

To: Academic Requirements Committee, Faculty Senate
From: Christine Harvey Horning, English Department
Date: November 6, 2014
Re: **First Year Writing (FYW) Placement Proposal: WR 115 & WR 135**

Recommended Proposal:

The English Department suggests the following two recommendations be implemented for incoming Western students starting Fall 2015: 1) the registrar will place students automatically into the appropriate first-year writing course based on their SAT Writing (or ACT English) scores, and 2) the adoption of a Writing Requirement Rider. These policies would appear in an expanded "First Year Writing requirements" section of the Catalog (p. 38 of 2014-15 Catalog).

- A. WOU's current guided self-placement recommendation reads: *"Students with an SAT Writing or Critical Reading score of **450 or lower** (ACT is 17 or lower) are advised to register for WR 115."* These scores equate to the 37%ile of students taking the exam nationally. They are also lower than the current scores needed to meet the Essential Skills Writing requirement for exiting Oregon high schools, which are 460 and 19, respectively (for graduation years 2014-2017). Our recommended new policy is tiered as follows:

First Year Writing Placement Policy

Western Oregon University's Placement Policy for First Year Writing Courses:

- Students scoring **below a 500** on the SAT Writing Test (20 ACT) who have no other college credits in writing will enroll in WR 115.
- Students who score below 500/20 **and** have at least a C for WR 115 or 121 (or its equivalent) may enroll in 135.
- Students scoring **500 and above** on the SAT Writing Test (21 ACT) (55%ile) who do not have WR 122 credits (or its equivalent) will enroll in 135.
- Students scoring **above 700** on the SAT Writing Test (31 ACT) (96%ile) have the option to place out of WR 135 and be given WOU credit for the course.
- Students who are admitted to WOU without a test score, known as "Alternately Admitted Students," will enroll in WR 115.

Challenge Exams are available on the following basis:

- An SAT score of 480 or 490 or an ACT score of 19 is eligible to challenge placement in WR 115.
 - Students must earn two (2) scores of at least "2+" (2.75) on the WOU First Year Writing "Trait-Based Rubric for Academic Essays" in order to place into WR 135.
- An SAT score of 680 or 690 or an ACT score of 30 is eligible to challenge placing out of WR 135.
 - Students must earn two (2) scores of "4" on the WOU First Year Writing "Trait-Based Rubric for Academic Essays" in order to test out of WR 135 and be given WOU credit for the course.

Challenge exams will be offered twice a year at WOU and administered by the English Department during New Student Week before classes start in the Fall and during Week 1 of Winter term.

1. The English Department will convene a subcommittee each Spring to oversee the development and coordination of the Challenge Exam for the new academic year.
- B. The second recommendation submitted is the addition of a Writing Requirement rider similar to the Math Department's.

Writing Requirement Rider: *"Students must complete this portion of the writing requirement toward graduation by the end of their freshman year (or no more than 50 credits completed at WOU). Students who do not meet this requirement will be put on notice."*

Projected Effects of the Policy

- A. The implications of this policy can be summarized by a comparison of the accuracy of student placement in WR 135. In Fall & Winter 2013-14, based on how they performed on their diagnostic writing sample (see Appendix A), **56%** of students placed themselves incorrectly into WR 135. This means that an average of over half of the students in any given section of WR 135 did not have sufficient writing skills to be in the class.

If SAT scores were used as the sole method of placement, only **32%** of students would be placed incorrectly, an improvement of 24 percentage points, and a number which could be further reduced by the Challenge Exam opportunity. From the instructor's perspective, this difference improves the classroom experience significantly as the range of skill level in a class tightens considerably, from over half being underprepared to only a third. Real-time, this means that instruction can be delivered more consistently at the appropriate level to a more homogenous population--a greater number of students starting at the same Point A.

- B. Enrollment Projections: We have calculated the probable impact of this placement policy on enrollment in first year writing courses for an entering freshmen class. Based on the scores of the entering class of Fall 2013, we would need to offer 20 more sections of WR 115 per year and 4 fewer sections of WR 135, resulting in a total gain of 16 sections. In short, there are currently not enough sections of WR 115 being offered to accommodate the true need.
- C. Budgetary Considerations: Adding 16 more sections of first year writing annually will result in additional FTE of 1.8 for the English Department. Dean Monahan is willing to support this proposal in the LAS budget should it be approved. As the Common Core standards are phased in, we believe we'll see stronger preparation of HS students that will drive these numbers back down.

Appendix A: Rationale for the Policy

- I. Description of Problem (2011-2013)
 - A. Problem
 - B. What we did: Exit Exam
 - C. Results & Next Step

- II. Diagnostic Placement Exam (2013-2014)
 - A. Process
 - B. Results

Appendix B: The English Department's "Trait-Based Rubric for Academic Essays"

APPENDIX A

I. Description of the Problem:

In June 2011, a number of NTT instructors of the English Department called an informal meeting to discuss student performance in their WR 115 and WR 135 classes, motivated by the general sense that students were leaving WR 135 still unprepared for the writing tasks that lay ahead on their academic journey. Instructors questioned themselves and their own standards as well as wondered how to address the perceived shortcomings in a meaningful way. They talked about the possibility of an "exit exam" as an attempt to measure their perceptions.

In Fall 2011, a group of this same faculty began to develop a "Common Final." Over the course of the year, they created a scoring rubric, designed an exam, and selected appropriate readings. The Writing faculty became involved and took the lead on creating the rubric as well as gave input on the exam design. There was an initial "pre-pilot" where two instructors gave a shorter version of the exam to produce writing samples to score with the fledgling rubric.

The Pilot: In Fall 2012 and Winter 2013, the Common Final was administered in 15 sections of WR 135. Eleven instructors and faculty helped to read and score the essays. Students read 4 short articles and then wrote an in-class essay in 110 minutes that used and responded to the readings (one of the things we wanted to measure was appropriate citation techniques). Instructors then gave feedback on the initial drafts of their own students. What was unique here is that the only feedback given was a copy of the rubric with the appropriate descriptors in each category circled. So students would see what areas their writing measured at the 4, 3, 2, or even 1 levels (see attached rubric Appendix B). Students took this material home and were allowed a second in-class opportunity to revise their responses in a proctored setting during Finals Week. Blue books were used and monitored so that students could not arrive with a pre-written revision. When the final score was produced, instructors were thus looking at a more refined piece of writing in which students had had the opportunity to reflect, change, and polish their initial responses.

Results: The results of this pilot were dismaying. Instructors agreed that our target score upon exiting WR 135 should be a “3” on the rubric (see Appendix B). Two-thirds of the students taking the exit exam scored *below* a “3” after having taken the single required writing course of their university career. The average score in Fall 2012 was 2.29 with 33% of students scoring a 3 or better while in Winter 2013 (the larger sample) was 2.5 with 38% scoring at the desired level. The Writing faculty discussed the results, and we speculated that the problem may not be at the exit point but the entry point. Under the current “guided self-placement policy,” many students place themselves into WR 135 even though they are under-prepared for college-level writing. As I described to one student whom I was trying to encourage to leave 135 and start with 115, it is like building the second story of a house that doesn’t have a first story yet.

II. Description of Process: Diagnostic Exam

Second Phase: Thus, we found ourselves in a second phase of the Pilot: the Diagnostic Exam. We refined our rubric further, changed the topic and number of readings (from 4 to 2), and eliminated the revision step of the writing task since we now were looking at what skills they were bringing with them at the beginning of the quarter. We were also searching for the appropriate cut-off point, or threshold, between WR 115 and being WR 135-ready.

Process: The diagnostic was administered in 26 total classrooms during the first week of classes Fall 2013 and Winter 2014. Both WR 115 and WR 135 students took the test. Almost 100% of Writing faculty scored the exams in either Fall or Winter, and all essays were read twice. Serious discrepancies were resolved by a third read, but these were minimal. The average score of 2.5 remained consistent over both quarters despite different groups of faculty scoring each time. Faculty encouraged under-prepared students to move as a result of their diagnostic test score, but with the usual limited success. Students tend to resist moving, and usually only the most insecure about their writing will do so. What faculty wanted, as one instructor put it, is “a diagnostic with teeth.”

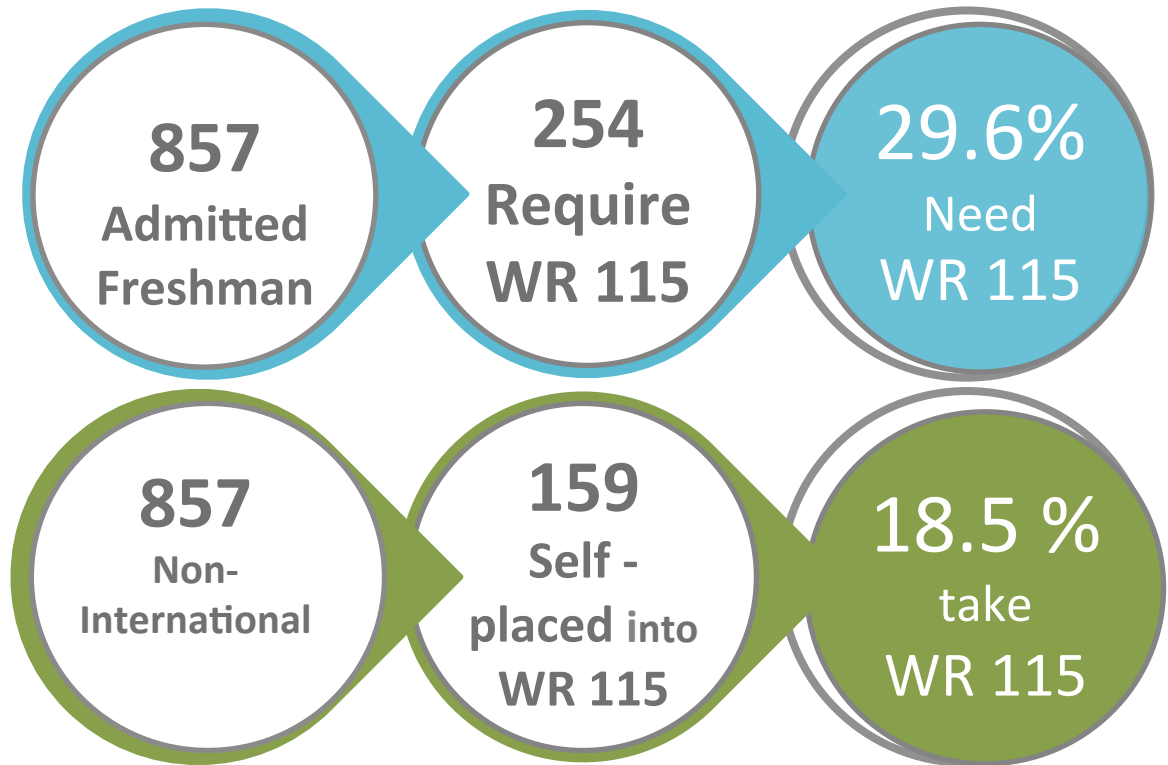
A subcommittee then set out to discover if there was a natural skillset “threshold” between a student who needed WR 115 and one who could succeed in WR 135. This group took 12 papers within the “2” category that had been scored at various combinations of a low 2, a 2, and a high 2 and scored them on 17 separate writing traits rather than holistically. No clear patterns emerged to give an indication of how to proceed. Yet the holistic score seemed reliable.

Result: For a report to the English Department, I compared students’ SAT Writing or ACT scores against how they had scored on our diagnostic. A clear pattern emerged that our diagnostic scores (as the result of a very time- and labor-intensive process) mapped closely to a national test score that 90% of students already have as part of being admitted to WOU. It thus makes sense to use the national scores and offer an opportunity to those students who are close to the cutoff points, and thereby considerably reduce the investment of faculty time to achieve better placement results.

APPENDIX B

[The English Department's "Trait-Based Rubric for Academic Essays"](#)

Writing 115 -- Statistics {2014}



379	SAT score below 500
94	ACT score 19 or below
<u>+ 33</u>	No SAT/ACT scores
506	= 59%
-167	Have WR115 from Dual Credit Programs
-67	Transfer in with WR 1XX equivalent
<u>-18</u>	Qualify for WR 135 (ACT higher than SAT)
254	TOTAL who need WR115

Challenge Exams

254 **Students**

-63 **Successful Challenge Exams**

191

