

Written Communication Assessment Summary

December 2015

The Drake Curriculum promises to help students learn how to shape their writing according to subject, purpose, medium, context and intended audience. Our institution maintains a commitment to inquire into the consequences of our work with students, something Lee Shulman described as a “pedagogical imperative.”¹

This document provides an overview of written communication assessment data gathered since 2011, as well as some of the relevant initiatives designed to support student learning. It begins with a summary of direct and indirect data and concludes with a discussion of implications and recommendations.

Direct Measures

In summer 2015, Drake University faculty from various disciplines met to review samples of student work and explore students’ written communication skills. The purpose of the effort was to focus on Drake’s overall effectiveness in supporting student learning.

Faculty members used a rubric to evaluate 20 samples of student work, whose class standings varied from first year to senior, across four classes offered in the general education curriculum. The written communication rubric has four criteria:

- Voice: writer conveys tone, subjectivity, style, narrator, or point of view appropriate to the discipline, genre or audience.
- Organization and development: writer demonstrates mastery of standards and conventions, and advances its aims.
- Control: writing compels reader engagement; the language engages strongly with the purpose of the work and the needs and interests of the audience.
- Content: writer includes essential claims, evidence, ideas expressed, information conveyed, etc., as appropriate to the discipline, audience and assignment

Faculty reviewers found a great deal of variability in how students performed relative to the assessment criteria, but did identify consistent skill areas that needed improvement:

- Organizing and developing ideas. The writing samples demonstrated students’ struggle to successfully transition between ideas. This was especially the case for writers who tried to introduce a lot of ideas in one piece within a short page limit. A related issue was students’ challenge with fully developing ideas before introducing a new one. Faculty noted that students tended to summarize ideas and make claims without adding evidence or relevant information to support them. The faculty reviewers did find that assignment design helped support organization for some of the writing samples. For example, one of the assignments outlined a detailed structure for students to follow. Work samples that included this approach were more effective in organizing content.
- Use of quotations. Faculty noted students’ ineffective use of quotes. In several samples of writing, students introduced quotes without interpreting, elaborating on, or discussing

¹ Shulman, L. S. (2003). No drive-by teachers. Carnegie Perspectives. Retrieved from <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/perspectives/no-drive-teachers>

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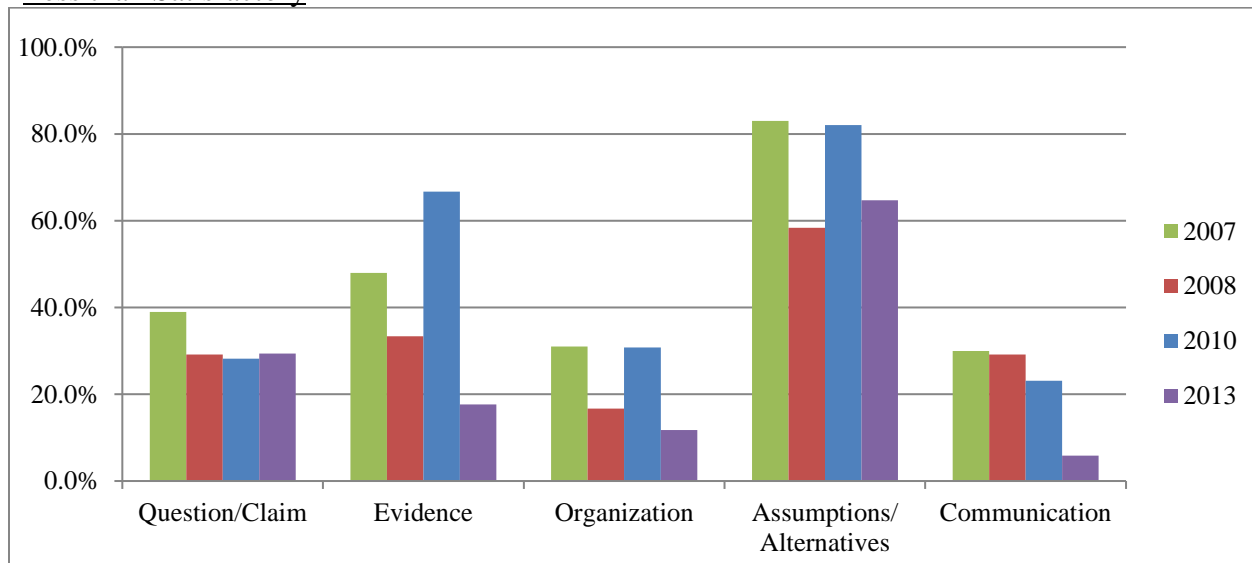
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their significance within the context. In some cases, students left it up to the reader to draw the connection between the quotes and the points they desired to make.

- Reflectiveness. Students tended not to engage in a thorough reflection on other points of view and made unexamined assumptions about the audience or content that was not always accurate.

Some of the conclusions from this assessment of students' written communication skills overlap with data from the critical thinking AOI review conducted in previous years. In 2007, 2008, and 2011 faculty reviewers examined work samples from first year students using the critical thinking rubric (*refer to rubric in the appendix*), resulting in a review of 86 work over three years. Each paper was rated by three faculty allowing for the calculation of a median score for all five rubric criteria. The information in Figure 1 below represents the percent of first year student papers with a median score that was "marginal" or "unsatisfactory" for each criterion by year.

Figure 1: Percent of FYS (2007-2010) and Senior (2013) Papers Receiving a Median Rating of "Less than Satisfactory"



The data show a consistent trend with the highest percent of low ratings in "assumptions and alternatives," "evidence/support" and "question/claims" indicating students struggle in these areas.

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Indirect Measures

To begin to understand why our students are challenged in these particular skill areas, it is worthwhile to explore student-reported experiences with writing. Results from the 2013 NSSE written communication module indicate that Drake FYS do report higher percentages of engaging in higher-level thinking (e.g. analyzing/evaluating information and arguing a position using evidence) on most or all assignments in comparison to peers. However, with only 29% of Drake First Year students discussing assignment ideas and fewer than half, seeking feedback before turning in work, it is possible that students are not taking full advantage of resources available to them. One should note that this trend is consistent at peer institutions as well. While students at peer institutions seem to engage in these behaviors more frequently, they are still relatively low (35% and 44% respectively). Table 1 summarizes FYS results from select questions on the NSSE written communication module.

Table 1: Percent of Drake FYS Compared to Peer FYS Responding to Select NSSE Questions with **“Most/All Writing Assignments”**

	First Year Student (Drake)	First Year Student (Peer)
<u>Item</u>	Most or All Writing Assignments	Most or All Writing Assignments
Talked with a classmate, friend, or family member to develop your ideas before starting your assignment	29%	35%
Received feedback from a classmate, friend, or family member about a draft before turning in your final assignment	43%	44%
Summarized material you read, such as articles, books, or online publications	50%	47%
Analyzed or evaluated something you read, researched, or observed	68%	60%
Argued a position using evidence and reasoning	58%	52%

This trend is consistent with seniors as well. A noticeable difference between FYS students and seniors is the latter group seeks peer feedback, uses peers to develop ideas before turning in an assignment, and reports fewer instances of engaging in higher order thinking skills than FYS. Again, this trend is consistent for Drake students and those at peer institutions. Table 2 summarizes senior student results from select questions on the NSSE written communication module.

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Table 2: Percent of Drake Senior Students Compared to Peer FYS Responding to Select NSSE Questions with “Most/All Writing Assignments”

	Senior Year Student (Drake)	Senior (Peer)
Item	Most or All Writing Assignments	Most or All Writing Assignments
Talked with a classmate, friend, or family member to develop your ideas before starting your assignment	25%	30%
Received feedback from a classmate, friend, or family member about a draft before turning in your final assignment	27%	30%
Summarized material you read, such as articles, books, or online publications	46%	47%
Analyzed or evaluated something you read, researched, or observed	68%	63%
Argued a position using evidence and reasoning	51%	47%

We do see, however, when we look at results from the Longitudinal Panel Study on questions relevant to written communication skills, that Drake students indicate their abilities are “better” since coming to Drake. Mean scores increased, as expected, from First Year to Senior year for most of the skill areas (Table 3). Mean scores were stable for the students’ rating of their ability to understand the perspectives and experiences of people different from them. This is likely due to the initial high score in this skill area. Table 3 summarizes the results from select questions from the Foundations of Learning Assessment and Drake Student Survey.

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Table: 3 Select Mean Score Results from 2011-2014 Longitudinal Panel Study

Each of the following reflects a goal of a Drake education. How have you or your abilities changed in each of the following areas since coming to Drake (Scale: 1 = much worse, 2 = worse, 3 = about the same, 4 = better, 5 = much better)	Pretest Mean (FLA)	Posttest Mean (DSS)	Effect Size
Employ evidence effectively in writing	3.82	4.08	0.33
Construct reasoned arguments	3.95	4.11	0.20
Evaluate reasoned arguments	3.91	4.12	0.25
Evaluate the quality or reliability of information	3.81	4.09	0.32
Understand the perspectives and experiences of people who are different than you	4.22	4.21	-0.01
Ability to integrate skills and knowledge from different sources and experiences	4.05	4.20	0.19

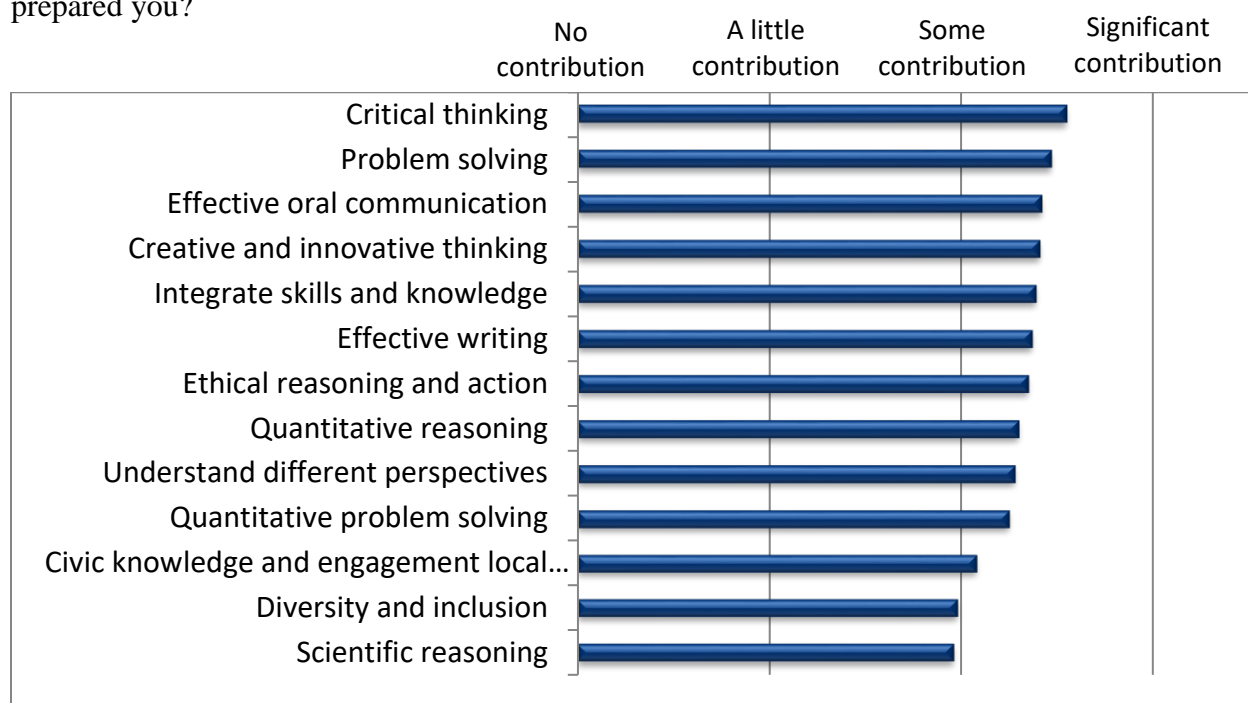
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Alumni Data

In summer 2015, Drake alumni were asked to rate how well Drake contributed to various skills. As seen in Figure 2, on average respondents indicated that Drake provided “some contribution” to their ability to write effectively. Of thirteen outcome statements, alumni ratings of contribution placed “Effective Writing” as the 6th highest.

Figure 2: To what extent do each of the following contribute to how well Drake University prepared you?



Ongoing Efforts

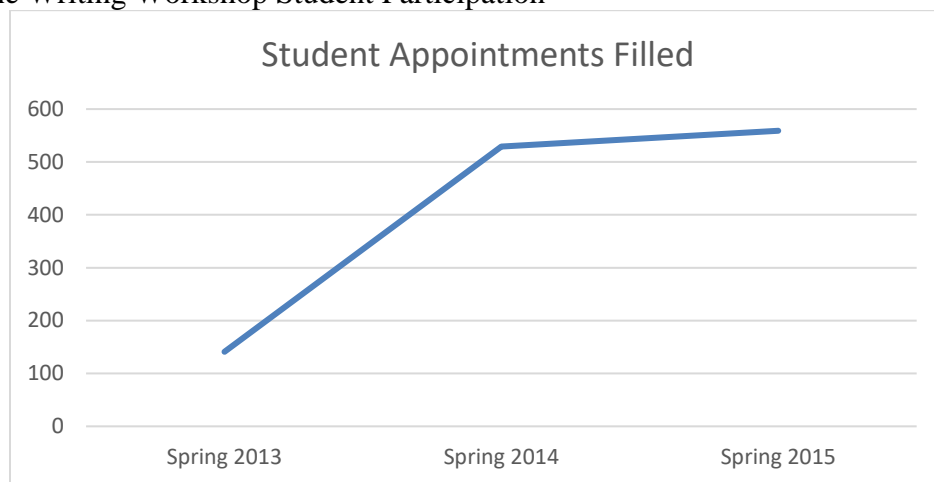
Drake provides several learning experiences through the general education curriculum to support student writing. The First Year Seminar is a semester long course that all incoming students with fewer than 30 credit hours are required to take. It offers writing-intensive experiences for students. Typically, these courses involve a series of short writing assignments beginning early in the term and totaling at least 20 pages in length. Instructors are expected to provide substantive feedback and students should be allowed an opportunity for correction and revision on at least some assignments.

The Writing Workshop is an ongoing effort designed to support student writing and faculty pedagogy in this skill area. This resource offers workshops on assignment redesign, etc.; peer tutors are also available to students. The Writing Workshop is typically utilized by first year seminar faculty and students, but has started to serve other students in the more recent years. Figure 4 shows the growing participation in the Writing Workshop in the past few years.

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Figure 4 The Writing Workshop Student Participation



There is some direct evidence that students whose instructors worked in collaboration with the Writing Workshop to support learning, experienced improvements in their writing over the course of the year.

Conclusions & Recommendations

The important question now is “What can we do with all of this information?” A broad overview of the data shows that Drake students are struggling in the areas of understanding others’ perspectives, identifying their own assumptions, organizing and developing their ideas, and making arguments. Results indicate that while students provide positive ratings of their own progress in developing writing skills (e.g., NSSE, DSS panel study, alumni survey), reviews of direct samples of student work highlight a concern with the quality of students’ writing and underscore the difficulty in teaching writing. The quality of writing varied in all sampled courses and across criteria, suggesting that developing writing skills is a long-term learning process which warrants ongoing attention.

As we work towards a writing intensive environment, DCAC committee offers several recommendations to enhance student writing based on our examination of the assessment data and comments from faculty who participated in the summer review of student work:

1. To the Faculty Senate, Provost, and University President: We recommend that increased resources be devoted to the writing center to support both enhancements to their existing services and expansions that will help them meet the needs of academic divisions across the university.
2. To the University Curriculum Committee, Faculty Senate, and committees working on revision of the Drake curriculum: We recommend that regardless of the direction the curriculum takes, there should be an emphasis on writing. This is in support of the writing principle passed through the Faculty Senate which emphasizes writing across the curriculum and in the discipline.

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- a. The quality of writing varied in all sampled courses and across criteria, suggesting that developing writing skills is a long-term learning process which warrants ongoing attention. These findings suggests a need for field-specific writing instruction. If the Drake Curriculum remains the same, we recommend looking closely at FYS's writing component, keeping the Written Communication AOI, and working toward developing field-specific writing courses or revamping some of the existing field-specific courses into writing intensive ones.
 - b. We recommend that Drake pay particular attention to the first-year experience. FYS has to be a "guaranteed" writing-intensive course, and though there has been progress toward this goal (Swilky's work with FYS instructors) sections still vary a great deal in the attention paid to writing instruction and practice.
3. To the Faculty Development office and Writing Center: We recommend the following development activities:
- a. Support ongoing and expanded faculty development workshops (e.g., Writing workshops) that support multiple needs (e.g., assignment design, providing feedback, implementing peer review, creating "writing intensive" courses). Faculty reviewers noted the importance of how assignments are structured and the consistency in quality in courses with a high level of structure in the assignment. Note here that "structure" does not equate to specificity or detail that limits creativity, but rather clarity of the overall assignment.
 - b. Sharing the written communication rubric across Drake. Individuals noted that the categories and descriptions were largely applicable across writing assignments and courses. We can see a strong benefit in providing a common framework for faculty and students (e.g. help students apply consistent standards of writing across the curriculum). This could be incorporated into a "Talking Teaching" session, with AOI faculty, and with departments. Departments may decide to tweak the rubric as needed. Provide a rubric with example pedagogical approaches for specific areas
 - Tracks for writing development (e.g., how to help students embed quotations, assignment design, prompts to structure writing)
 - Recommendation on providing resources for how to structure peer review and the best way to implement
 - Provide a rubric with example pedagogical approaches for specific areas
 - Developmental progression of skills – where to start to support individual students
 - c. Encourage department-level conversations about the quality of student writing. Noted that the rubric is a useful guide to support holistic discussions. Rather than

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focus on the process of assessment, faculty indicated that department discussions about the quality of student writing could offer more useful information. There may be a fear in opening up conversations about this topic (e.g., how do I address, how do I include in my course, do I have time and expertise), but saw strong potential for identifying needs.

- d. Provide additional resources to enhance student writing for those with learning disabilities as well as English language learners.

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Appendix

First-Year Students

First-Year Students				Frequency Distributions ^a				Statistical Comparisons ^b		
				Drake		Writing Experiences		Drake	Writing Experiences	
Item wording or description	Variable name	Values ^c	Response options	Count	%	Count	%	Mean	Mean	Effect size ^d
1. During the current school year, for how many <i>writing assignments</i> have you done the following?										
a. Talked with a classmate, friend, or family member to develop your ideas before starting your assignment	WRI01a	1	No writing assignments	13	5	2,901	13	3.0	3.0	- .02
		2	Few writing assignments	61	27	5,387	21			
		3	Some writing assignments	91	39	7,940	31			
		4	Most writing assignments	55	23	6,560	24			
		5	All writing assignments	14	6	2,660	11			
		Total	234	100	25,448	100				
b. Received feedback from a classmate, friend, or family member about a draft before turning in your final assignment	WRI01b	1	No writing assignments	13	5	2,705	12	3.2	3.2	.04
		2	Few writing assignments	43	19	4,285	17			
		3	Some writing assignments	73	32	7,016	27			
		4	Most writing assignments	78	32	7,680	29			
		5	All writing assignments	27	11	3,726	15			
		Total	234	100	25,412	100				
d. Summarized material you read, such as articles, books, or online publications	WRI01d	1	No writing assignments	7	3	1,438	6	3.4	3.3	.08
		2	Few writing assignments	32	15	3,745	15			
		3	Some writing assignments	78	33	8,418	33			
		4	Most writing assignments	87	37	8,416	33			
		5	All writing assignments	30	13	3,354	14			
		Total	234	100	25,371	100				
e. Analyzed or evaluated something you read, researched, or observed	WRI01e	1	No writing assignments	2	1	887	4	3.8	3.6 ***	.19
		2	Few writing assignments	13	6	2,358	10			
		3	Some writing assignments	57	25	6,706	27			
		4	Most writing assignments	111	47	10,355	40			
		5	All writing assignments	49	21	5,060	20			
		Total	232	100	25,366	100				
g. Argued a position using evidence and reasoning	WRI01g	1	No writing assignments	13	5	1,831	8	3.5	3.4	.11
		2	Few writing assignments	21	10	3,131	13			
		3	Some writing assignments	64	27	6,982	28			
		4	Most writing assignments	100	43	8,909	34			
		5	All writing assignments	35	15	4,486	18			
		Total	233	100	25,339	100				
h. Wrote in the style and format of a specific field (engineering, history, psychology, etc.)	WRI01i	1	No writing assignments	18	7	4,846	20	3.3	2.9 ***	.25
		2	Few writing assignments	34	16	4,635	18			
		3	Some writing assignments	68	29	6,285	25			
		4	Most writing assignments	83	35	5,889	23			
		5	All writing assignments	27	12	3,670	15			
		Total	230	100	25,325	100				
Total				234	100	25,384	100			
c.										

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Seniors

				Frequency Distributions ^a				Statistical Comparisons ^b		
				Drake		Writing Experiences		Drake	Writing Experiences	Effect size ^d
Item wording or description	Variable name	Values ^c	Response options	Count	%	Count	%	Mean	Mean	
1. During the current school year, for how many <i>writing assignments</i> have you done the following?										
a. Talked with a classmate, friend, or family member to develop your ideas before starting your assignment	WR10 1a	1	No writing assignments	21	11	5,051	15	2.8	2.8	.00
		2	Few writing assignments	52	26	8,364	23			
		3	Some writing assignments	81	38	11,418	31			
		4	Most writing assignments	44	20	8,360	22			
		5	All writing assignments	12	5	2,907	8			
		Total	210	100	36,100	100				
b. Received feedback from a classmate, friend, or family member about a draft before turning in your final assignment	WR10 1b	1	No writing assignments	22	11	6,158	18	2.8	2.8	-.02
		2	Few writing assignments	73	35	8,274	23			
		3	Some writing assignments	56	27	10,463	29			
		4	Most writing assignments	46	21	7,943	21			
		5	All writing assignments	13	6	3,194	9			
		Total	210	100	36,032	100				
d. Summarized material you read, such as articles, books, or online publications	WR10 1d	1	No writing assignments	9	5	2,461	8	3.3	3.3	.02
		2	Few writing assignments	31	14	5,055	14			
		3	Some writing assignments	72	35	11,325	31			
		4	Most writing assignments	82	38	11,866	32			
		5	All writing assignments	16	8	5,231	15			
		Total	210	100	35,938	100				
e. Analyzed or evaluated something you read, researched, or observed	WR10 1e	1	No writing assignments	3	2	1,579	5	3.8	3.7	.09
		2	Few writing assignments	14	7	2,990	9			
		3	Some writing assignments	46	23	8,565	24			
		4	Most writing assignments	105	49	14,654	40			
		5	All writing assignments	42	19	8,161	23			
		Total	210	100	35,949	100				
g. Argued a position using evidence and reasoning	WR10 1g	1	No writing assignments	16	8	3,773	11	3.4	3.3	.11
		2	Few writing assignments	22	11	5,073	14			
		3	Some writing assignments	63	30	9,741	27			
		4	Most writing assignments	72	34	11,112	30			
		5	All writing assignments	37	17	6,218	17			
		Total	210	100	35,917	100				
i. Wrote in the style and format of a specific field (engineering, history, psychology, etc.)	WR10 1i	1	No writing assignments	23	11	4,633	14	3.3	3.4	-.09
		2	Few writing assignments	33	16	4,439	12			
		3	Some writing assignments	41	21	6,907	19			
		4	Most writing assignments	74	34	10,170	28			
		5	All writing assignments	38	17	9,723	27			
		Total	209	100	35,872	100				
Total				211	100	35,966	100			

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Written Communication Rubric

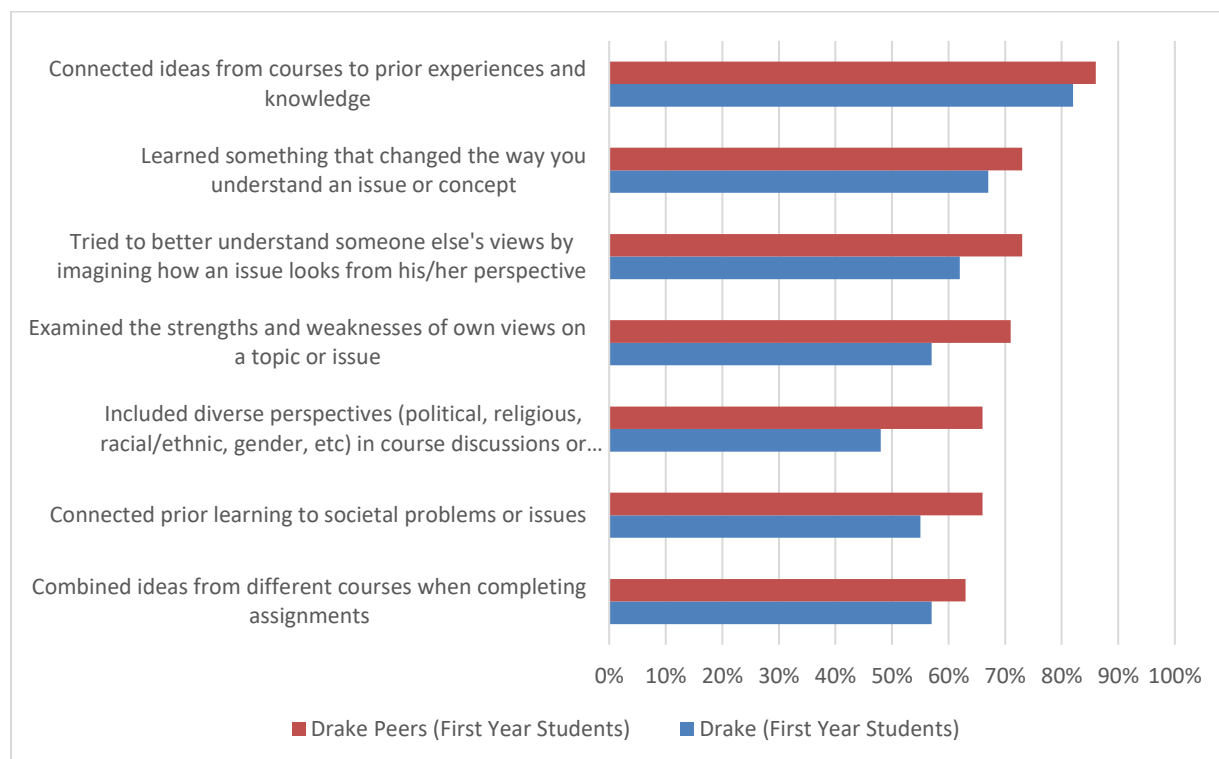
	Poor (1)	Fair (2)	Good (3)	Excellent (4)
Voice (or tone, subjectivity, style, narrator, or point of view, depending on discipline or audience)	The voice detracts from the goals of the writing.	The voice does not advance the goals of the writing or is not clearly established.	The voice generally advances the goals of the writing but shows occasional lapses in consistency or appropriateness.	The voice is appropriate to discipline, genre, or audience. It effectively achieves the goals of the writing, and is credible and/or compelling in itself.
Organization and Development (or form, genre, structure, mode, or presentation, depending on discipline or audience)	The writing is confusing and lacks development. It may invite interpretations contrary to its aims.	The writing is occasionally confusing, not well-developed, and does not fully conform to conventions and expectations.	The writing achieves its aims. It may occasionally deviate from standards or audience expectations. It may show occasional lapses in development.	The writing shows mastery of standards and conventions, and advances its aims.
Control (control over language as it relates to purpose and audience)	The writing uses language which does not attempt to address the purpose of the work or the needs of the audience.	The language of the writing does not make the goals of the piece clear to the reader. It shows little engagement with the purpose of the work or the needs of the audience.	The writing uses language effectively to advance the goals of the piece. The language generally engages with the purpose of the work and the needs and interests of the audience.	The language of the writing compels reader engagement. The language engages strongly with the purpose of the work and the needs and interests of the audience.
Content (including claims, evidence, ideas expressed, information conveyed, etc., as appropriate to the discipline, audience and assignment)	The writing includes little, if any, of the expected content material, and thus cannot achieve its aims.	The writing mentions the content but does not incorporate, examine, analyze or engage with it adequately.	The writing includes enough essential content material to achieve its aims and to answer expectations, but does not persuasively or compellingly incorporate, examine, analyze or engage with it.	The writing includes all essential content and uses it effectively to achieve its aims.

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Indirect measure of student learning from the 2013 NSSE survey demonstrate students' challenge in several skill areas. While these skills are not explicitly focused on writing, they do represent systematic learning challenges for Drake students that could be addressed through intentional writing experiences. Drake students' NSSE ratings were compared to peer institutional data. Figure 2 below shows First Year Students' responses to seven questions. Comparing the percent of Drake FYS to the percent of peers who responded either "Often" or "Very Often" shows that we scored lower on all of the questions, with the largest negative difference on items 3, 4, and 5 with a gap of 18%, 14%, and 11% respectively.

Figure 2 Percent of Drake and Peer First Year Students who responded "very often" or "often"



Interestingly, when looking at the same questions at the Seniors level, they are still showing up as lower than peer institutions on most of these questions. The largest negative difference is found on questions 3, 4, and 5, which is consistent with First Year Student data. However, the negative difference is not as large, 5%, 5%, and 3% respectively. On the sixth question, Drake seniors score slightly higher than peers, by 2%. (Figure 3).

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Figure 3 Percent of Drake and Peer Seniors who responded "very often" or "often"

