(Re-)establishing a WAC Community: Writing in New Contexts at Governors State University

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A Scene from ENGL 301

Recently I entered the English 301 classroom here at Governors State University for the first time. Even though I had taught college writing at all levels for ten years prior to this, I was nervous about teaching this particular course entitled "Composition: Structure and Style." Sixteen students sat in front of me. Thirteen of them were women; twelve of the sixteen were members of ethnic minorities; most of the group appeared to be older than me (35-years-old or older); and none looked happy about being in the course. One African-American woman who sat in the back row seemed to glare at me from the moment I entered the classroom. A little girl (perhaps 6-years-old) sat close beside her and seemed to be doing the same as I began to speak.

"Hello. My name is Eric Martin, and I will be your instructor this term. I have taught college writing for a decade, and over the years I have always started my courses by asking students to introduce themselves to me and one another. We'll do that later, and I will go over the syllabus for this course as well. First, I would like for you to take a few minutes to write a response to this question: 'What is English 301?'

"Before you begin, let me give you a bit more context. I am relatively new to GSU; I started here in June 1999. Also, I am not a faculty member. Rather, I am a full-time administrator. I direct something called the Writing Across the Curriculum program, which attempts to enrich the overall culture for writing on campus. My job entails working with faculty in all disciplines to enhance the teaching and learning of writing in each major. While this involves teaching, I will not be in the classroom unless I re-

quest to teach, just as I have done this term. Finally, I have not taught English 301 before now. That said, I would like for you to tell me about this course as you already understand it."

Except for the initial ruffling of papers and snapping of three-ring binders, the room remained quiet as the students wrote. After a few minutes, I asked for volunteers who might be willing to share what they had written. Hands went up cautiously. I reminded the students, "Remember, I haven't read the roster. I don't know who you are, so there's no need for hands. Just tell me about this course as best you can."

Volunteers began speaking. The first student: "English 301 is meant to improve my communication skills." From another student: "It will help me write better in my other classes." From a third: "This course will help my vocabulary and help me learn grammar." At this point, I signaled for a time-out. "Okay," I said, "these things are more or less true. But I get the feeling that you are holding back. Remember, I don't know your names, and I certainly won't remember who says what. So, can anyone else tell me about 301?"

At this point, the comments flew. "I'm here because I failed that stupid test." From another student: "I failed the test two times, so they told me I had to take 301 or not graduate next year." From a third student: "That test was unfair. Mine was so old it fell apart, and they didn't give us enough time." From a fourth student: "I got a B in English at my community college; I thought I was done with this. Besides, that was a grammar test. How does that tell about writing?"

After a few more such comments, silence again retook the room. Having said nothing throughout the first twenty minutes of class, the woman in the back row continued to follow my every move.

Our School

Governors State University is a state-supported, open-admissions institution enrolling approximately 6,000 students. The school offers only junior- and senior-level courses, as well as a variety of graduate degrees in its four colleges that include Arts and Sciences, Business and Public Administration, Health Professions, and Education. Students come to the university from "partner" community colleges in the region. Prospective students must have either an associate's degree in hand or 60 hours of course work. The vast majority of our students attend part time, hold full- or part-time jobs, and are the heads of their families. The average age of

students is 34, although we are beginning to enroll more "traditional-age" students. Approximately 70% of the students are women and over one-third are minorities. Perhaps most important for the discussion at hand, our incoming undergraduate students have already satisfied general education writing requirements at community colleges when they arrive, but many are still underprepared for writing in upper-division courses despite the best efforts of the community colleges.

Faculty members and administrators at GSU have been concerned about the quality of student writing for many years. However, they have been unable to agree on how best to address the "writing problem." Overworked faculty members have objected to solutions which they see "coming out of their hides," whereas cost-conscious administrators have worried about funding proposed solutions as well as other potential "costs" related to community-college relations. Administrative turnover has also contributed to the problem. Between 1992 and 2000, the Provost's Office was occupied by six "permanent" and interim appointments. In June and July of 1999, both the provost and the university's president of seven years resigned for a variety of professional and personal reasons. The current president began in April 2000, and the new provost/vice-president for academic affairs began six months later in October 2000. As was noted above, I started at GSU as the Director of Writing Across the Curriculum in June 1999.

Issues Surrounding Proficiency Testing and the WAC Program

Governors State began to address concerns about student writing in the early 1980s by requiring all incoming students to take a proficiency exam. Initially, the exam was a timed writing that was scored by a group of faculty members and administrators. Although interrater reliability was considered high, the exam eventually was seen as a deterrent to retention because community-college graduates simply applied elsewhere to avoid GSU's test and the requirement (and stigma) of additional course work if they failed. What's more, community college faculty questioned the exam. Many considered it an insult to their hard work. Even though most GSU faculty members supported the testing process and wished to see it continue, the former administration decided in 1995 that the exam's costs outweighed its benefits. However, because of strong faculty opposition to abandoning proficiency testing altogether, it was decided that an objective test would replace the timed writing. The assumption was that such

an instrument would ensure "more accurate" placement. The results would be "irrefutable" and would therefore eliminate much of the controversy surrounding the timed writing. Or so the thinking went.

Facing pressure from the faculty, administration, students, and community colleges, GSU's first WAC coordinator recommended ETS's Test of Standard Written English (TSWE) as the proficiency examination until the new WAC program could be implemented. It should be noted, however, that in the early stages of WAC's development at GSU, the relationship between proficiency testing and the WAC program was sketchy at best. As a result, TSWE was in place as a "temporary" arrangement from 1995 until February 2000. Students who failed the exam on their first attempt—and approximately 60% did fail—were required to take a grammar workshop offered by the Writing Center before being allowed to retest. Students who failed a second time—and approximately half of the initial 60% did fail again—were required to take ENGL 301. Registration holds ensured compliance.

Not surprisingly, this policy only increased the frustration of everyone involved. The students who failed the TSWE were frustrated at having to take another writing course. Their frustration increased when they learned that some academic programs counted ENGL 301 merely as elective credit, whereas others did not count the course at all. GSU's faculty remained frustrated. Most disagreed with the move from direct to indirect assessment, and, not surprisingly, few noticed any significant improvement in student writing. GSU's Writing Center staff grew increasingly frustrated because they had been forced into the grammar business, which took time away from individual tutoring and offering other kinds of workshops related more purposefully to the writing process. Finally, the English 301 instructors—most of whom were part-time faculty members—were frustrated because many of the students who were placed into the course resisted instruction. Student outbursts in the 301 classrooms and in the Writing Center became an ugly routine.

The WAC program faced turmoil as well. GSU began developing a writing-across-the-curriculum program in 1993. The following assumptions supported the original initiative and continue to do so today: 1) Writing is a tool for learning as well as communicating information; 2) Writing is a process and should therefore be treated as such; and 3) Student difficulties with writing must be addressed by faculty in all disciplines. Unfortunately, these assumptions were largely invisible between 1993 and 1998.

After several years of exploring WAC and discussing the local situation with experts in the field of writing program administration, GSU named its first WAC coordinator in 1995. The coordinator was to work in cooperation with a newly formed Writing Across the Curriculum Board, which included faculty from each college as well as the coordinator of the Writing Center, the director of Student Development (the office directly responsible for proficiency testing in both writing and math), and various other campus constituencies. The first WAC coordinator was a tenure-track faculty member in English; therefore, he reported to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences while working closely with the Provost's Office on matters related to WAC.

The WAC coordinator and the provost at the time determined that GSU's program would follow the writing-intensive (WI) model. Such an approach was considered both viable and cost-effective. In the GSU model, a student would complete at least one (and eventually several) WI courses in his or her major. These courses were to be existing content-area courses which would have a writing workshop built into them. Thus, students enrolled in a three-hour course were to spend two hours each week investigating the "content" of the course; the third hour would then be devoted to using writing to explore that content in a student-centered workshop format. One full-time faculty member was to be responsible for both facets of the course. He or she would be supported with WAC workshops, while his or her students would receive assistance with writing through the Writing Center. In late 1995, the University Curriculum Committee voted to make the completion of at least one WI course a graduation requirement for all undergraduate students beginning in the fall of 1996. The Faculty Senate approved this proposal shortly thereafter.

Throughout the spring and summer of 1996, the WAC coordinator and WAC Board worked with various programs to develop WI courses. This process extended through fall 1996 and well into 1997 as conflicts arose regarding the definition of "writing intensive." Thorough guidelines had not been developed. The role of the WAC Board in program development and oversight was unclear. Most faculty viewed the WAC Board with suspicion. And the authority of the WAC coordinator was questionable as there was considerable disagreement about this person's leadership style.

The WAC coordinator subsequently resigned in the spring of 1998. An interim coordinator was appointed for the 1998-1999 academic year,

and a search for a permanent replacement began in the fall of 1998. I began on June 16, 1999, and while I have been assured that their respective decisions were "nothing personal," the provost resigned at the end of my first week on campus and the president followed suit several weeks later. These resignations were especially significant because after the departure of the first WAC coordinator, the position was reclassified as an Administrative and Professional position that reports directly to the Office of the Provost.

In the wake of such conflict and administrative turnover, the WAC Board lost all authority over the writing-intensive courses. Instead, individual programs and instructors began indicating for themselves which courses would be taught as "WI" simply by checking (or not) the "WI box" on the university's official course proposal/revision form. These decisions were made in the absence of WI guidelines and, in most cases, administrative support for those earnest instructors who genuinely wished to satisfy the original intent of the WI initiative. As a result, some of these faculty members now teach WI courses with enrollments of 30, 35, or 40 students. Also, as one can imagine, student compliance with the one WI course graduation requirement has been and remains suspect. In many cases, it would be impossible for students to satisfy the requirement if it were strictly enforced because the status of many WI courses varies from section-to-section, term-to-term, and year-to-year.

In sum, by June 1999 the proficiency testing policy was again being criticized by all of the university's stakeholders both for the exam being used and for the course in which students were being placed; the WAC program had essentially collapsed; and perhaps most damning, consistent administrative leadership was once again missing. The WAC Board remained but was powerless as it watched both the WAC community and its curricular context implode.

A Summary of Assets and Actions

My first instinct in the wake of such chaos was to leave town. I decided to attend the *Council of Writing Program Administrators Annual Summer Conference* and its accompanying pre-conference workshop. In one of the workshop sessions, I learned for the first time of Dan Royer and Roger Gilles's article "Directed Self-Placement: An Attitude of Orientation" (CCC 50.1/September 1998). Prior to this, I had heard of DSP, but I had not considered the idea for GSU. Like many others, I assumed

that such a placement method works only at elite schools. However, as the workshop and conference unfolded, directed self-placement became increasingly appealing. I asked myself: Who better to make an authentic, adult decision about education than adult learners? What better way is there of restoring student dignity while repairing damaged relationships with our partner schools? Directed self-placement seemed like an obvious choice for GSU. When I returned to campus, I shared the idea with the WAC Board members, and they agreed. In fact, their collective enthusiasm may have eclipsed my own.

Early in the fall of 1999, the Board and I began exploring several possible new directions for the WAC program, all of which featured directed self-placement. The best of these ideas actually originated in a 1993 WPA Consultant-Evaluator's report written by Edward White. This report was sent unceremoniously to me in August 1999 by an administrative assistant working in the Provost's Office.

As discussions of WAC were starting at GSU in 1993, White was invited to campus to evaluate the existing writing program. In his subsequent report, he indicated that the single best way to ensure student writing competence at GSU was to create a rigorous upper-division writing course and require it of all incoming students. As a result, there would be no need to test incoming students either by means of timed essays or objective tests. The course would simply be part of the curriculum— thereby eliminating the stigma of remediation—and writing proficiency would be reflected in a passing score for the course. Recognizing that some students enter GSU with superior writing skills and experience in their field, White also recommended a "challenge" (course-equivalency) exam for highly-qualified students. Back then, his recommendation fell on deaf (if not frugal) ears, but in 1999 it burst with promise. The WAC Board ran with the idea.

We quickly developed a proposal for *expanding* the WAC efforts at GSU. We hoped to build upon existing work with student writing which was, in fact, exemplary and to avoid unnecessary conflicts. We developed a model in which students would self-place into either English 301 or a required, upper-division "gateway course" that would introduce them to the discourse conventions of their respective majors. We proposed developing such a course in each of the university's eight academic divisions. After successfully completing the gateway course for their major, students would then take WI course(s) which, at least for the time being,

would remain undisturbed. Our model also promoted the development of writing portfolios which would both benefit the students and facilitate program assessment. Throughout the fall of 1999, the Board and I worked on this proposal, and I began circulating numerous copies of Royer and Gilles's CCC's article to faculty members and administrators alike.

The gateway course was soon given a name. We wanted the rigorous writing course that White had advocated, but we realized that either adding a new three hour requirement to already packed curricula or converting existing courses to a new format would be impossible unless the course could address other needs. The two most obvious possibilities related to our students' struggles to collect, analyze, and synthesize information as well as the inability of many GSU students to use even basic technology, let alone discipline-specific data bases. We began calling the course a "Writing-Research-Technology" (WRT) course, but later changed the name to "Writing-Information-Technology" (WIT) at the behest of colleagues in the physical sciences who did not like the term "research" bandied about so casually. We didn't quibble. Given the overall condition of the WAC program, it seemed like the time for a little "WIT" was long overdue. More importantly, this new identity would allow us to move colleagues away from earlier thinking which viewed writing and conveying "course content" as separate activities. Appendix 1 depicts our proposed program as of the Fall 1999 Trimester.

Throughout the fall term, reactions to our ideas ranged from generous support to complete disagreement. Although the outgoing president loved the idea of directed self-placement, she remained silent about curriculum revisions. The interim provost also supported self-placement, but she too was skeptical about curriculum revisions. In various meetings with faculty members, our ideas regarding directed self-placement and the WIT courses were generally well-received, but like the chief administrators at the time, most were skeptical given the WAC program's sordid history. Strong resistance was also voiced. As one long-time division chair put it, "We think WAC is a pain-in-the-ass, and we want less of it, not more."

The "Not-So-Silent" Spring of 2000

Despite such remarks, the Fall 1999 Trimester generated many positive discussions of directed self-placement and WAC. By the Spring 2000 Trimester, more decisive events began to unfold.

At the request of the Director of Student Development (who by this time was serving as the interim associate provost), I called ETS in February 2000 to inquire about the status of the TSWE. The reason for the call was innocent. The test booklets which GSU had been using throughout the five-year "temporary period" were worn-out, and the Student Development Office needed to obtain new versions of the exam prior to testing for the Spring/Summer 2000 Trimester. None of us was sure that the TSWE was still available because it was not included among the exams listed on the ETS web site. I called so that alternative instruments could be discussed if necessary.

The call proved informative. I learned that Governors State had unwittingly violated several ETS policies related to the TSWE over the period. As a result, we were asked to destroy the test booklets in our possession, and we were sent revised TSWE materials as well as information on a variety of other writing exams which were "potentially better suited to our needs." In the hours following this phone call, the University Examination Committee was reconvened—it had not met in several years—and within days of the call, the committee had voted against the continued use of the TSWE. However, because students test weekly at GSU, because the major testing session for the Spring/Summer 2000 Trimester had been arranged and was closing in, and because discussions of directed self-placement were ongoing, the Exam Committee voted to replace the TSWE with another objective test (Conventions of Written English). At its first meeting, the committee settled on this course of action but after hearing the compelling testimony of the Writing Center coordinator (the person who administers the proficiency exam for writing on behalf of the Office of Student Development), members vowed that this new arrangement would in fact be temporary this time. Indeed, before that first meeting concluded, several committee members were already intrigued by directed self-placement as the Writing Center coordinator and I described it.

A few weeks later in March 2000, I shared with the Deans Council a report which summarized the dubious condition of the existing writing-intensive program. They reacted with shock and dismay, and (not surprisingly in hindsight) I left the meeting charged with writing a follow-up report which would: A) outline the steps necessary for correcting the situation, B) offer the WAC Board's recommendations for training and appropriately compensating WI instructors, and C) discuss the overall cost of the "repairs." At first, this report proved impossible to write because

the assignment asked me to revive a program that had never worked. However, the follow-up report ultimately served as a powerful tool for promoting the WAC Board's ideas related to WIT courses and directed self-placement. It was sent to the Deans Council as well as the new university president who began a month later in April 2000.

With the permission of the interim provost, I met with the new president in May 2000. In this meeting, I sketched the current state of WAC and proficiency testing, and I overviewed the steps which would be necessary to "restore" the WI requirement. After I outlined the steps—steps which included approving guidelines for WI courses, reviewing syllabi for *all* new and existing WI courses, and requiring workshops of all faculty assigned to teach WI courses—he asked what I wanted to do.

I indicated that the time for the WI approach toward WAC at Governors State had passed, and that the history and ill-will surrounding the requirement would likely preclude success. My specific comment was: "The steps outlined in this report would simply position us to repeat the mistakes of the past." I then shared with the president the possibility of developing in each academic division and/or college a Writing-Information-Technology course which would be required of all students. I also explained the WAC Board's (and by this time, the Examination Committee's) proposal for launching the WIT program with a system of directed self-placement. This system, I explained, would allow students to enter into the WIT course either directly or via English 301, depending upon a guided self-assessment of their own writing abilities when they enter the university. At this point, he began to smile.

Near the end of our discussion, the president said that the WAC Board should begin developing materials related to the WIT course for consideration during the upcoming strategic planning initiative. When I mentioned that adding a curricular requirement would not be easy or cheap, he responded, "Eric, quality never is." Regarding directed self-placement, he asked that we proceed more cautiously. He recommended conducting a pilot study as soon as possible. He reminded me that ultimately democratic processes would determine the outcomes for both WAC and directed self-placement, but he indicated that the WAC Board would have his support. It was then my turn to smile.

The Current Status of WAC and DSP at Governors State

Between May 2000 and May 2001, I met with the Board of Trustees, the Deans Council (several times), the Faculty Senate, colleagues from

the community colleges, and numerous GSU faculty members and students to discuss the future direction of proficiency testing and WAC at Governors State University. Through these sessions, it became clear that at least four additional things needed to happen to give the proposal its best chance for success.

First, the portfolio requirement concerned the faculty members. Most worried about assessing and then storing the portfolios, and junior faculty members were convinced that the work would fall disproportionately upon their shoulders. Moreover, several programs were already requiring different kinds of portfolios in capstone courses, and they were against anything which might disturb the status quo. As a result, the WAC Board decided to eliminate the requirement from its proposal and return to the portfolio discussion later. Appendix 2 represents the revised proposal.

Second, regarding the writing-information-technology courses, it became clear that before the colleges would implement WIT courses at the division level, they wanted to see the course in a generic format. As a result, the WAC Board and I developed a WIT course for undeclared students, non-degree seeking students, students enrolled in the Integrative Studies program, and students enrolled in the Board of Governors program—a B.A. program that credits students for life experience in addition to previous college course work. A WAC Board member and I created the course which, similar to many junior-level WAC courses offered at other schools, covers critical thinking and research methodologies in the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Physical Sciences. We also arranged to team teach the course for the Fall 2001 Trimester through the College of Arts and Sciences.

Third, regarding DSP, concerns lingered about its feasibility among working adults who may know but not necessarily make the best placement decisions due to pressures from families and/or employers regarding swift degree completion. As a result, the WAC Board and I decided to invite Dan Royer to campus in April 2001 to make a presentation and address concerns. The day was a terrific success. Many people who described themselves as "on the fence" regarding DSP subsequently considered it appropriate for GSU students. In fact, those who coordinate math placement on our campus are also now moving to a system of directed self-placement. That said, there is ample more work to be done.

Specifically, we currently lack a mechanism for directed self-placement. The former administration eliminated compulsory new student ori-
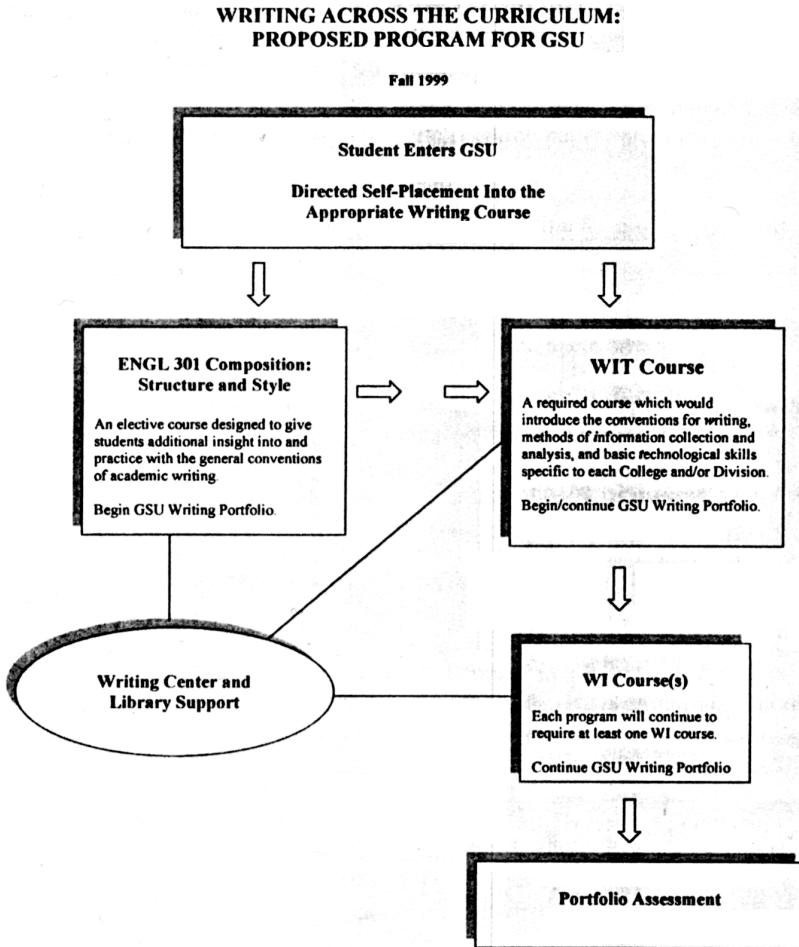
entations because these "inconvenienced" our adult student population. However, during the university's strategic planning process last year, widespread support for reinstituting mandatory orientation was voiced. If mandatory orientation is brought back—and it appears now that it will be—we will need to offer sessions in both campus-based and online formats to accommodate our many distance learners. Currently, the WAC Board is working with the Office of Student Development to create the orientation and an accompanying web site which will enable DSP online. We plan to pilot the system in fall 2002. As part of the self-placement process, students will reflect on their past writing experiences in school and on the job using a checklist similar to that in Appendix 3. They will read exemplary student essays from the respective colleges, preview syllabi for ENGL 301 and the WIT course relevant to their major, and take a self-scoring, diagnostic grammar exam. Based on these indices as well as any informal consultations with faculty regarding their writing, individual students will then make their course selections for writing. Math placement will follow a similar format, and registration holds will ensure that the orientation and placement process is completed.

Finally, the stakeholders made it clear that a consistent message regarding the administration's long-term commitment to the success of WAC had to be sent. This happened via the strategic planning process when "demonstrable academic excellence" was identified as the university's highest priority. This pursuit of quality occasioned the creation of a Center for Quality in August 2001, which now coordinates GSU's assessment program, faculty development initiative, Graduate Studies Council, and WAC program. The Center is administered by the Assistant Provost/Director of the Center for Quality, and I have the honor of originating the position. Although my new job still does not guarantee a full-scale implementation of either the WIT proposal or directed self-placement, it does appear that both the university community and the curricular context for a successful WAC program are nearly (re-)established at Governors State University.

The next time that I teach ENGL 301, I anticipate that the students will be smiling on that first night of class because they will want to be there. Undoubtedly, I will share their enthusiasm.

Appendix 1

WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: PROPOSED PROGRAM FOR GSU, Fall 1999

WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM:
PROPOSED PROGRAM FOR GSU

Fall 1999

Student Enters GSU

Directed Self-Placement Into the
Appropriate Writing Course

ENGL 301 Composition:
Structure and Style

An elective course designed to give
students additional insight into and
practice with the general conventions
of academic writing.

Begin GSU Writing Portfolio.

WIT Course

A required course which would
introduce the conventions for writing,
methods of information collection and
analysis, and basic technological skills
specific to each College and/or Division.

Begin/continue GSU Writing Portfolio.

Writing Center and
Library Support

WI Course(s)

Each program will continue to
require at least one WI course.

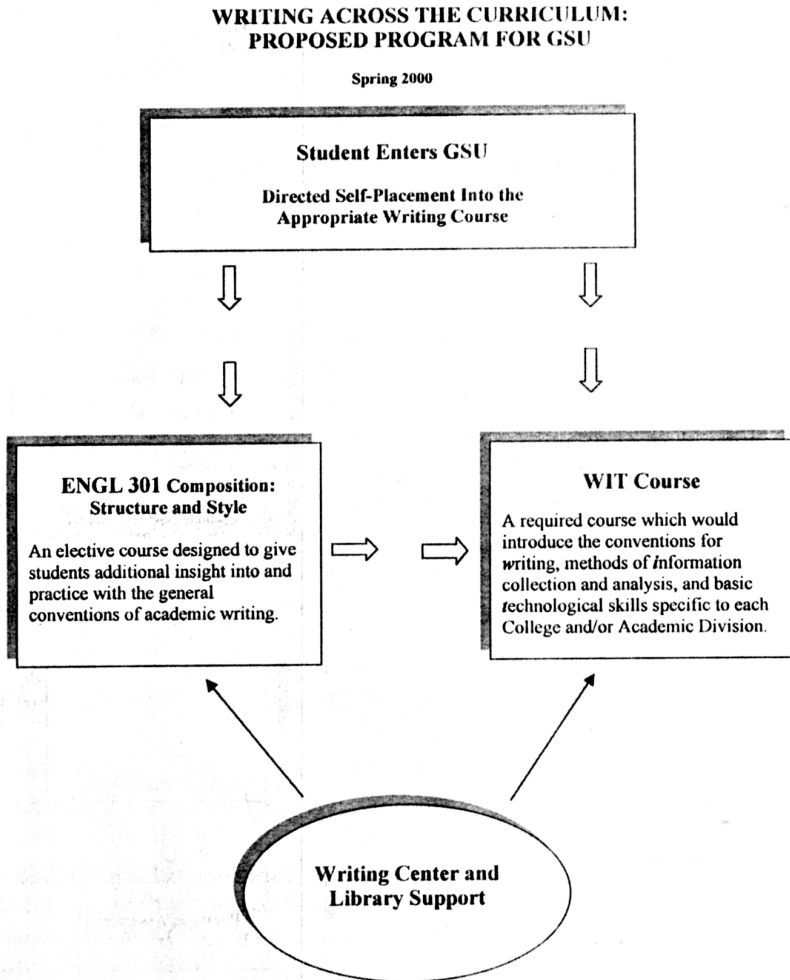Continue GSU Writing Portfolio

Portfolio Assessment

Appendix 2

WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: PROPOSED PROGRAM FOR GSU, Spring 2000

**WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM:
PROPOSED PROGRAM FOR GSU**

Spring 2000

Student Enters GSU

**Directed Self-Placement Into the
Appropriate Writing Course**

**ENGL 301 Composition:
Structure and Style**

An elective course designed to give
students additional insight into and
practice with the general
conventions of academic writing.

WIT Course

A required course which would
introduce the conventions for
*w*riting, methods of *I*nformation
collection and analysis, and basic
*t*echnological skills specific to each
College and/or Academic Division.

**Writing Center and
Library Support**

Appendix 3
Checklists for Directed Self-Placement at GSU

Characteristics Which May Indicate That ENGL 301 Is Your Best Choice
- I have been out of school for a long time, and I don't write very much in my current job.

- Although I have recently taken a college writing course at another school, I am still unsure about how to write research papers and other kinds of papers which require sources.

- I am nervous that I am not really ready to write for upper-level courses in my major.

- I am uncertain about the rules of standard written English (e.g., spelling, grammar, punctuation, usage), and I often make errors.

- I have used computers for researching, drafting, and revising essays, but I am still unsure of myself with such technology.

- Overall, I do not think of myself as a strong reader and writer at this point in time.

Characteristics Which May Indicate That You Are Ready for a WIT Course
- I have recently taken college writing course(s) and I have excelled.

- I have not taken a college writing course in a long time; however, I frequently write formal documents (e.g., memos, letters, proposals, reports, etc.) in my current job, and I am confident when composing such documents.

- Although I do not yet know the conventions for writing in my major, I am comfortable writing research papers and other kinds of papers which require sources.
- I know the rules of standard written English (e.g., spelling, grammar, punctuation, usage), and I make very few mistakes when writing.

- I have used computers extensively for researching, drafting, and revising essays.

- Overall, I consider myself a strong reader and writer who is ready for advanced writing assignments.