**Writing & Critical Reading**

**Learning Goal Executive Summary 2018**

Based on the 2017 NSSE, results related to writing and critical reading are mixed. In regard to using the writing process, here are significant findings:

* 51% of first-year students report “preparing two or more drafts of paper before turning it in” “often” and “very often,” which is 5% above students at public Midwestern MA-granting institutions.
* Seniors report preparing two or drafts “often” and “very often” 38% of the time, which is 5% below seniors at the same type of colleges.

From a larger perspective, when asked about how their experiences at the university have “contributed to [their] knowledge, skills, and personal development in writing clearly and effectively”:

* 73% of first-year students indicate “very much” (20%) and “quite a bit” (53%) in contrast to 63% at similar institutions.
* 76% of seniors indicate the same answers compared to 71% at comparable universities.

The difference of EIU first-year students focusing on improving their writing in contrast to comparable universities appears to be a noteworthy difference of 10%.

Results from the NSSE show this self-reporting about reading practices:

* 55% of first-year students note they spend only 0-5 hours a week on reading, and 30% spend between 5-10 hours a week, which is consistent to findings at similar institutions.
* 57% of seniors say they spend 0-5 hours on reading, and 25% spend between 5-10 hours a week, which is slightly higher (82%) than comparable universities (79%).

When looking at the results from the CLA, the standardized test shows meager gains in regard to the holistic goal of “writing effectiveness” and the limited goal of “writing mechanics.” A certain cadre of seniors earned more 4 and 3 markers on those subscores than a different cadre of first-year students.

In regard to Eastern’s Electronic Writing Portfolio (EWP), according to faculty readers, the strengths of the EWPs were the following: mechanics, focus, and use of sources. In contrast, the weaker areas were the following: development, organization, style, and sense of audience.

Readers related that they saw little growth across the portfolios. However, the submissions are provided in a random manner. In general though, stronger writing resulted from research papers and assignments that asked student to undertake higher-level critical thinking tasks.

Overall scores of the portfolios were the following:

* Strong Portfolios: 21.82%
* Adequate Portfolios: 61.21%
* Weak Portfolios: 15.76%

As can be seen in the graph below, there was an uptick in the percentage of “adequate” portfolios (61% compared to the previous year’s 52%). In addition, the percentage of “weak” portfolios was significantly smaller than the past two years (16% compared to 26% and 25%).

**Implications for Growth & Improvement**

The NSSE provides serious indicators that students are not spending enough time reading even though self-reporting is consistent with comparable institutions. Instructors need to find ways to make reading meaningful and required in their courses. Some best practices can be found in following resources:

* *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* by John C. Bean
* *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning* by Peter C. Brown, Henry L. Roediger III, and Mark A McDaniel
* *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* by James M. Lang
* “Strategies That Foster Critical Reading” on the Writing-Critical Reading Learning Goals website.

Based on the results from the CLA and EWP, faculty should use the writing process in a more robust manner, focus more strongly on argument and detailed evidence, and design assignments that require higher-level critical thinking tasks.

The University should also consider implementing required writing-centered courses at the junior or senior level for every major at the university, which is a best practice at universities across the country. Students take general-education writing courses at the first-year level to provide a solid foundation for future writing tasks, and then students take required writing courses in their majors or later in their undergraduate careers to reinforce and refine their writing practices and abilities.