For the academic year 2009-10 the Women’s Studies Department focused on the 3rd element of the Department Learning Goals and Objectives: Written Communication. The assessment was designed to meet the following objective: “Students who graduate with a baccalaureate degree in Women’s Studies will demonstrate strong written communication skills. They will be able to effectively present feminist perspectives through sophisticated, well-organized and clearly developed research papers.”

Following the recommendations of our 2008-09 Assessment Plan, and consistent with our focus for this year, the department conducted a Writing Workshop in March 2010, which was attended by most of the majors participating in the capstone seminar. A power point presentation of the workshop was also made available to other students in the capstone seminar who could not attend the workshop.

The department assessed student competence in the following 4 criteria of written communication: 1) Clear Purpose & Organization; 2) Development of Analysis; 3) Audience Engagement and Interest; and 4) Clarity & Mechanics of Writing.

Method of Assessment

The 4 categories were assessed through one direct measure: the final research paper for the capstone seminar in Women’s studies: WOMS 180: Seminar in Feminist Theory. The final research assignment prompt was prepared after taking into consideration the department learning goals and objectives, with particular emphasis on written communication. The Grading Rubric was discussed in class and made available to all students. Students were encouraged to develop their own topics for the assignment based on specific instructions provided in the prompt.

Findings

Both the full-time Faculty members of the department were involved in the assessment process. First we established the point-criteria for the review. Then both instructors read 3 or 4 random papers in order to check for consistency. Once it was established that the assessment criteria were consistently implemented, the course instructor, Sujatha Moni assessed the remaining papers. Both Faculty members discussed the findings, and planned for anticipated changes resulting from the assessment. In all, a total of 11 assignments were assessed. The direct assessment of effective written communication skills for a Woman’s Studies Major revealed several areas of strength and some areas requiring improvement.

Students were assessed on a scale of 4 to 1, where 4 = Exceeding Expectation, 3= Meets Expectation; 2 = Approaching expectation; and 1 = Below Expectation.

In category 1) Clear Purpose & Organization: nearly 70% of the students are exceeding expectations (3.5-4 on the scale); 2% meet expectation (3); and 2% were approaching (2).
In category 2) Development of Analysis: 3% exceeded expectation (4); 2% were at Expectation (3) while nearly 50% were between meeting and approaching expectation (2 to 2.5). This is the area in which the department needs to see improvement and consistent performance on the part of all the majors.

In category 3) Audience Engagement & Interest: the Women’s Studies Majors came up with research topics and discussions that were not only engaging, but managed to sustain audience interest throughout. In this category, nearly 50% of the students exceeded expectation (4); while another 40% either met or exceeded expectation (3-3.5). Only 1% approached expectation, that too primarily because the topic was not clearly developed.

In category 4) Clarity & Mechanics of Writing: 60% of the students were either meeting or exceeding expectations (3-4); and 40% were either approaching or close to meeting expectation (2-2.5). Problems with respect to clarity while discussing complex issues, was a bigger challenge than grammatical or syntactical errors.

Overall, a majority of Women’s Studies Majors are capable of writing sophisticated research papers that have a clear purpose and analysis. While they are proficient in organizing and presenting an interesting and engaging research project from a feminist framework, one area in which they need to improve their Written Communication skills is development of analysis.

**Future Plans**

The department recognizes that our majors have greatly benefiting from the College and Department’s emphasis on Written Communication this Academic year. We would like to sustain this momentum in the following academic years also, while extending the assessment category to include **Critical Analysis of Feminist Perspectives**.

In order to improve student performance in the areas of **development of analysis** and **clarity in written communication**, the department instructors will try to emphasize these qualities not only in the Seminar on Feminist Theory, but also in the other required courses for the major. Faculty teaching these courses will be encouraged to construct assignment prompts that specifically address the following skills: 1) Critical Analysis of Feminist Perspectives; 2) Clear Development of Argument; and 3) Clarity and Organization of Material.

To this end, we will try to include in the assessment for 2010-11, one additional measure: review of written assignment prompts.

Secondly, in advanced seminars and courses that require papers that are 8 pages or longer, students will be encouraged to develop the paper in stages, with the instructor giving feedback and suggestions on at least one draft. The department will discuss this as a policy to be implemented in all advanced writing courses and seminars.

We also plan to continue offering the Writing Workshops to all majors, at least once a year.