

Writing in the News: NSSE Findings Emphasize Importance of Writing

Susanmarie Harrington, Director of Writing in the Disciplines, University of Vermont

The 2008 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) report shows clear patterns linking best practices in writing instruction and measures of deep learning. The NSSE report also emphasizes that variation *within* institutions is significant. This is an opportune time to explore how UVM students' experiences with writing may vary. Important elements of the NSSE report:

Writing is linked to deep learning

When courses “provide extensive, intellectually challenging writing activities students engaged in more deep learning activities such as analysis, synthesis integration of ideas from various sources, and grappled more with course ideas both in and out of the classroom.” Furthermore, students who had the chance to work on challenging writing projects “reported greater personal, social, practical and academic development.”

Processes of writing promote learning

The more importance a faculty member placed on preparing multiple drafts of a paper, the more likely they were to emphasize deep approaches to learning. The NSSE analysis of seniors' deep learning and gains indicates that pre-writing activities (feedback from peers and instructor) and good instructor practices (staging of assignments and classroom activities) is linked to growth in practical competence and integrative learning.

Student Preparation

Nearly one in five college seniors and 25% of freshmen say they frequently come to class without completing readings or assignments. UVM's 2002 NSSE results showed about 18% of freshman and seniors reporting this behavior.

NSSE reports that students are more likely to talk with their instructors or class peers about writing drafts; fewer than 1 in 3 first year students and 1 in 5 seniors regularly visited a campus writing center while working on writing.

What we can do

Promote sustainable writing in the curriculum: The Writing in the Disciplines program offers workshops that will help UVM faculty craft assignments that maximize student learning. Working with individuals or groups, we can explore ways that assignments can engage students in talking with each other and with faculty about course concepts. WID partnerships can help units analyze their writing expectations and map desired outcomes over sequences of courses. WID can also assist individual faculty in (re)designing their courses.

Use writing to make class preparation tangible: Regular writing assignments—formal and informal—are ways to promote deep learning *and* give students encouragement to be in class and prepared. We can work with faculty to structure informal writing assignments that cultivate regular class preparation without significantly increasing faculty workload. WID staff will welcome the opportunity

Increase student contact with the Writing Center: The Writing in the Disciplines program and the UVM Writing Center are working closely to ensure that student and faculty support come hand in hand. As we work with faculty on developing writing assignments and teaching strategies, we will structure student learning support that fits new teaching practices.