 2009 (juniors).
- Over half of the survey respondents are affiliated with the School of Social Ecology (51%). In comparing the school affiliations of survey respondents to those of the entire undergraduate population, there are significant differences. Students affiliated with Social Ecology are over-represented while those affiliated with Biological Sciences and Social Sciences are underrepresented among the survey respondents.

#### Upper-Division Writing Courses (Courses with a "W" Suffix)

- The most reported types of writing students are asked to do are research reports and short essays.
- When asked how many total pages they produced for their W course, 91% report they were required to produce 16 or more pages.
- When asked about feedback they receive on the quality of their writing, 90% of respondents report they receive feedback on their written work frequently to very frequently, with 82% quantifying that as enough or more than enough feedback. More importantly, 89% of respondents describe that feedback as somewhat, very, and/or extremely helpful.

- Based on feedback received, 70% of respondents report that half the time or more, they were encouraged to revise and resubmit their writing based on feedback while 53% report they were required to revise or resubmit their writing assignments.
- When asked about the grades received on their writing, 68% of respondents perceive that they the quality of their writing as well as the content were equally important in determining their grade. In addition, 98% of respondents report that their instructors are somewhat, very, and extremely knowledgeable about both the content and the teaching and writing process.
- While 88% of the respondents describe the overall quality of instruction as good, very good, or excellent, and 76% report they were able to make useful connections between upper and lower division writing courses half the time or more, only about half of the respondents (53%) felt the course contributed to improving their writing skills, and 48% felt prepared for writing assignments in other courses as a result of their upper-division writing course.

#### Writing Courses in the Major

- When asked how many total pages they produced per course in their major, 66% of respondents report they produce between 1-10 pages per course.
- When asked about feedback they receive on the quality of their writing, 61% of respondents report they received feedback on their written work half the time or more.
- Based on feedback received, 31% of respondents report that half the time or more, they were encouraged to revise and resubmit their writing based on feedback while 23% report they were required to revise or resubmit their writing assignments.
- When asked about course exams, 67% of respondents report that their exams required writing half the time or more.
- When asked about the contribution of their writing experiences in these courses to the improvement of their writing skills, 61% of respondents report that they contributed somewhat, quite a bit, or greatly to improving their writing skills.

#### Writing Experiences in Courses Outside the Major

- When asked how many total pages they produced per course in their major, 51% of respondents report they produced between 6-15 pages per course.
- When asked about feedback they receive on the quality of their writing, 50% of respondents report they received feedback on their written work half the time or more.
- Based on feedback received, 30% of respondents report that half the time or more, they were encouraged to revise and resubmit their writing based on feedback while 23% reported they were required to revise or resubmit their writing assignments.
- When asked about course exams, 63% of respondents report that their exams required writing.
- When asked about the contribution of their writing experiences in these courses to the improvement of their writing skills, 74% of respondents report that they contributed somewhat, quite a bit, or greatly to improving their writing skills.

#### Overall Evaluation of Writing Experiences at UCI

- In their overall evaluation of their writing experiences at UCI, 98% of respondents report they are confident that their writing is adequate for their chosen profession, 93% report they are confident that their writing is adequate for graduate school, and 86% of respondents describe writing instruction at UCI as good, very good, or excellent.

#### Upper-Division Writing Faculty Survey

Faculty were asked to assess the quality of student writing they observed in their Winter Quarter 2008 course, the factors that contribute to students' writing abilities and the techniques they use in the instruction of writing.

- When asked about the quality of student writing in their courses at the beginning of their Winter Quarter 2008 course, the majority (62%) of the faculty describe it as good (acceptable).
- Faculty respondents perceived student areas of difficulty as being, in order of significance, surface-level errors, organization and arrangement, logical and critical thinking, and vocabulary and word usage.
- When asked about possible factors that contribute to students' writing abilities, the top two concerns were insufficient experience in academic writing and insufficient time devoted to reading.
- These concerns are reflected in the faculty comments that students don't devote enough time to writing and don't understand what constitutes academic writing or how to produce it.
- When asked about specific techniques they use in the instruction of writing, half the time or more, 89% of the faculty report that they focus students' attention to the written genres specific to their discipline, and 83% report that they attempt to build on writing and communication skills developed in the lower-division writing courses.
- Further, based on the written comments, faculty see feedback as an important tool for addressing problems in writing, and many report the use of grading rubrics that reflect their writing criteria and the development of resources on how to organize a paper, ideas, and the construction/formulation of arguments.
- Though the comments by faculty suggest that there are a significant number of issues and challenges associated with student writing, 55% report that the quality of students' writing has remained about the same in the last five years, and more faculty describe the quality of student writing as better (24%) than worse (21%).
- When asked about the ideal time for students to take the upper-division writing course, 62% of the faculty cited the junior year.

#### Highlights of the Upper-Division Writing Student and Faculty Surveys

In reviewing the results from both the student and faculty surveys about upper-division writing, there are two important findings worth noting.

- There appear to be meaningful differences in student perceptions about their writing experiences in W courses, writing courses in their major, and their writing experiences outside their major. Students report producing more writing in W courses than in other courses both within and outside their major. They also report receiving more feedback about their writing, and are more often encouraged and/or required to revise their papers in their W course than is the case for other courses. When asked about the contribution of courses to improving their writing, students report that courses outside their major make the largest positive contributions to their writing, followed by courses in the major, and then the W courses.
- While the majority of faculty describe the quality of student writing as being either the same or better in the last 5 years, their comments about the instruction of writing suggest that it is both very time consuming and demanding, and their comments about students' writing suggest that there are a number of important issues in need of addressing. Key among these issues are the need for more opportunities and increased expectations for writing in the curriculum and within the major, and more in-class writing exercises and more feedback to students, in general, about the quality of their writing.

In addition, it is recommended that future upper-division writing student surveys include open ended items where students can provide comments about their writing experiences as this would likely provide a more complete picture of students' perceptions about writing at UCI.

If there is additional or further analysis you would like, please be sure to let me know.