

November 11, 2008

To: (Provost, Associate Provost, Dean)

From: Linda Adler-Kassner and Ann Blakeslee

Re: National Survey of Student Engagement Findings (NSSE) and EMU

We wanted to share with you some significant data pertaining to instruction in writing from the 2007-2008 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). This data strongly supports the approach to writing that we have taken at EMU in the past decade through changes and investments in the First Year Writing Program, the Writing Across the Curriculum Program, and the University Writing Center.

This year, for the first time, the NSSE included a set of questions that focused on writing. Findings from these questions draw a clear link between best practices in writing instruction with measures of “deep learning.” More specifically, the data indicate that when instructors incorporate challenging writing assignments in their classes and make writing expectations clear through modeling and feedback – an approach that is encouraged and supported in all of the writing initiatives at EMU – students are more engaged in learning.

The report demonstrates that immediate benefits include gains in students’ abilities to work with the four strategies that are indicators of success in all writing: analysis, synthesis, integration of ideas from sources, and the ability to make ideas relevant inside and outside of the classroom.

The FYWP, WAC, and the UWC together comprise a three-pronged approach to supporting students as they develop strategies for critical writing, reading, and analysis crucial for their success in EMU courses and beyond. First Year Writing provides this support at the outset of their experience at EMU; the UWC provides support throughout their experience at EMU; and WAC provides support for writing instruction in the majors (primarily through the writing intensive requirement of the new General Education program, and by supporting faculty as they develop writing intensive courses as well as other general education courses that use writing). All of these initiatives also provide development for those who deliver the instruction and support: teaching assistants, adjuncts, and faculty.

Data from the 2006-2007 NSSE report, along with findings from a NSSE study conducted in 2007, suggest that students who are more engaged in their learning may be more likely to stay at their college than drop out or transfer. NSSE found that “effective educational practices, such as regular and intellectually challenging writing activities, play a significant role in retention and academic success, another central concern at EMU.

All of these findings strongly affirm our practices in EMU’s First Year Writing Program, the Writing Across the Curriculum Program, and the University Writing Center. Together, these

- Support the use of writing as a challenging, intellectually engaging activity
- Invite students to grapple with ideas in the context of academic disciplines
- Facilitate the connection of learning inside and outside of the classroom

These findings support the continued support and development of all of these critical university writing programs and initiatives.