Improving Western's ACOM General University Requirement

Writing Instruction at Western

While this report pertains to CUE's work related to assessing the ACOM GUR, in order to understand the impact/role of ACOM, the following articulates the overall purpose of the Communications portion of the GUR programs (ACOM, CCOM, and BCOM):

> *"Communication is the foundation of your academic education and essential for your professional and personal success. These GURs develop your ability to generate, assess, and express ideas accurately, clearly, and creatively in a range of modalities and using a variety of technologies. Through ongoing learning and practice in different contexts, good communicators acquire skilled expertise in designing information effectively in different ways for different audiences. This area includes courses in writing, speaking, and information literacies."*
> - *WWU [Communication GUR (ACOM, BCOM, & CCOM)](#)*

The only class that currently fulfills the ACOM requirement is English 101 "[Writing Your Way Through Western](#)," though a student can also satisfy this requirement by scoring a 4 or higher on the AP English exam. Pre-pandemic, about 66% of incoming students needed to enroll in English 101 to fulfill their ACOM requirement. Due to a substantial decline in students testing out of ACOM via the AP English exam, now close to 90% of incoming students must take ENG 101 to complete ACOM.

English 101 is run by the University Writing Program (UWP), led by English faculty member Dr. Jeremy Cushman, and housed in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHSS). ENG 101 enrolls ~1,800 students yearly. The UWP runs ~28 course sections quarterly, capped at 22 students[1], and taught entirely by first and second-year MA/MFA graduate teaching assistants, most of whom have no prior teaching experience.

To fulfill the remaining writing requirements at WWU in addition to ACOM, students are required to take one BCOM or CCOM course and must obtain at least three writing proficiency (WP) points from 300 or 400 level courses.

Overview of CUE's 2022-23 Approach to Assessing ACOM

During academic year (AY) 2022-23, CUE assessed the effectiveness of Western's first year writing program, which is currently the ACOM GUR: ENG 101. As part of this work, CUE, with input from a variety of stakeholders across campus, developed the following learning objectives and assessed them using three main approaches:

1. Students will demonstrate ability to engage in critical and reflective analysis of diverse perspectives and communication techniques

2. Students will demonstrate ethical research and writing through locating, evaluating, and utilizing sources, to both develop and support their argument and discover what has been said and whose voice is missing

---

[1] Historically, WWU's English 101 classes were capped at 24 students. Since AY 2022, classes are now capped at 22. The Conference on College Composition and Communication, (the largest professional organization representing two- and four-year writing instruction), recommends that no more than 20 students should be enrolled in a writing class, and ideally, writing classes should be capped at 15. https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/postsecondarywriting

3. Students will demonstrate the ability to evaluate both scholarly and non-scholarly sources

4. Students will demonstrate understanding of how to craft comprehensible and effective arguments

5. Students will be able to understand and navigate the stages of writing, from generating ideas to revising the final product

6. Students will understand the need to adjust their writing or other communication based on their objective, audience, and other context

The first approach to assessing ACOM was a direct assessment of student work in ENG 101; this was done by having the Office of Institutional Effectiveness give CUE a randomized list of about 75 recent ENG 101 students who passed the course, where the randomization was set up to include more Pell-eligible students, first-generation students, and underrepresented minority students than would be likely from chance alone. CUE then obtained the final English 101 research project (the Observe, Analyze, and Theorize "OAT" Project) for these students. CUE members reviewed these submissions to see if there was evidence of satisfactory conclusions from the first four learning objectives listed above, noting that reviewing the final OAT submissions was not likely to give evidence one way or another for the final two.

Second, CUE obtained information on all the learning objectives plus some additional questions via self-reported results from questions added to the WELS survey of Spring 2023 graduates run by OIE.

Third, CUE obtained information on student success rates (DFW rates, etc.) for ENG 101 for the past several years, also from OIE.

2022-2023 ACOM Assessment Results

The results of the direct assessment of the OAT project for the first four learning objectives are as follows, with results also broken down by various demographic factors and grade outcomes:

DIRECT ASSESSMENT OF ENG 101 OAT PROJECT

	N	SHARE OF ASSESSMENTS THAT ARE 'SATISFACTORY' OR BETTER				NOTES
		Students will demonstrate ability to engage in critical and reflective analysis of diverse perspectives and communication techniques	Students will demonstrate ethical research and writing through locating, evaluating, and utilizing sources, to both develop and support their argument and discover what has been said and whose voice is missing	Students will demonstrate the ability to evaluate both scholarly and non-scholarly sources	Students will demonstrate understanding of how to craft comprehensible and effective arguments	
Overall Average:	73	**83.56%**	**74.88%**	**70.47%**	**72.60%**	
First Gen	18	77.78%	72.22%	64.71%	69.44%	
Pell Eligible	23	79.55%	65.22%	66.67%	62.32%	
Not First Gen	55	85.49%	75.76%	72.32%	73.63%	
Not Pell	50	85.33%	79.33%	72.11%	77.33%	
URM	23	76.09%	82.61%	68.94%	67.39%	"URM / Not Pell" have above average performance and are comparable to "Not Pell (URM & Not URM)"
URM not Pell	9	83.33%	100.00%	70.83%	88.89%	
Pell not First Gen	11	80.00%	59.09%	75.00%	53.03%	"Pell / Not First Gen" below average outcomes
First Gen not Pell	2	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	Not enough data to make conclusions
A-type grade in ENG 101	58	83.04%	69.25%	68.13%	73.27%	
B-type grade in ENG 101	9	87.50%	100.00%	87.50%	66.67%	
Less than B in ENG 101	6	83.33%	91.67%	70.00%	75.00%	

These results show that, at least as far as the OAT project is concerned, most students are showing at least satisfactory evidence of meeting ACOM learning objectives, though there is some variation between SLOs. Additionally, first-gen and Pell-eligible students do tend to have somewhat lower results on average.

Key results from the WELS survey of Spring 2023 graduates are as follows:

SPRING 2023 WELS Survey Results

| | Share of respondents answering "Somewhat" through "Very Substantially" | | | |
	All Respondents	First Gen + "Not Pell, Not URM"	Pell + "Not First Gen, Not URM"	URM + "Not Pell, Not First Gen"
To what extent did the process of completing the ACOM requirement through "passing ENG 101" improve...				
your ability to understand and navigate the stages of writing, from generating ideas to revising the final product?	56.5	48.6	50.0	80.0
your ability to engage in critical and reflective analysis of diverse perspectives and communication techniques?	59.2	59.5	44.4	66.7
your ability to develop and support your argument through locating, evaluating and utilizing sources?	56.3	56.8	44.4	60.0
your ability to identify what has been said on a topic and whose voice is missing?	53.8	48.6	50.0	50.0
your ability to evaluate both scholarly and non-scholarly sources?	57.8	54.1	55.6	60.0
your understanding of how to craft comprehensible and effective arguments?	57.0	51.4	50.0	73.3
your ability to adjust your writing or other communication based on your objective, audience, or other contexts?	61.4	56.8	61.1	66.7
After completing the ACOM requirement through "passing ENG 101"...				
were you more prepared than you would have otherwise been for future writing assignments in college?	51.3	43.2	38.9	60.0
were you in a position to succeed on future writing assignments in college?	71.4	56.8	55.6	66.7
Number of Respondents:	278	37	18	15

There is substantial consistency in the SLO results, especially for the "All Respondents" column with a relatively large number of respondents; generally the share of respondents saying that ENG 101 "somewhat" to "very substantially" improved their ability to do the different SLOs was generally in the mid-50s. This is also true for the later question asking if after completing ACOM via ENG 101, they were "more prepared than they would have otherwise been for future writing assignments in college." These results are substantially different than the final question, which asks if respondents were in a position to succeed on future writing assignments in college after passing ENG 101, which was notably higher at 71%. Since the first eight questions were about *improvement* due to ENG 101 and the final question was about being ready for future classes after ENG 101 (regardless of whether ENG 101 helped with that or or not), one interpretation is that about 20% of respondents felt like they would have been ready for upper division writing classes without the ENG 101 course, while about 50-60% of the respondents felt like ENG 101 helped them achieve various SLOs and be more prepared to handle writing in future courses.

Results for "First Gen (not Pell or URM)" and "Pell (not First Gen or URM)" do appear substantially lower than the "All Respondents" and "URM (Not Pell or First Gen)" groups, especially with respect to the final two questions concerning whether ACOM/ENG 101 helped prepare them for future writing assignments and if they were in a position to succeed on future writing assignments (regardless of if ENG 101 helped them get there).

Finally, CUE reviewed student DFW rates (obtaining either a D or F, or withdrawing from the course) in ENG 101 over the past several years.

DFW Rate for ENG 101

	Overall	First Gen	Pell	URM
2015-2016	4.9	5.6	5.7	6.0
2016-2017	6.2	4.8	5.3	4.8
2017-2018	7.0	9.7	9.4	6.5
2018-2019	4.8	3.4	5.3	3.9
2019-2020	4.5	5.1	6.4	4.4
2020-2021	8.4	12.4	11.4	12.8
2021-2022	10.7	12.4	11.4	12.4
2022-2023	8.3	9.9	9.1	10.3

DFW rates have jumped up substantially since the pandemic, especially for first gen, Pell-eligible, and URM students. While the 2022-2023 academic year did see DFW rates fall by about two percentage points for all groups, they still remain elevated compared to most pre-pandemic years.

Recommendations for ACOM

CUE suggests two relatively low-cost approaches to "close the loop" on this assessment and further improve WWU's first year writing program. The first is straightforward and has already occurred: sharing these assessment results with the staff at the University Writing Program, and especially Dr. Cushman, who does make modifications to the ENG 101 course each year so that this information, especially regarding SLO outcomes, can be incorporated into future modifications of the course.[2]

The second recommendation that CUE makes is to pilot an optional 2-credit paired course for ENG 101: LIBR 139 "Writing and Research Workshop." This proposed paired course was designed by WWU's Director of Composition (Dr. Jeremy Cushman) and the Assistant Director of Teaching and Learning (Dr. Shannon Kelly) and would essentially offer additional support to students who are concurrently enrolled in ENG 101. Incoming students with lower GPAs and test scores would be invited to enroll in the paired course offering, but this course would not be required for anyone. A longer description of the proposed LIBR 139 course can be found at the end of this document.

Next Steps: Proposed LIBR 139 Pilot for AY 2024-25

For AY 24-25, LIBR 139 would pair with 12-15 sections of ENG 101 taught by a mix of first and second-year graduate teaching assistants (GTA). The pilot will run throughout all of AY 24-25; however, to balance having sufficient time to evaluate the impact of the course and plan for future quarters while also allowing for some "learning-by-doing" in LIBR 139, the assessment will mostly focus on student writing and success outcomes during the winter quarter.

---

[2] Fortunately for CUE this year, ACOM is perhaps the easiest GUR category to disseminate assessment results to and have impacts on designs of the courses with that GUR attribute since ACOM is currently only met by one single course.

Pilot Program Assessment

- Led by the Assistant Director of Teaching & Learning, Director of Composition, and the 2024-2025 CUE Chair, with the general CUE membership providing input and feedback.

- Assessing impacts of opt-in resources such as the proposed LIBR 139 course can be challenging since students that opt-into this course might be systematically different than those that do not; for example, they may be more academically conscientious and might have done relatively well even without the LIBR 139 course. If LIBR 139 has a non-trivial waitlist, this would facilitate a more compelling assessment of the pilot program by allowing evaluators to compare results from students who wanted to take the paired course and either did or did not make it in; essentially the waitlisted students are the "placebo" group that semi-randomly do not receive the treatment.

- Assessment could include, as in this original ACOM assessment, direct assessment of ENG 101 work, self-reported answers from students, and DFW rates for ENG 101.

- Assessment results and final recommendation should be shared with ACC by the end of spring quarter 2025. Recommendations should take budgetary considerations into account.

Funding For LIBR 139 Pilot
Once CUE has agreed on what ACOM recommendation will look like more fully, then the funding needs section can be populated.
Talk with Jack Herring about this… what to write here?

ITEMS TO DEVELOP FURTHER BEFORE FINAL DRAFT
- Funding section – make the proposal financially feasible
- Support from the library dean? [Meeting on Monday 11/20]
- Discuss any issues with 7-credit 101 with Megan Bryson?
- Incorporate retention data/discussion

Paired Course Description
LIBR 139: Writing and Research Workshop (2-credit)

Course Description Catalog Version
In support of their linked course and in preparation for future academic work, students in this workshop course will learn strategies and skills necessary for engaging inquiry-based learning, effective communication of ideas in informal and formal writing assignments, and efficient and ethical research.

Course Description Longer Version
This 2-credit paired course examines and develops the integrated literacies of writing, research, and reading necessary for success in first year courses. Students will learn strategies and develop skills necessary for inquiry-based learning, effective communication of ideas in informal and formal writing assignments, and efficient and ethical research.

Each student in the course works with the instructor to create an individualized learning plan that supports their work in English 101 and their writing and research goals. Additionally, the course includes a peer-to-peer embedded learning community structure consisting of two undergraduate tutors to every 6-8 students. The goal of this learning community structure is to facilitate collaboration through a smaller workshop in which students bring in their research and writing drafts, give and receive feedback, and share any of the challenges and successes they are experiencing during the quarter. The tutors facilitate these smaller breakout sessions and provide peer-to-peer support and expertise related to writing, reading, and research.

Course Learning Aims
- Strengthen academic literacies for writing, researching, and reading.
- Practice strategies to increase agency, inquiry, and collaboration.
- Develop capacity in metacognition to reflect upon personal strengths and set goals in order to promote learning transfer.

Course Scheduling Information
- T/Th 1 hour (English 101 is scheduled MWF for 80 minutes).