

University-Wide Writing, Critical Thinking, and Literacy Initiative

Why a Writing, Critical Thinking, and Literacy Initiative is Needed

We envision a University-wide, “Writing, Critical Thinking, and Literacy Initiative” designed to improve written communication, critical thinking, and information literacy at all levels, across the curriculum. These three learning outcomes are intertwined and are essential to nearly all areas of academic endeavor and to the mission of the University as a whole.

Currently assessment of written communication is carried out in the Composition program using the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) Written Communication Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) Rubric. For the last two years, these results have shown that students are just slightly below the appropriate benchmarks. Two specific areas that have shown need for improvement are “Student Use of Sources and Evidence,” suggesting a need for increased information literacy and “Content Development,” suggesting a need for improved critical thinking. There is no university-wide assessment of writing outside of Composition, though many programs assess it as part of the reviews they regularly undertake.

Assessment of critical thinking takes place in the Humanities 2510 course that is required for all students. Again, this assessment shows some good results, as well as some room for improvement. But like the Composition assessment, it represents a snapshot in time and does not account for student growth over the course of their time at FGCU or how critical thinking skills are demonstrated in major level courses. Again, many programs do include assessment of critical thinking outcomes in their periodic reviews.

We examined the Program Assessments for 2010 for Biology, Communication, English, Environmental Science, and Marine Science. While we were not able to find trends in data that was gathered and presented so differently, our examination underscored two important factors. First, written communication, critical thinking, and information literacy are essential goals across disciplines. Second, there seems to be little consistency in how these skills are introduced and assessed at the University level. This initiative is predicated on the idea that establishing that consistency throughout the student academic experience will lead to increased student proficiency in each of these competencies.

Proposed Scope, Resources, and Return on Investment

The Writing, Critical Thinking, and Literacy Initiative would have its roots in innovative work that has already been undertaken in Composition and in the General Education Curriculum. One focus of effort would be introducing a common language about writing, critical thinking, and information literacy throughout the University, enhancing student understanding of the skills they are being asked to develop and building the foundation for interdisciplinary conversations and more ambitious assessment. These efforts as we envision them could largely be carried out by current faculty, who might be compensated through stipends, with course releases, or through other means as deemed appropriate.

University-Wide Writing, Critical Thinking, and Literacy Initiative

In addition, we envision some standardization of assessment rubrics for written communication, critical thinking, and information literacy, perhaps based on the AACU VALUE Rubrics in each area. Again, these efforts could likely be carried out by current faculty perhaps with some limited training and consultation with assessment experts.

Additional resources would be needed to provide support for each college to incorporate and assess elements of the initiative in ways that are meaningful in their disciplines. Consultation and professional development could be provided through outside experts or again by providing compensation for experts already on the FGCU faculty.

We envision further support of the initiative being delivered through enhanced services at the Writing Center, the Center for Academic Achievement, and Library Services. Investing in innovative programs delivered directly to students would target those students most in need of skill building and could support faculty in the classroom. Specifically, we hope to see a one-time investment in the purchase or development of a program that would assist those students whose writing needs attention, whether they have skill deficiencies, second-language issues, learning differences, or other challenges. Other enhanced resources would be provided on an ongoing basis during the duration of the QEP, with ongoing evaluation of their effectiveness. We would endeavor to make sustainable efforts that were demonstrated to have the most significant impact on student achievement.

Overall, the return on investment for the Writing, Critical Thinking, and Literacy Initiative would be enormous, as it builds capacity at the University by enhancing faculty expertise and supporting the infrastructure for meaningful assessment. Most of the aspects of the initiative could be easily become self-sustaining. Improving student achievement in these three core competencies will ultimately serve not only the students, but the University and larger community in ways that are difficult to quantify directly at this time.

Goals of the Initiative

The Writing, Critical Thinking, and Literacy Initiative will have a direct impact on the achievement of four of the current student learning outcomes: effective communication, information literacy, problem-solving abilities, and technological literacy. It also would address two of the three General Education competencies: Written communication and Critical Thinking. Information literacy competencies are present under both of these categories. We believe the initiative will have the following results:

- Students will perform better in writing and critical thinking in General Education and in the majors.
- Students will demonstrate consistent improvement in writing, critical thinking, and information literacy.
- Students will graduate with improved readiness for professional practice.

University-Wide Writing, Critical Thinking, and Literacy Initiative

- Faculty members will be empowered to create meaningful writing and critical thinking assignments that directly support their teaching without creating burdensome workloads.
- The University will develop an infrastructure for writing, critical thinking, and information literacy assessment.
- The University will build capacity for interdisciplinary learning and connections by adopting and applying a common discourse relative to writing, critical thinking and information literacy.

Links to the University Mission

Improving writing, critical thinking, and information literacy across the University supports the mission by fostering academic excellence and career readiness. Helping students develop these competencies will ensure that they “cultivate habits of lifelong learning,” which will serve them as they face novel challenges and situations in their professional and personal lives. Focusing on these critical areas directly addresses the needs of all learners at the University, encourages diversity in its many forms, and creates new opportunities for interdisciplinary learning. The initiative we envision also includes components of service learning and enhancing learning through information technology, which also speak directly to the mission of the University.

Links to the University Strategic Plan

Goal 1: Academic Excellence – Strategy 2: Demonstrate and improve academic quality through assessment, institutional accreditation and accreditation of academic programs. By building an initiative that includes the assessment of writing, critical thinking, and information literacy at every level, we build the capacity for institutional assessment as well as contribute to a culture of accountability for student achievement, including readiness for professional practice.

Goal 1: Academic Excellence – Strategy 3: Strengthen diversity through internationalization: By developing and offering resources for those students who are working toward proficiency in English as a non-native language, we enhance our ability to attract international students and ensure their success.

Goal 1: Academic Excellence – Strategy 4: Provide effective academic support and library and information technology services to support the University’s academic endeavors and student learning. By providing electronic learning modules to support writing readiness, we capitalize on the power of information technology to support student learning. Additionally, we hope to bolster the services offered by the Writing Center to include those that support discipline-specific writing assistance. Expanding information literacy instruction will lead to improved student learning and academic performance. Improved retention of students is mentioned as a benchmark for this action, and focused information literacy instruction aimed at all first year students is expected to result in higher functioning students that are better prepared for the challenge of upper division courses.

Goal 3: Strategic Growth – Strategy 5: Increase degree production to meet BOG-defined targets for FGCU and the SUS. Improving the experience of first year students in relationship to writing and critical

University-Wide Writing, Critical Thinking, and Literacy Initiative

thinking and building their confidence in their writing and reasoning skills could support increased retention. This aspect of the initiative will also introduce first year students to sophomore and junior peers who are academically successful. Providing resources to improve writing and critical reasoning should also bolster retention.

Goal 6: Community Engagement – Strategy 4: Foster business/community partnerships to stimulate economic development and promote professional growth. Developing a writing initiative that empowers faculty to use both academic and workplace writing to enhance student learning opens the doors to partnerships with the business community in direct support of academic achievement.

Capacity for Assessment

The Writing, Critical Thinking, and Literacy Initiative would be built around ensuring meaningful and ongoing assessment of effective written communication, critical thinking and information literacy at all levels. Students would ideally be taught, challenged, and assessed on these three student learning outcomes in at least three points in their career at FGCU - the beginning, middle, and end - to track their progress from initial understanding to mastery. First year Composition courses would be an ideal place to perform the beginning assessments. Certain General Education courses, such as Introduction to Philosophy, which are identified as writing-enriched or critical thinking enriched would be candidates for locating assignments that could be evaluated using the AACU rubrics. And finally, senior capstone or seminar courses in the majors are promising venues for performing a final assessment of the three learning outcomes. Standardized tests such as ETS or Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills (SAILS) are also possible vehicles for additional longitudinal assessment. Four years after the start of this initiative, we should be able to see improvement over time in one complete cohort of four-year graduates.

University Support

We anticipate broad University support for the Writing, Critical Thinking, and Literacy Initiative as it would facilitate program assessment, foster student achievement in critical areas, and ultimately increase the time and energy faculty members have to teach their core content areas. The efforts while comprehensive can easily be designed to be non-invasive and supportive of other ongoing efforts. The Initiative could connect to many other student success and engagement activities at FGCU as well as faculty professional development activities. Finally, this initiative could lay the groundwork for a richer culture of teaching and learning as it would depend upon a broad, university-wide conversation about core student learning competencies.