Report on Writing Assessment at the University of Texas at Dallas
Year 2006-07
(Response to the *Year 2003* Report)
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Summary
This report responds to the *Report on Writing Assessment at the University of Texas at Dallas: Year 2003*, and it also explains our recent efforts to implement effectively the Rhetoric Program. To date, we have adhered closely to the "maxims" identified in the 2003 report, but we are making some changes, particularly with regard to assigning grades for student essays and portfolios, that, to some extent, depart from the approach this program has historically taken in evaluating student writing. By assigning grades for individual assignments, we believe we are empowering teachers to determine more systematically a student's performance in the course. In addition, the Rhetoric Program has begun implementing new training opportunities for Rhetoric TAs and new measures for assessing their performance in the classroom. We are also embracing a renewed commitment to student-centered learning as well as a renewed commitment to helping students improve their writing skills so that they can succeed in other academic coursework and also in their professional lives. In our efforts to "close the loop," we will continue to revise and solidify evaluation/assessment methods, complete annual program-level assessments, and build stronger ties University-wide with other schools and academic programs.

A Vision for the Rhetoric Program
The following report responds to the *Report on Writing Assessment at The University of Texas at Dallas: Year 2003*, which reports program-level writing assessment data, achievements, and goals of the Rhetoric and Writing Program. Although the Rhetoric and Writing Program has changed somewhat over the last three and half to four years, the basic goal of the program has remained the same. We strive to teach students to improve their writing and critical thinking skills so that they may excel in both their personal and professional lives as well as in their academic coursework in other disciplines.

As the Director of Rhetoric, three major goals comprise my vision for this program. First, the Rhetoric Program should teach students to become better writers for their other academic courses. Second, the Rhetoric Program should train students to apply effectively their writing skills in workplace contexts and future professions. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the Rhetoric Program should train students to become better citizens who can comprehend different forms of rhetoric (e.g., digital rhetoric, visual rhetoric, and textual rhetoric) and who can communicate effectively in writing as active participants in a democracy. To achieve these goals, we should emphasize the students learn to comprehend argument in an academic sense and also exercise their own abilities to write arguments to specific audiences. Clearly, the Rhetoric Program's business is to teach rhetoric and writing, which necessitates students also learn to enhance their critical thinking skills and to synthesize research as evidence in support of their positions. They must then demonstrate aptitude in expressing critical thinking skills in written communication. Computer technology represents one tool for enhancing the learning experience, but technology does not represent the focal point of teaching. Rather, our

teachers use computer technology to enhance the overall learning experience for students and to create a positive learning environment.

The preceding paragraph represents my guiding philosophy as Director of Rhetoric. The Rhetoric Program should embody a humanities' mission, and more specifically, a humanities mission for the 21st Century. Our approach to the Rhetoric Program should not deviate from these "roots," so to speak, in recognizing the magnitude and impact of human creativity and human achievement. Therefore, I have structured this report so that it communicates the Rhetoric Program's commitment to these overarching goals. In addition to providing a response to the *Report on Writing Assessment at The University of Texas at Dallas: Year 2003*, this document details our progress to date, future directions, and how we plan to "close the loop" to improve writing instruction in the Rhetoric Program.

Writing Assessment Data from the 2003 Report
In 2003, the Rhetoric Program conducted a writing assessment based upon a random sample of student portfolios using a web-based application called the Learning Resource Record Online (LRO). The 2003 report states that a "total of 34 portfolios were read (representing about 10% of all students passing the course in all sections during Spring 2003)" (page 1). Program administrators conducted the assessment in three phases, all of which involved the ranking of portfolios according to a holistic rubric. In addition, they measured student performance according to five separate competencies:

- Rhetorical Knowledge
- Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing
- Collaboration
- Research and Processes
- Technology

(Each competency is more specifically defined in Appendix B of the 2003 report.)

The group then ranked portfolios on a scale from 1 to 5, with each number representing the following:

- 1 = Competencies not evident
- 2 = Competencies rarely evident
- 3 = Competencies sometimes evident
- 4 = Competencies frequently evident
- 5 = Competencies extensively evident

For their study sample, the Rhetoric Program administrators found that, for both 2002 and 2003, over 50% of students scored 4 or above with regard to four of five competencies. However, between 2002 and 2003, administrators saw a percentage decline in three of the five competency categories for student portfolios scoring 4 or better. The "Collaboration" competency saw the greatest decline, dropping from 65% in 2002 to 44.1% in 2003 (see following table).

	2002	2003	change+-
Rhetorical Knowledge	76%	76%	---
Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing	76%	67.6%	- 8.4
Collaboration	65%	44.1%	- 21.0
Research and Processes	64%	53%	- 11.0
Technology	58%	70.6%	+ 12.6

(Recreated from *Year 2003* report, page 3)

The Rhetoric Program continues its commitment to helping students improve in each of these five competency areas (with some diminished emphasis on "technology"). While the 2003 data suggests that the Rhetoric Program has succeeded in helping many, if not most, students improve their writing ability, the perception among many UTD faculty members remains that their upper-division students cannot effectively write for their upper-division courses. Negative comments from faculty imply that student writing competence continues to diminish, as the declining percentages for competencies between 2002 and 2003 would also suggest.

Because I have only served in my capacity as Director for less than a year, I have not yet conducted any program-level writing assessment, but I plan to do so at the end of the 2006-07 academic year. We are, however, making changes to our methods for evaluating student work in these classes. For the last several years, the Rhetoric Program has adopted a holistic method of evaluation requiring the use of portfolios. Under this system, students submit all of their work (e.g., major assignments, minor assignments, drafts, online responses/posts) at the end of the semester. Teachers assess student work based on overall improvement, and they only assign two actual letter grades – one grade at midterm and one for the final grade. We have begun changing this practice, and as of Spring 2007, teachers are now giving individual grades for major writing assignments, although we have retained an element of holistic evaluation in our assessment of student writing.

Enrollment Trends, Changes in Program Administration
The 2003 report indicates that in academic year 2003-2004, the undergraduate enrollment had "increased 8.6 percent" over the previous year – "from 7,959 to 8,646" (*Year 2003 Report*, page 4). In addition, the report states that "this year [2003-04] we have a record number of freshmen (around 1400), and the exponential growth each year has put a strain on our resources that in past years seemed sufficient" (page 4). In partial response to these new demands, the Rhetoric Program hired one new Assistant Director of Rhetoric and Writing as well as a Technology TA assistant sometime in 2002 or 2003. In addition, new computers for "all rhetoric classrooms and instructor offices were installed in January 2003" (page 5).

Currently, I serve as the only administrator for the Rhetoric Program. I was asked to serve as Director when the previous Director of Rhetoric and Writing as well as the Assistant Director resigned in May/June 2006. I officially began my duties in July/August 2006. As I understand it, the School of Arts and Humanities will conduct a nationwide search in 2007-08 to hire a permanent director who will begin his or her

duties in Fall 2008. Furthermore, the Rhetoric Program no longer employs a Technology TA to assist with computer needs in classrooms; we rely upon the Arts and Humanities technology support staff when teachers and students experience computer problems.

On a different note, I am led to believe that Rhetoric 1302 enrollments may have dropped slightly since the completion of the 2003 report. In 2005-06, we taught 975 students in our Rhetoric classes (548, Fall 2005 and 427, Spring 2006). This school year, we taught 512 first-year students in Fall 2006, and our current enrollment for Spring 2007 sits at 393. Our overall enrollment in Rhetoric 1302 for this school year has declined by approximately 70 students from the previous year. The 2003 report also suggests that the Rhetoric Program taught the majority of the 1400 first-year students entering UTD in 2003-04, but enrollments for 2005-06 and 2006-07 suggest that student numbers have declined somewhat since 2003-04. In Fall 2006, we employed 22 Rhetoric TAs for 32 sections, and the School of Arts and Humanities canceled only one section due to low enrollment. The School of Arts and Humanities has canceled nine sections due to low enrollment in Spring 2007. For Spring 2007, we currently employ 16 Rhetoric TAs to teach 24 sections of Rhetoric 1302. However, a declining Spring semester enrollment for Rhetoric 1302 does represent the normal trend for this course.

Recommendations from the 2003 Report
The 2003 report also makes recommendations for bolstering writing instruction University-wide. For example, the report suggests that the three-hour upper division writing requirement should "be supplemented by a sophomore level prerequisite course offered in the School of Arts & Humanities" (page 6). The report also recommends implementing Rhetoric 1300, a "much-needed course in ESL and developmental writers (*sic*)" (page 6). Other calls for action include requests for additional classroom space, computer equipment, the creation of a campus Writing Center, and funding for conducting the annual year-end writing assessment.

To date, UTD has added neither the sophomore-level writing requirement nor the Rhetoric 1300 course. Recent deliberations addressed the need for possibly adding another writing course to the core curriculum (e.g., Rhetoric 1301 – the first semester, first year course offered at most other universities as English 1301); however, no further discussions – to my knowledge – have taken place since the end of the Fall 2006 semester. In their report to the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) in December 2006, both the current Director for Communication/Professional Communication and I explained that writing requirements at UTD remain very consistent with writing requirements at other major universities in Texas (e.g., UT-Austin, University of North Texas, and Texas Tech University) and also other states. On a different note, and to my knowledge, the Rhetoric Program has received no funding for year-end writing assessments, and our classroom space and computer equipment remain as they were in 2003. A Writing Center or Writing Lab does exist on the UTD campus, but it exists very much apart from the Rhetoric Program and the School of Arts and Humanities.

The 2003 report also strongly recommends using the Learning Resource Online (LRO) system for conducting year-end writing assessments. During the last three to four years,

Rhetoric Program teachers have steadily quit using this system, and to my knowledge, no Rhetoric teachers currently use the LRO in their classes. Moreover, the Rhetoric and Writing Program has not conducted a program-level writing assessment since 2003, so previous administrators have not used it for that purpose. Teachers had used the LRO for portfolio submissions, but many teachers have devised other methods for implementing online portfolios in their classes.

In addition to the aforementioned recommendations, the 2003 report presents "maxims" for guiding the Rhetoric Program as it implements recommendations (page 7). The report provides eight maxims, each beginning with the words, "We need…" (page 7). The Rhetoric Program administrators stress several needs, including:

- The need to ensure assessment does not hinder learning;
- The need to include any reporting for SACS that could also be used in our assessment plans and reports, as well as similar information gained during any departmental self-studies;
- The need to look at low end and high end writing samples so that it magnifies the differences more than looking at middle quality writing samples; and
- The need to involve faculty at all levels of curriculum planning, instructor training, and assessment. (page 7)

We have adhered closely to these maxims just in the short time I have served as Director of Rhetoric. For example, we have solicited input from faculty in Literary Studies and History as well as from members of the UTD higher administration. We have also asked other Arts and Humanities faculty to speak to TAs during the first-of-the-year meeting, held in early August, and I have personally asked other faculty to lead training sessions and conduct informational workshops. In addition, we are taking the necessary steps to ensure that assessments support and affirm student-learning objectives and outcomes. We have also very conscientiously gathered data for SACS reports that we can also use in assessing the effectiveness of the Rhetoric Program. These examples represent only a few of the ways in which we are continuing our efforts to strengthen the Rhetoric Program at UTD.

New Methods for Assessing Student Writing (Grades for Individual Assignments)
According to the grade distribution reports for Spring 2006, Rhetoric Program teachers issued 76% As and Bs in Rhetoric 1302 (65% A+, A, A-, and B+). This percentage of high grades represents a completely unrealistic distribution and does not, in my view, accurately reflect the level of student writing in these classes. Based on my experience, the average grade in a first-year writing course should be C+ or C, with B or B- representing the average grade for an "exceptional" class. I have not yet studied the grade distributions across sections for Fall 2006, but it is my hope that grades were far less inflated.

Grade inflation in Rhetoric 1302 is attributable to a number of possible causes. For example, the Rhetoric program has for several years, as previously mentioned, stipulated a holistic and portfolio approach to evaluating student performance. In other words, our

teachers were only assigning two letter grades during the semester (a midterm grade and a final grade). Ostensibly, this approach required that teachers critically examine a student's performance from the beginning of the term to the end, and then they assigned a grade based on overall improvement in a student's writing. Students were also permitted to present a written argument supporting why they should receive a certain grade in the course. However, many teachers have seemingly evaluated student performance based on quantity, rather than quality, of work. If a teacher saw that all required assignments were present in the portfolio and the student had demonstrated some improvement, then the teacher assigned an "A" for the student in the course. In my opinion, the lack of a systematic approach to evaluation encourages teachers, particularly less experienced teachers, to privilege sheer volume over quality of work.

In response to this problem, we have implemented a modified grading scale for Spring 2007 that allows teachers to assign individual grades on final drafts as well as the end-of-the-semester portfolio. We have retained elements of holistic evaluation (e.g., students can argue for grades); however, individual grades, as measures, will help the teacher more systematically arrive at a final grade. Moreover, most Rhetoric TAs want to assign grades, and most students are asking for individual grades on their work. A small group of Rhetoric TAs and I will meet at the end of Spring 2007 to determine a more permanent system of evaluation and grading scale, and we will implement that system beginning Fall 2007.

The 2003 report establishes binary oppositions between "teaching" and "learning" as well as "writing improvement" and "making better grades." It states, "We have always stressed that any assessment of writing should be tied to LEARNING as opposed to TEACHING so that the focus is on making sure our students are learning to improve their writing, rather than on whether they are making better grades" (page 4). Although the program will continue to emphasize student-centered learning, the issuance of grades does not impede student-centered learning nor represent an obstacle to students improving their writing. The assigning of grades as part of writing assessment helps students understand their performance more concretely so that they might improve their writing. In addition, several students have remarked that previous holistic evaluation methods were "too subjective." Granted, any evaluation method carries with it a greater or lesser degree of subjectivity, but specific measures enable teachers to calculate more systematically a student's performance. Moreover, teachers have expressed that they, in using the previous holistic approach, had no systematic way or method for determining or calculating a student's final grade. In the final analysis, assigning grades and improving writing complement, rather than contradict, one another.

Rhetoric TA Performance
As Director, I have now made it my standard practice to observe all Rhetoric teachers at least once during the school year; I plan to conduct these observations every academic year during the Fall semester. The vast majority of our Rhetoric TAs have demonstrated above average competence in the classroom, and many have experimented with creative approaches to this course. They have demonstrated creativity, thoroughness, and

conscientiousness, and furthermore, they genuinely care about student learning. In most respects, I am very pleased with our Rhetoric TAs' overall performance.

All TAs are required to use the standardized syllabus, and they must also use the textbooks the Rhetoric Program has adopted (*Aims of Argument* and *A Writer's Resource*). In addition, all Rhetoric TAs must follow the standardized syllabus explicitly. They can, however, rearrange and alter the schedule as long as they teach the required content. I have allowed teachers to add thematic readings and short homework assignments, but they are not permitted to substitute any readings or assignments in the syllabus. Standardization has become a paramount concern in our Rhetoric 1302 classes, and we have taken the necessary steps to ensure consistency and continuity across sections.

Commitment to Teaching Writing Skills
The previous Director of Rhetoric and Writing created the standardized syllabus for 2006-07. The previous Director is to be credited with effectively integrating our new texts for the course, *Aims of Argument* and *A Writer's Resource*, as well as creating sophisticated assignments that call upon students to exercise their critical thinking skills. Furthermore, these assignments require students to practice writing arguments, to synthesize research, and to engage their own writing processes. Our course reflects a renewed emphasis on teaching writing skills; specifically, we are emphasizing to no small degree the student's ability to construct arguments, use evidence, and persuade audiences.

We ask students in Rhetoric 1302 to complete three major writing assignments. These assignments also require students to submit several drafts before final submission their essays. The three major assignments are titled *Inquiry Argument*, *Textual and Visual Essay*, and the *Convincing* or *Motivating Argument*. These assignments reflect progression in terms of complexity and length. We evaluate students based on their ability to present and defend an argument, synthesize research in support of an argument, construct effective sentences, and establish a clear purpose as well as address a clear audience.

These assignments are designed to help meet specific core objectives. For Spring 2007, UTD's Core Curriculum Committee created one new objective specific for Rhetoric 1302, in addition to the other three objectives that all other UTD Communications classes must fulfill:

- Students will be able to write in different ways for different audiences (specific to Rhetoric 1302);
- Students will be able to write effectively using appropriate organization, mechanics, and style;
- Students will be able to construct effective written arguments; and
- Students will be able to gather, incorporate, and interpret source material in their writing.

We have listed these objectives on the first page of the standardized syllabus, and we use these objectives in completing SACS assessment plans and final reports.

SACS Assessment Plans and Final Reports
I have been told that Rhetoric TAs have performed well as related to timely submission of SACS materials. As of November 21, 2006, the SACS team had returned only seven of 32 assessment plans to TAs for corrections and/or modifications. Rhetoric TAs have demonstrated the utmost in cooperation and diligence in completing these tasks and meeting the deadlines. They have also demonstrated considerable initiative in learning the expectations of this process and then accurately executing based on those expectations. For Fall 2006, only one Rhetoric TA failed to submit a final report for SACS. (This person, for other specific reasons, no longer teaches Rhetoric 1302.)

Rhetoric Teaching Assistant Training Initiatives
For Spring 2007, we have begun a series of training workshops emphasizing different themes relevant to teaching Rhetoric 1302. Five experienced Rhetoric TAs are conducting these workshops. These more experienced TAs have developed creative and successful approaches to their writing classes, approaches that I have asked them to share with other Rhetoric teachers. In addition, other faculty from Arts and Humanities have volunteered to help train Rhetoric TAs. One professor of Literary Studies, for instance, has volunteered to conduct a grading workshop at the outset of the 2007-08 academic year to help teachers learn to more effectively assess and evaluate student writing.

Classroom Technology
We teach Rhetoric classes in three different computer-based environments. These classrooms contain Macintosh IMac computers as well as LCD projection screens. A need does exist to update this technology because, as I understand it, the technology is now approximately five years old. We are also experiencing difficulties with the computers; freezes and crashes consistently hamper instruction.

I have considered a few possibilities for updating the technology in these labs. First, we can possibly establish a wireless connection in these classrooms, completely removing all computers and asking students to bring laptops. However, this option assumes that most, if not all, students own laptop computers, and while most UTD students are technologically savvy, most students do not own laptops. Second, we can also write a grant proposal requesting funds for technological upgrades. The Director of Communication/Professional Communication and I have already discussed such an option for the professional communication computer classrooms. The technology in those classrooms desperately needs attention. Every semester, we experience constant (and increasingly annoying) technological malfunctions in the Dell/PC-based professional communication classrooms. To date, we are continuing in our efforts to identify strategies for updating and upgrading technology.

Closing the Loop
During both the current semester and future academic terms, the Rhetoric Program will take the following actions to "close the loop" on a programmatic level:

- Revise and solidify evaluation methods, grading scale

- Continue making available new opportunities for TA training

- Identify technology needs and implement strategies for meeting those needs

- Complete program-level assessment at the end of 2006-07 academic year

- Assess the effectiveness of Spring 2007 evaluation methods for student assignments

- Build stronger ties campus-wide with other schools and also the campus Writing Lab/Center

- Continue to identify specific and more effective assessments for meeting Rhetoric 1302 course objectives

- Seek new methods of instruction that affirm student-centered learning and help students become better writers

In close, I am enthusiastic and excited about the direction the Rhetoric Program is taking. We have employed a good group of Rhetoric TAs who are committed to excellence in teaching and very much care about student learning. Furthermore, we have totally embraced a commitment to teaching writing skills, emphasizing the construction of arguments, clear organization and focus, and also effective style and sentence structure. We will continue teaching students to enhance and improve their writing skills so that they can become more active and successful participants in all facets of democratic society and also their individual lives.