Engaging Undergraduate Researchers in the Assessment of Communication across the Curriculum Courses

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Abstract: This article describes an assessment project that analyzed syllabi approved for a communication intensive (CI) requirement in a general education program. As such, it is a first step in a more comprehensive assessment. The article suggests that it is important to ensure that inputs are evaluated prior to an evaluation of outcomes. The assessment itself was undertaken by a team of undergraduates enrolled in a research methods course. This is a group that has an important stake in the delivery of communication across the curriculum (CxC) courses as more often than not, it is these students and their writing that are being assessed. We turn the tables and make them the assessors and lay out the process of conducting such an assessment using novice researchers, noting the benefits and risks involved.

Assessing communication across the curriculum (CxC) programs can be a thorny institutional issue, vexed in particular by the complexity and size of the task. It is time consuming and requires significant resources. But what happens when this complex task is paired with a high-impact undergraduate educational practice—undergraduate research? This article describes an assessment process in which undergraduate researchers took on the role of assessors. Typically, when the outcomes of CxC initiatives are reviewed, students and their writing are the subjects of such assessment: What did the students learn? Did their communication skills improve? In the model put forth here, the tables are turned, and the students are the evaluators, not the object of the evaluation.

A second distinction of the approach described here is that it focuses on *inputs*: do courses approved for CxC designation continue to meet the criteria under which they were accepted? We believe this an important first step in a comprehensive assessment. We describe our process and its results in the hope that others will see assessment of CxC, writing across the curriculum (WAC), or writing in the disciplines (WID) programs as an opportunity for willing and interested students to engage in a high-impact activity that influences their undergraduate education and also makes a contribution to the institution.

The article first introduces the CxC requirement within the institutional context and history of general education reform. It then describes the process whereby undergraduate students undertook the assessment of the syllabi approved for CxC delivery, noting important steps along the way as well as risks of this approach and safeguards put into place. It then concludes with a list of recommendations for those interested in undertaking a similar approach.

Institutional Context

The focus of assessment explained in this article is the communication intensive (CI) requirement at Utah State University, which varies from the more familiar Writing Intensive (WI) requirement in that both oral and written components are required.

I admit to being in a privileged position in writing about the CI courses at my home institution. In the 1990s, I chaired the institution's General Education Reform Task Force, which developed a curriculum that was put into place in 1998. The reform featured an inclusive and iterative process. In addition to the central committee, we included over 100 faculty in subcommittees focusing on the various segments of general education: humanities, arts, life and physical sciences, social sciences, quantitative literacy, and communication skills. At the time, the committee adopted a philosophy that both writing and speaking skills are important to an undergraduate's education. We were influenced, in part, by Clemson University's Pearce Center for Professional Communication, established in 1989, and the work done by Art Young and others (2005).

The General Education Committee also drew on a study of writing on campus undertaken by Writing Fellows in the early 1990s, a program that I created and directed.[2] As an assignment for their tutoring practicum, they analyzed every syllabus on campus for inclusion of writing assignments. The tutors reviewed 800 syllabi and coded their findings in a matrix that we developed together in our practicum. Their findings were discussed by the General Education Committee and influenced the curriculum that was developed, particularly the communication intensive courses. (A description of this project is detailed in Kinkead, 2016.)

The CxC Requirement

Drawing on the work of the Writing Fellows, the General Education Reform Task Force established two required communication literacy (CL) courses in general education—English 1010 and English 2010[3]— and a follow-on requirement for two communication intensive (CI) courses in *depth* education. Together, general and depth education formed University Studies, which had the goal of developing "citizen-scholars." Public speaking was not included as a foundation course in the CL requirement but was termed a breadth-humanities option, most likely due to limited staffing and funding issues. Whatever the cause, it meant that oral communication skills were integrated into first- and second-year writing classes rather than in a mandatory public speaking class.

The two compulsory CI courses were "intended to be discipline-specific, letting students simultaneously attain communication fluency goals while they learn communication forms most appropriate to their discipline" (Utah State University, p. 1). Certification of courses as CI was overseen by a subcommittee of the General Education Committee, chaired by the Writing Program Administrator (WPA). The complete guidelines for CI courses are included in the appendix.

Assessment of the new University Studies program was fairly perfunctory. In terms of the CxC classes, they seemed to be approved and then never reviewed thereafter. From my perspective and my deep investment in the general education reform process, that seemed a lost opportunity, but I was not in a role to act, having moved to a different administrative assignment overseeing undergraduate research at the university. That experience actually came into play in an interesting way as this article demonstrates.

Fast forward to 2016. As a faculty member, no longer in an administrative role, I began to hear from colleagues on the CI Committee that the chair of the General Education Committee had expressed concern about the quality of student writing he was seeing in his own department capstone courses. Although I had no official connection to the CI or General Education Committees, naturally, I cared about a program that I had helped create. It occurred to me that evaluating *inputs*—the CI courses themselves—might be a first step before the committee addressed outcome measures, such as samples of student writing. As it happened, I was seeking a project for my research methods class, and this seemed a likely candidate. Following is a description of that class that also explains why this assessment project was a perfect fit for the whole-class project that kicks off the semester.

The Research Methods Course and Undergraduate Research

"Approaches to Research in English Studies" is an undergraduate majors course in research methods that meets the quantitative intensive (QI) requirement of our general education program. The University Studies program enacted in 1998 featured both communication and quantitative literacy at a foundational level with reinforcement in the major. Thus, CI courses have a parallel in QI courses. In these quantitative-focused courses, students are to use statistical analyses, be able to graph information, and to understand how statistics may be misused. Each department was to develop its own upper-division CI and QI courses to ensure that students understand and have experience in the discourse conventions and quantitative methods in the discipline. Ironically, the Department of English did not put forth a QI course until 2016 when I created this junior-level course. Students enrolled in the course come from all emphasis areas in English: literature, English education, folklore, technical and professional writing, creative writing, and American studies. Their research projects demonstrate how quantitative approaches can be applied to any subfield within English Studies.

Our students are accustomed to the research paper in which others' work is reviewed and incorporated—what some have called "rehashing" others' work (Fitzgerald and Midiri 2013, 6). Authentic research that is replicable, aggregate, and data-supported (RAD), as defined by Haswell (2005), asks students to undertake original research that has the potential to contribute to the field. Conducting an empirical study helps students understand research in a broader sense and gives them practical skills that can transfer to other settings. The value of such work has been endorsed and authenticated by George Kuh (2008), who listed it as a "high-impact practice" (HIP) in undergraduate education. (WAC also made this list). Undergraduate research has, in fact, been termed the "pedagogy of the 21st century" (Council on Undergraduate Research and National Conferences on Undergraduate Research 2005, 1).[4]

Many students in English Studies stress about conducting empirical research and using quantitative data.[5] To ease that worry, the course is designed so that they engage in a whole-class research project prior to individually taking on an independent study of interest.[6] This whole-class project changes each semester. Its goals include introducing students to the research process; certifying in human subject research; developing an IRB proposal; interviewing participants; constructing a Qualtrics survey; employing mixed methods; and disseminating in multiple formats (a research report, slide presentation, and poster). For the spring 2017 semester, students analyzed communication intensive (CI) courses and prepared a report to be delivered to the General Education Committee and its CI subcommittee as their whole class undertaking.[7]

The Process

How can a teacher structure an evaluation of CI courses that must be completed in fewer than 15 weeks and by naive researchers? The steps described in the sections that follow are applicable to almost any institutional context that features centralized general education oversight and structure. To begin, I had to do some spadework prior to the start of the term. I approached the university's General Education Committee about CI course assessment and was granted approval. The provost informed deans and department heads of the study so that we could request syllabi. As those who have engaged in assessment know, it is essential that chain of communication and chain of command are followed and that everyone who may be affected is in the communication loop.

Early in the term, our two "clients" for the report—the chairs of the General Education Committee and the CI Committee—met with the research class to explain why they felt an assessment was needed and to answer the students' prepared questions. This exchange also served the function of practicing interview skills, important in the development of any researcher working with human participants. Interviewing was just one of the skills they developed as they accumulated important elements in a researcher's toolkit.

The interview served another important function: it clearly said that this is a real project with expected deliverables. Meeting the audience for the report spurred them to take the project seriously, particularly helpful as we dove into a review of literature.

Review of Literature and Sources

Although the student researchers had first-hand experience with CI courses, they were unfamiliar with scholarly work on CxC. Fortunately, among the volumes of *Across the Disciplines* (*ATD*), reports on the assessment of writing across the curriculum (WAC) and writing in the disciplines (WID) are common. Bartholomae and Matway (2010) offered the results of their ethnographic study of writing in the undergraduate curriculum in "The Pittsburgh Study of Writing." Stitt-Bergh and Hilgers (2009) provided a comprehensive description of how ongoing assessment since the initiation of writing intensive (WI) classes in 1987 has created a culture of closing the feedback loop. Parrish, Hesse, and Bateman (2016) presented the results of an assessment of a general education, writing intensive capstone course. Deans (2017) demonstrated the viability of the one-credit WI course. Anderson, Anson, Gonyea, and Paine (2016) shared the results of add-on questions to the National Survey of Student Assessment (NSSE) to obtain broad information about how writing is taught in U.S. colleges and universities. And, Volume 6 of *ATD* (2009), a special issue, focused on Writing Across the Curriculum and Assessment: Activities, Programs, and Insights at the Intersection. One of the essays in that volume has particular application to the research students' work. Anson and Dannels (2009) give attention to assessment of communication across the curriculum (CxC) programs.

The students also needed to understand the larger philosophy behind CxC and WAC/WID programs. Defining and differentiating terms such as CxC, WAC, and WID were important to writing the research proposal. This was a second area of investigation in their review of literature. They found that the importance of writing as a means of learning a subject as well as learning the discourse conventions of a particular field has been documented in multiple studies, including the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), led by researcher George Kuh (2008). His definition of writing intensive courses follows:

> These courses emphasize writing at all levels of instruction and across the curriculum, including final-year projects. Students are encouraged to produce and revise various forms of writing for different audiences in different disciplines. The effectiveness of this repeated practice "across the curriculum" has led to parallel efforts in such areas as quantitative reasoning, oral communication, information literacy, and, on some campuses, ethical inquiry. (p. 10)

A third section of the review of literature focused on CxC programs at other institutions, analyzed through a web-based search. At the time of our institution's adoption of CI courses in the 1990s, the communication across the curriculum movement was in its infancy. Now it is termed a "national movement." CxC means incorporating oral and written communication assignments into courses across disciplines—at the very least. They found in their Internet research that at MIT, students are required to complete four CI courses, preferably one each year of the undergraduate career: two in humanities/writing, and two in the subject area.

The student researchers were intrigued by varying models of CxC. Sometimes other modes of communication—visual, digital—are included as part of CxC. At Louisiana State University, CI courses are required to emphasize at least two of four modes: written, spoken, visual, or technological communication. The University of Rhode Island features a resources page on national initiatives for CxC, and Baruch College of CUNY offers a newsletter, *CACophany*. Iowa State University's program, ISUComm, includes written, oral, visual, and electronic communication (WOVE) at both foundation and

advanced levels. Vrchota and Russell (2013) discuss how WAC/WID and CxC converge and diverge at Iowa State, a department that retains its emphasis in both writing and speech communication.[8]

We also turned to the National Census of Writing[9], overseen by Jill Gladstein and Brandon Fralix, for data on how institutions use writing intensive (WI) courses, which continues to be more common than CxC.[10] Of the 302 institutions answering the question, "Does your institution require WI or W courses taught by departments other than English or Writing?" 62% answered yes. Our institution is among the 33% that reported its intensive requirement to be in place 15 years or longer. It is among the 38% that require two such courses, which is the mode with answers ranging from zero to six. Again, students gained awareness of writing studies in a much larger context and learned that institutions go about accomplishing goals in various ways.

To find out about assessment of WI courses, the National Census offered several options on how assessment happens, ranging from the faculty member evaluating the course to the students' writing being reviewed. The 148 institutions that answered ranked the various choices in this order: professor evaluation, random samples of student writing, other, no assessment, paper portfolio, electronic portfolio, and writing exam. Who administers assessment of WI courses? Again, a variety of answers appeared: faculty from across campus, ad hoc groups, the Writing Program Administrator (WPA), writing faculty, and others. We might point out that there was no option for student researchers as assessors.

The Census focuses primarily on outcomes for the WI requirement: do students become more adept at writing through this requirement? As a research team, we talked about our approach to assessment focusing on inputs rather than outputs. They understood that their work would be foundational to a continued analysis of the CI requirement that could possibly unfold in phases. They used this information, in addition to their considerable review of published articles, websites, and data mining to develop the research proposal to be submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Conducting Research Ethically

IRBs are designed to ensure that research involving people is conducted ethically. A concern of employing students to conduct assessment is whether or not each and every student is behaving responsibly. The students' meeting with their clients meant that they felt a personal and professional connection to the project, and they demonstrated a strong commitment to conducting their research in a professional manner. Training in responsible conduct of research (RCR) is also important. The students read a chapter on ethics in their textbook (Kinkead, 2016); reviewed the CCCC Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Research in Composition Studies; and became certified in human subjects research. The CITI modules for certification emphasized that a research report is only as good as the credibility of its data and analyses. Writing the research proposal for the IRB was an important step in the process, defining their research question, the review of literature, and their methods.[11] We guaranteed that faculty names would be anonymized; our purpose was to evaluate courses, not instructors.

Reviewing, Analyzing, and Depicting Data

With approval from the IRB to proceed, paired with a big picture understanding of why CxC is important and how it is enacted at other institutions, the research team moved to understanding its own institutional program. They reviewed the list of approved CI courses (n=237) in the university's General Catalog and commented on the CI courses they had completed.

Formulating a research question may be one of the most difficult tasks for novice researchers. In this case, it was fairly transparent: Do courses approved for CI designation continue to meet the CI criteria? The task of designing methods to answer this question was trickier. On the surface, it would seem simple to read syllabi and then mark them as meeting or not meeting the criteria, but it actually meant creating a

tool for the evaluation. The research team drafted a matrix in which each syllabus could be coded on the individual factors of a CI course. As it turned out, the criteria were not necessarily easy to operationalize. What is a "significant amount" of writing and speaking? How would it be measured? In terms of pages required? Amount of time speaking? Did classroom discussion count? What is meant by an "individual writing component"? How might they tally the criterion to "Incorporate communication/learning components that reinforce effective two-way communication skills appropriate for discipline-specific audiences."

If the students were confused about the stated criteria, might faculty members putting forth syllabi for CI approval also find them somewhat murky? This was a question put aside for further investigation in a faculty survey yet to be designed.

The final matrix included columns for the course identification; semester/year; a notation on delivery (traditional classroom, online, hybrid); an overall evaluation (checkmark, plus, minus); significant quantity of writing; individual writing component; significant quantity of speaking; two-way communication; continued improvement; types of writing assignments; length of writing assignments; types of oral assignments; information on discipline-specific discourse; evaluation criteria or rubrics; peer response groups; faculty-student conferences; Writing Fellows; Writing Center recommended; Undergraduate Teaching Fellow. Once a syllabus was analyzed and coded, the reviewer finished with a color code on column one: blue for exceeds criteria; green for meets criteria; and red for not having sufficient information to determine if the standard is met.

Figure 1. Matrix for CI Course Analysis

| Dept / Course	Semester/Year (of syllabus)	Requires Writing	Requires Oral	ONLINE?	overall Eval	Significant quantity- writing	Significant quantity- oral	individual writing component	2-way communication	cont'd improvement	Types of writing assignments	# of Writing assignments	Length (words/pages)	types of oral assignments	Discipline-specific info	Eval Criteria/Rubric	Peer Response groups	Fac/Student Conferences	Writing Fellows	UTF	Writing Center
CS 3450a	Spring 2015	yes	yes		minus (little info)	no	no	yes	yes	yes	project; online discussion	unknown	unknown	group discussion	yes	yes	no	no	no	TA	no
CS3450b	Fall 2016	yes	yes		minus (little info)	no	no	yes	yes	yes	project; assignments	unknown	unknown	group presentation	no	no	no	no	no	TA	no
Electrical & Computer Engineering																					
ECE 4830	Fall 2016	yes	yes		check	yes	unknown	yes	yes	yes	assignments	10	unknown	presentation	yes	yes	not listed	yes	no	no	no
ECE 4840																					
ECE 4850	Fall 2016	yes	yes		check	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	assignments	9	unknown	presentation	yes	yes	yes	no	no	no	no
Engineering Education																					
	f 16	yes	yes		plus	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	manuals; presentation	4		presentation	yes	?	no	yes	yes	TA	YES+
ENGR 3080	F16	yes	yes	no	plus	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	memos; letter of transmittal; proposal; resume; cover letter; presentation	6	?	team presentation	yes	no	yes	no	no	no	yes: Engineering WC

The team members practiced evaluating syllabi using the matrix and made changes as needed in the coding mechanism. We began with the syllabi from our home department—English—for this calibration, as these documents were the most familiar to the students. Of course, this provided a good forum for a discussion of inter-rater reliability and another opportunity to underline the importance of doing the work with integrity. With this training, the students adopted departments to evaluate and completed the matrix on a shared platform. We returned for further calibration over the period of review to ensure that

we held to the same standards throughout. When all available syllabi from a department were completed, the researcher summarized findings. We had data! Now, what to do with them?

An objective of the research methods course is to depict data graphically. Candidly, students in English Studies do not have much experience with charts or graphs. This was one of the anxiety-provoking aspects of the course. For some, using a spreadsheet was a new experience. We practiced collecting data, entering them into a spreadsheet, and then developing a graphic to depict this information. They found the process of turning spreadsheet data into visual information "magic."

They also discussed how the style of a particular chart or graph might show data in ways that influenced the interpretation. One of the QI objectives is to understand how statistics may be misused or slanted to influence perceptions. In the review of charts and graphs from other projects, this objective suddenly had real meaning to the students. They took extra care on how they graphically depicted their own information. The students created several diagrams of varying complexity to communicate their findings[12]. Following is a graph on the number of CI courses found in each college. This is an instance of the bar chart providing the dramatic results that "College 3" exceeded all others by a wide margin. But data from content analysis tell only part of the story. We turned to another source—the faculty—to gather their perceptions of CI courses and the approval process.

Figure 2. College Counts of Departments and CI Courses (e.g., college 3 has 8 departments and nearly 100 CI courses).
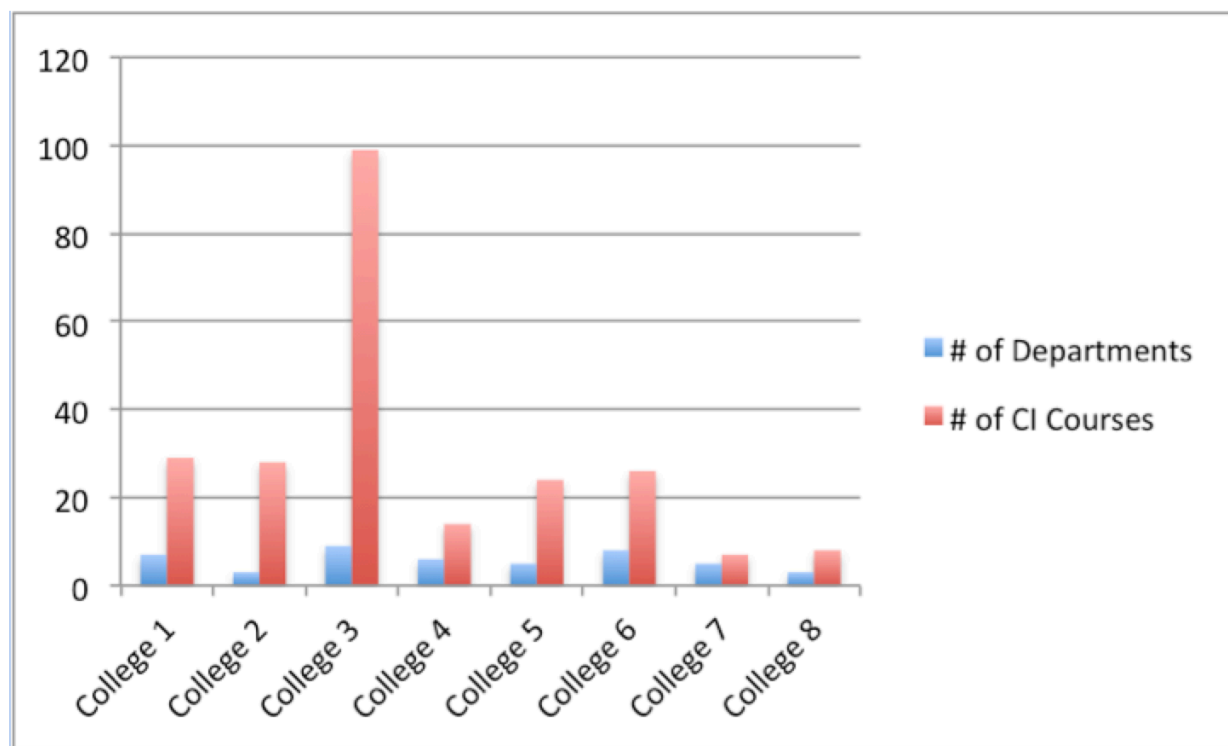
Surveying the Faculty

Working with human subjects is an important part of learning to be a researcher. In this particular study, we felt that surveying faculty who teach CI courses would be the most helpful. The survey provided a rich training ground. The students developed questions using the Qualtrics platform and tested them on a willing member of the English faculty. These queries included information on how many CI courses a

faculty member teaches; if the person originated the class; how long the person has been teaching CI classes; if the course is taught for majors in the field of the teacher. They designed open-ended questions to solicit ideas about teaching CI courses and their administration: What are your favorite aspects of teaching CI courses? What are your least favorite aspects of teaching CI courses? What is one aspect about teaching CI courses that you would change? What advice would you offer the CI Committee?

The Registrar's Office delivered a list of 16,371 faculty with experience teaching CI courses over the lifetime of the CI requirement. We opted to send the survey to faculty members who taught CI courses during the past year (n=240), a much more manageable size. The response rate was "reliable" as defined by research methods literature. Again, this was an important lesson for novice researchers and an opportunity to discuss validity.

Table 1: Data Points in Enrollment in CI Courses

Mean	Median	Mode	Range
28	30	29	135

Faculty concern about class size in the open-ended questions prompted us to request additional data from the Office of the Registrar. The range in class size was surprising. A specialized research problems class might enroll as few as one student while some online courses enrolled as many as 136. Table 1 includes the mean, median, mode, and range of class size. As a class, we had learned these terms, but seeing them applied in this context made them real. The students quickly saw that mean, median, and mode were manageable class sizes, but that the range was unacceptably high. If we had not included that data point, the whole story would not be clear. Another graph told a more comprehensive story about worrisome class size. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3. Enrollment of CI Courses
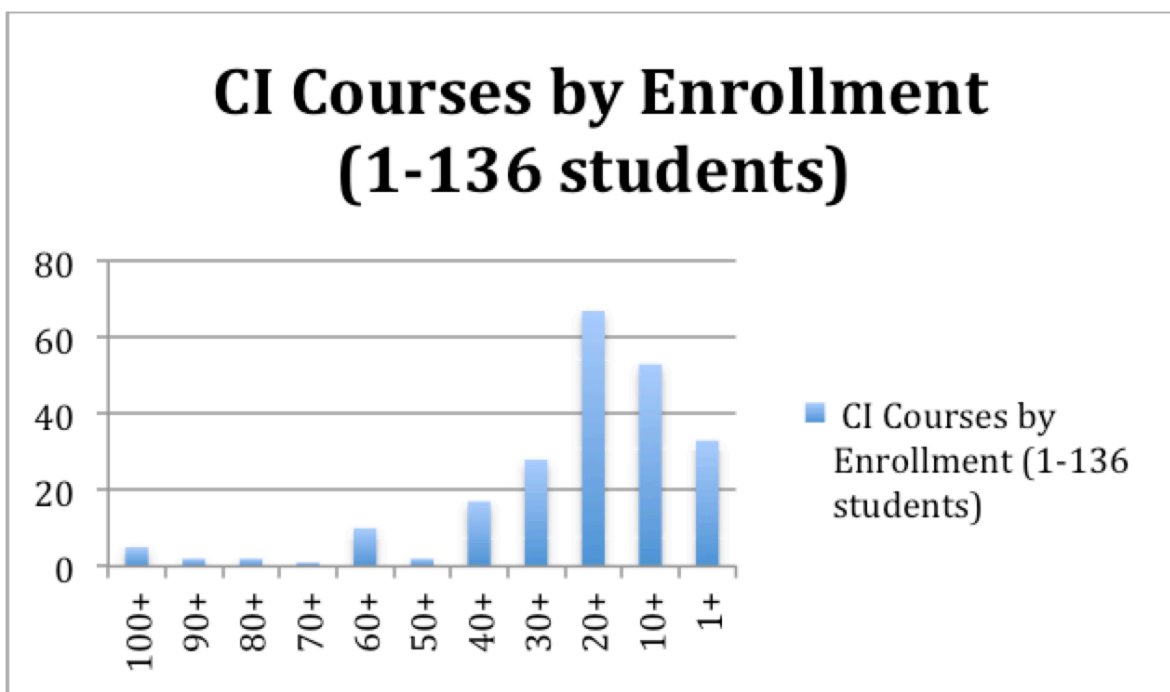
Reporting the Results

The research team prepared a comprehensive report, lodged the database on a secure campus server for access by the clients, and prepared a presentation for members of the General Education Committee. The report itself met the requirements for standard research accounts: the research question, the methods, results, limitations, recommendations for policy and practice, and directions for future research. At the presentation, members of the committee asked about number of pages required in CI courses. The team had not produced a graph but could speak to the question, noting that 10-30 pages were common, but that a few courses requested 40+ pages. They submitted an addendum with a table plus information that the highest number of pages in one course came in at 100. The committee members appreciated this level of detail as they lacked such specific evidence about these courses and their delivery.

Figure 4. The Research Team and Butch (seeing eye dog)

As the teacher of the class, I had some apprehension myself about how the report would be delivered and received. I should not have worried. The students were articulate and answered questions knowledgeably. They were, undeniably, the experts in the room. They handed over their materials, closed out the IRB protocol, and moved to completing their independent research projects. As mentioned earlier, the whole-class project provides a model for the students' own research projects. The latter tracks the larger project, giving them experience in writing a research question, conducting a literature review and finding the gap, submitting an IRB proposal, surveying and interviewing participants, collecting and analyzing data, developing graphic formats to depict these data, writing the report and delivering it as a lightning talk as well as a poster.

Outcomes, Benefits, Risks, and Safeguards

I'm bullish on meaningful, authentic writing assignments for students, and undergraduate research can meet that goal. The student research team accumulated evidence and put forth recommendations about our institution's CxC curriculum, including feedback on individual syllabi but also on the CI approval process. The end product was well received by those who authorized the project. The findings from that report are not the subject of this article. It is the emphasis on using undergraduates as agents in CxC assessment. Other groups could certainly employ the same processes: a Writing Studies course in the major, an Honors seminar, Ethnography of the University, an internship group, a graduate course in writing program administration.

As I mentioned earlier, English majors tend to fear empirical research as the unknown, and their comments at the end of the term used metaphors such as "It was like I was a first-time hiker on Mount Everest" or acknowledged, "I didn't know much about research." One student's reflection charts her growth as a researcher:

> I had diminished self-confidence that I could perform what I was going to be asked to do. The concept of doing a significant class project [on general education], that we couldn't mess up, I might add, as well as a personal project with writing studies initially overwhelmed me. Our instructor took us seamlessly through the process, and I realized that these two projects [whole class and individual] just have a plethora of small things to get done along the way, and the breakdown make them feel far more achievable. I feel much more confident in my abilities as a researcher. I learned I can do hard things.

Another student focused on his satisfaction in producing a report that was valued.

> I'm really proud of being a part of a research team that conducted a study for the general education committee. Doing meaningful research was one of the most rewarding things I've ever done. I felt really appreciated at the end of the study and could tell members of the committee were thankful for our study.

The reflections of the student researchers at the conclusion of their projects calmed any concern I had with using students as the assessors. At the beginning of the term, I wondered if I could depend on the students to analyze accurately each syllabus and record the results on our matrix. After all, it would not be a difficult task for a coder to simply check syllabi as meeting standards and move on. We worked to establish a level of trust in our research community and to emphasize responsible conduct of research. The class was also drilled on "What happens here, stays here." We were speaking, sometimes critically, about the documents being reviewed and analyzed. That could have led to negative comments about individual faculty members. A few departments were also tardy or absent in supplying syllabi. We made a pact that these conversations were not to go outside our classroom.

On the other hand, the research team enjoyed an inside look at faculty attitudes and beliefs. In particular, the faculty surveys revealed how much they enjoyed watching students' growth in writing and speaking. The CI assignments enabled faculty to know their students better, and faculty members were often passionate about the importance of communication skills. The students appreciated this portrait of a faculty that cares about teaching and learning.

Assessment Advice

At the end of the research project, we had learned much. We share these lessons for other institutions considering engaging undergraduate researchers in similar assessment projects:

- Seek approval at the highest levels for authority and credibility.

- Secure agreement on what is required for an effective study: 1) communication authorizing the program evaluation; 2) a clear message that courses, not faculty, are being evaluated; and 3) access to syllabi and other information.

- Introduce the clients to the student researchers early to make the audience for the study concrete.

- Work with IRB to ensure that human subject protocols are correct; anonymize as much as possible to avoid moving the project into a non-exempt category. In short, make sure it's clear that no one's job is at stake if the assessment reveals issues in a particular faculty member's syllabus.[13]

- Emphasize responsible conduct of research and the integrity of the study.

- Calibrate analyses of syllabi multiple times to ensure the researchers are in agreement on coding.

- Highlight particularly effective syllabi.

- Recommend that the teachers who designed syllabi that exceed standards be invited to participate in faculty development workshops.

- Avoid saying that syllabi "fail" to meet standards; instead, use wiggle language to suggest circumstances that syllabi may not meet standards for reasons such as insufficient information.

- Be watchful for complementary issues that arise (e.g., the CxC course approval process).

It was our hope that the central oversight committee would offer opportunities for faculty to update or revise syllabi or provide additional information to meet standard expectations, giving them a time frame for the task to be completed. Likewise, we offered suggestions to the CI Committee on the process of approving courses, drawn from faculty survey comments. We also proposed that once approved, courses should be reviewed and accessed on a regular basis. The overarching goal is to ensure that communication intensive courses are truly delivering the essential writing and speaking skills that all students need. Only when it's clear that the curriculum is accomplishing that objective can further assessment of outcomes proceed.

Concluding Remarks

Assessment of CxC initiatives is essential to the health of the curriculum, but it can also be time and resource intensive. By providing students in this methods course with the opportunity to conduct curriculum assessment through the program evaluation project, they not only learned valuable research skills, but they also demonstrated how some aspects of institutional assessment can be successfully conducted by students rather than faculty and/or administrators. They undertook a meaningful, authentic research topic, worked through the parts of the process, and delivered a comprehensive report to the General Education Committee. This work has sparked follow-up communications between the CI Committee and departments to analyze further CI courses that do not appear to meet expectations, to recognize faculty with exemplary syllabi, and to modify approval processes. The winnowing that the research team did on nearly 200 syllabi has made CI assessment a much more manageable task for the committee.

Our institution's CxC program deserves a thorough assessment. The project described here is an initial step: ensuring that courses labeled Communication Intensive (CI) continue to meet the criteria under which they were approved, perhaps as long as 20 years earlier. Evaluating syllabi is a foundational phase that can be undertaken by undergraduate researchers working as a team. Although there are inherent tensions when the assessed become the assessors, they bring special insight to the process as consumers of

the CI curriculum, and they reap enhanced knowledge about the structure of general education and the institutional curriculum at large when engaged in an evaluation project such as the one described here. They are, in fact, enacting the very goals of the university's Citizen Scholar statement: "University Studies involves a series of interrelated educational experiences which stimulate and assist students in becoming self-reliant scholars and individuals." The integration of CxC assessment in the curriculum provided just this kind of educational experience.

Richard Light (2001) found in his study, *Making the Most of College*, that students "believe they learn most effectively when writing instruction is organized around a substantive discipline" (59). Students on the research team were thoroughly engaged in doing the research and delivering a consequential report. As the University Studies General and Depth Education program marks its 20th anniversary in 2018, this project, undertaken by student researchers, provides the impetus to use the assessment feedback loop to improve undergraduate education. It is a model that other institutions could employ as well.

Appendix – CI Course Criteria from the *General Catalog*

Criteria for Communication Intensive Courses

Philosophy

The purpose of communication intensive courses is to help students achieve proficiency in both written and oral communication in a manner that is appropriate to their major discipline. Although CI courses must meet specific criteria, there are many possibilities for how those criteria may be achieved. CI courses may use a range of artistic and technological forms of communication.

All CI courses must help students engage productively, responsibly, and thoughtfully in written and oral communication. CI courses are also intended to be discipline-specific, letting students simultaneously attain communication fluency goals while they learn communication forms most appropriate to their discipline

 Communication literacy (CL) goals are met by taking English 1010 and English 2010 (CL courses) and two communication intensive (CI) courses. Communication intensive courses are designed to follow, and build upon, English 1010 and English 2010. Therefore, all communication intensive courses should have English 2010 as a prerequisite.

Communication Intensive Course Criteria

1. All communication intensive courses must:

2. Be an upper division course.

3. Require both written and oral communication.

4. Require a significant quantity of written and oral communication as demonstrated by the outcomes, assignments, and assessment in the course.

5. Have an individual writing component.

6. Incorporate communication/learning components that reinforce effective two-way communication skills appropriate for discipline-specific audiences.

7. Allow for continued improvement through opportunities for revision, and/or multiple assignments.

Communication intensive courses are encouraged to:

1. Utilize collaborative forms of communication.

2. Be explicit with students about how the discipline communicates and invite them into its ways of communication.

3. Utilize a wide variety of communication forms and media.

4. Incorporate communications activities appropriate for a wide variety of audiences.

Communication Intensive Implementation Ideas

To clarify communication intensive requirements listed above, and to encourage thinking "outside the box," we list some key terms below and suggest a variety of ways to implement them.

Continual Improvement:

1. Students may write multiple drafts of a single paper, with the opportunity to implement feedback and suggestions in the final paper.

2. The instructor may assign several papers of the same type. Constructive feedback is provided on the early assignments, so students can apply this information to succeeding assignments.

3. The student may be offered the opportunity to revise a paper after it has been graded.

Feedback:

1. Feedback is response to student writing in the form of constructive criticism and suggestions for improvement.

2. Feedback can come from peers, the instructor, or graduate assistants, writing fellows, undergraduate teaching fellows, external audiences, or others.

3. Feedback may be oral or written.

Oral Communication:

Students may communicate orally in a wide variety of formats. Some examples include the following:

1. Make a formal presentation to a class or subgroup of a class, an outside audience, or the instructor.

2. Make a formal presentation using video format or other presentation software.

3. Perform in a dramatic presentation or other oral reading.

4. Participate in structured in-class debates with assigned roles.

5. Lead structured discussions synthesizing class materials and audience responses.

Collaboration:

1. Collaboration includes an occasion in which students talk to, or work with each other, a client outside the classroom, or an instructor to produce something.

2. Collaboration can include occasions in which students provide feedback on each other's work.

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Notes

[1] The Research Team for this project included Amanda Belliston, Jamie Finch, Jessica Griffeth, Cora Hammer, Paige Hammer, Kylie Hagen, Tina Haskin, Isabella Nolte, Caden Richins, Carolyn Lyle (Undergraduate Teaching Fellow), and Joyce Kinkead (Professor).

[2] As part of a WAC initiative when I joined my college's administration in 1990, I developed a Writing Fellows program, based on the work of Tori Haring-Smith (1985) and others. Originally, the fellows were termed Rhetoric Associates because they worked with both written and oral assignments (Kinkead, 1993).

[3] Utah State University features a vertical writing program in that students complete English 1010 during year one and English 2010 during the sophomore experience.

[4] The efficacy of undergraduate research has also been demonstrated in at least two different assessment projects by Lopatto and Seymour, et al.

[5] In the Fall 2017 research methods course, students investigated this very topic, analyzing "English Majors' Knowledge of and Anxiety about Empirical Research," the results of which were presented at the university's fall undergraduate research symposium.

[6] For instance, whole-class research projects have focused on the history, use, and future of blue books, an understudied examination tool, as well as "Writing at USU: 1890-2018."

[7] Another approach to this kind of evaluation can be found in an increasingly popular form of research: Ethnography of the University. Originating at the University of Illinois, the Ethnography of the University Initiative (EUI), "promotes student research on universities and colleges as complex institutions." (See, for example, Godbee, et al, 2015.) EUI courses culminate in a public presentation of students' critiques of university programs and practices with suggestions for change, much as my own students did with its project for the General Education Committee. Students who engage in such projects not only grow intellectually, but they become much more aware of their educational environment and the scholarly literature of higher education.

[8] The students learned that speech communication departed from the National Council of Teachers of English shortly after NCTE's formation in 1911, forming a separate organization. This historical piece informed their professional development as English majors.

[9] A limitation of the National Census is the modest number of institutions responding; slightly over 600 responded to the overarching questions on first year composition (FYC) in the four-year institutions survey, and there are almost 2,000 four-year institutions in the United States. Still, this is monumental work done by the Census, and future iterations should be more robust. Thaiss and Porter (2010) reported on a more comprehensive survey.

[10] It is not clear if CxC folks see themselves in the WI questions of the Census, but these questions may function as a catchall.

[11] IRB #8208.

[12] The results are anonymized here.

[13] Carefully choose among exempt, non-exempt, or classroom activity when submitting the proposal to your Institutional Review Board. The Classroom Activity category at our institution does not permit publication without an additional review. Publication may involve gaining full consent from participants, which can be fraught when survey respondents are anonymous.

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