

Alcorn State University

Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) Impact Report

Part 1: Initial goals and intended outcomes

The goal of Alcorn State University's QEP, *Writing Matters*, was to improve the writing proficiency of undergraduate students by systematically extending student writing beyond the already existing two semesters of freshman composition. We began our implementation with a sophomore level course, EN 213, Introduction to Literature. All sections of EN 213 were modified to meet the specifications of a "writing enhanced" (WE) course, which included a minimum of 10 assigned pages of writing, 5 to be written using process writing and 5 to be written via writing to learn assignments. In each subsequent year, three departments were to likewise revise two of their existing upper level courses to conform to the WE requirements. At the end of the five-year period, then, we anticipated the following WE courses: all sections of EN 213 along with 24 courses in 12 departments outside of English.

To accomplish this, the QEP established two sets of outcomes. The first of these addressed student writing, as follows:

1. Students will be able to produce written texts
 - A. that are logically and coherently structured.
 - B. whose arguments are warranted and persuasive.
 - C. supported by evidence from reliable sources.
2. Students will write in a recursive process. They will plan, generate, revise, and edit drafts and will critique their own and others' written work.
3. Students will be able to produce written texts that show awareness of genre, audience, and discipline.
4. Students will employ standard written English--its syntax, grammar, and conventions--in writing free of serious grammatical and mechanical errors.

The second set of QEP outcomes concerned faculty training, as follows:

As a result of participating in writing workshops, faculty will be able to

1. conduct courses, which include process writing and other writing instruction.
2. produce course syllabi that detail the "writing enhanced" elements of the course, especially process writing and other writing instruction methods.
3. apply a variety of assessment applications to student writing.

Part 2: Changes made to the QEP and the reasons for making them

In his report, the QEP on-site evaluator suggested that we clarify the assessment component of *Writing Matters*. Part 2 contains three sections: Changes Made to Clarify Assessment, Rebalancing QEP Priorities, and QEP Director.

Changes Made to Clarify Assessment

Proposed Assessment of Student Writing: Portfolio

As the evaluator noted in his comments, our plan to use student portfolios as our assessment tool was impractical for two reasons: lack of an ePortfolio system and the diversity of the artifacts to be evaluated.

We did not have a large scale ePortfolio system in place. We thought we could overcome this problem by subscribing to Criterion (discussed below), but we were mistaken. Therefore, we did not have a workable system for collecting and storing student papers along with the evidence that students had used a recursive process.

Even if we had been able to collect papers written in individual courses, evaluating them would have been resource-prohibitive due to the diversity of the assignments. We intentionally incorporated this diversity based upon a pedagogically sound principle: it respected individual instructors' need to design appropriate assignments for specific courses. Instructors were free, therefore, to meet the process writing requirement (at least 5 pages) in one or more papers, and many instructors assigned papers of much greater length. This left us with little in common among assignments; each artifact had to be evaluated on its own terms. For example, consider Student Outcome 3, Awareness of Genre, Audience, and Discipline. An intelligent evaluation of this outcome would have required the evaluation team to evaluate each paper alongside the individual instructors' respective instructions. Not only would this have been too time-consuming, it also would have forced us to abandon an assessment element we valued: anonymity for both instructors and students.

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Consequently, QEP instructors collaboratively developed a pre-test, post-test assessment to be administered in every WE class: a 500-word essay to be written at the beginning and end of each semester. Instructions for these essays utilized a writing prompt that was both universal and individualized.

This prompt asked students to consider two or three course objectives specific to that course plus the QEP objective, which was common to all courses. At the beginning of each semester, students made predictive claims, backed up by evidence, as to how easy or difficult it would be to meet the specified course objectives. At the end of each semester, students wrote a similar essay in retrospect, considering how easy or difficult each objective had proven to be. We had high hopes for this assessment for a variety of pedagogical reasons:

1. its organic evolution among QEP instructors and the evaluation team;
2. its universal aspect, which would produce essays similar enough to enable efficient evaluation;
3. its discipline-specific aspect, which would make the assessment an integral and valuable part of each course; and
4. its alignment with best writing to learn principles, which predict an increase in learning when students actively engage with course objectives.

The assessment still proved difficult to administer. QEP instructors wrestled with this assessment over the entire 5-year period, refining and revising it to deal with, for instance, lack of student engagement and plagiarism. We found that instructors needed at least two semesters to successfully administer the assessment. Because of this, we did not require the Year 5 new instructors, each of whom taught their WE course just once per academic year, to administer the assessment; and because we had 9 semesters of information from EN 213 instructors, we did not require them to administer the assessment in the final semester. However, in years 1-4, students in all QEP courses produced beginning and ending essays.

Use of ETS Criterion Writing Evaluation Service

As mentioned above, we initially subscribed to ETS Criterion Writing Evaluation Service for its evaluation and storage capabilities. After two semesters, however, we realized that it did not meet either of these needs satisfactorily. Among its many shortcomings: its evaluative comments were generic, computer-generated, and too often misleading, while its storage capacity did not allow students to upload evidence of process writing. We therefore discontinued use of Criterion after the first year and developed our own repository for student essays. All essays from Criterion were exported to the new repository.

Student and Instructor Surveys

Because students were not able to upload evidence that they had used a recursive process, we developed a student survey (year 2) and an instructor survey (year 3) to measure SLO 2: Use of a Recursive Process. Additionally, the student survey provided students with a means to evaluate the QEP component of individual courses, as suggested by the QEP evaluator. Finally, the surveys allowed us to evaluate the perceived effectiveness of the QEP's two most important classroom interventions: the use of process writing and writing to learn. Student Survey results, collated both collectively and by individual instructor, were shared and discussed with QEP instructors.

Assessment of Student Writing: Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) Writing Exam

The Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) Writing Exam was intended to serve as an external measure of the general writing ability of all students across campus (without regard to which students had completed WE courses). However, our QEP was not clear as to which CAAP component we would use, which student groups would take the CAAP, and when they would be tested. In clarifying our use of this assessment tool, we decided that CAAP would serve us best as a generalized, external measure of proficiency in writing across the university. We therefore administered the Writing Exam, not the multiple choice test, to a representative sample of upper level students in the spring of each year.

Instructor Portfolios

The SACS on-site QEP evaluator also expressed surprise that our only evaluation of the faculty outcomes was a faculty survey completed at the end of the training workshop. Our focus, we had believed, was on the training itself; we had not identified a method of assessing actual implementation. Therefore, our faculty outcomes were worded thusly: **As a result**

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of participating in writing workshops, faculty will be able to conduct courses, produce course syllabi, and apply assessment applications.

We realized our mistake in the first semester. Working along with faculty, we therefore developed a faculty portfolio requirement which transferred the focus of assessment from effective training to competent faculty implementation. We also developed a rubric that allowed for assessment of individual components of each faculty outcome. Submitted at the end of each semester in which a WE course was taught, the faculty portfolio required detailed evidence for each faculty outcome. Using the rubric we developed, the QEP Assistant Director evaluated each component of the faculty portfolios on a scale of 1-4, with a score of 1 meaning the element was not addressed, 2 meaning less than proficient, 3 proficient, and 4 excellent. The Assistant Director and Director then met individually with faculty members to review the scores and develop plans for improvement in any element for which the instructor had not scored at least a 3.

Rebalancing QEP Priorities

The data we gathered from instructor portfolios, along with some of the data gathered from student essays, demanded that we rebalance QEP priorities to dedicate more resources to faculty training. The overarching question of our QEP was this: by increasing student writing across the disciplines, can we improve student writing on our campus? Undergirding this question was the unexamined assumption that we could prepare faculty quickly and easily to assign more writing and incorporate best practices of teaching writing while doing so.

Our assumption proved to be unjustified. Just as it is unrealistic to expect students to master content and skills after first being exposed to new concepts, it was unrealistic for us to expect faculty to complete one 4-day training session and then successfully incorporate the WE requirements into their courses.

Rephrasing the question as an if-then statement—if we assign more writing using best practices in every discipline, then student writing will improve—clarifies our dilemma. Completion of the “then” clause is not possible until the “if” condition is fulfilled. We responded to this by directing more time and effort to the “if” condition: training and supporting faculty. This rebalancing, however, remained true to our QEP goal of improving student writing.

QEP Director

Our plan called for hiring a Ph.D. faculty member with expertise in Rhetoric and Composition. In spite of a vigorous search, no candidate accepted the position of QEP Director. Out of necessity, the Chair of English, who had been involved in the development of the QEP, served as the Interim QEP Director in the first year while we continued the search, again to no avail. The Chair of English then agreed to serve as QEP Director for the remaining four years. As one of the writers of the QEP and with her expertise in teaching writing, the Chair of English was the person best qualified to fill this position; she also continued her professional development in Rhetoric and Composition throughout the 5-year period, successfully completing, for example, a two-week Writing Assessment Symposium at Kent State University. The QEP Director’s base of knowledge, enthusiasm, willingness to learn, and familiarity with the university facilitated a successful QEP. Nonetheless, at the beginning of the QEP implementation, she did not have the expertise a Rhetoric and Composition specialist would have been able to provide.

Part 3: QEP impact on the environment and student learning

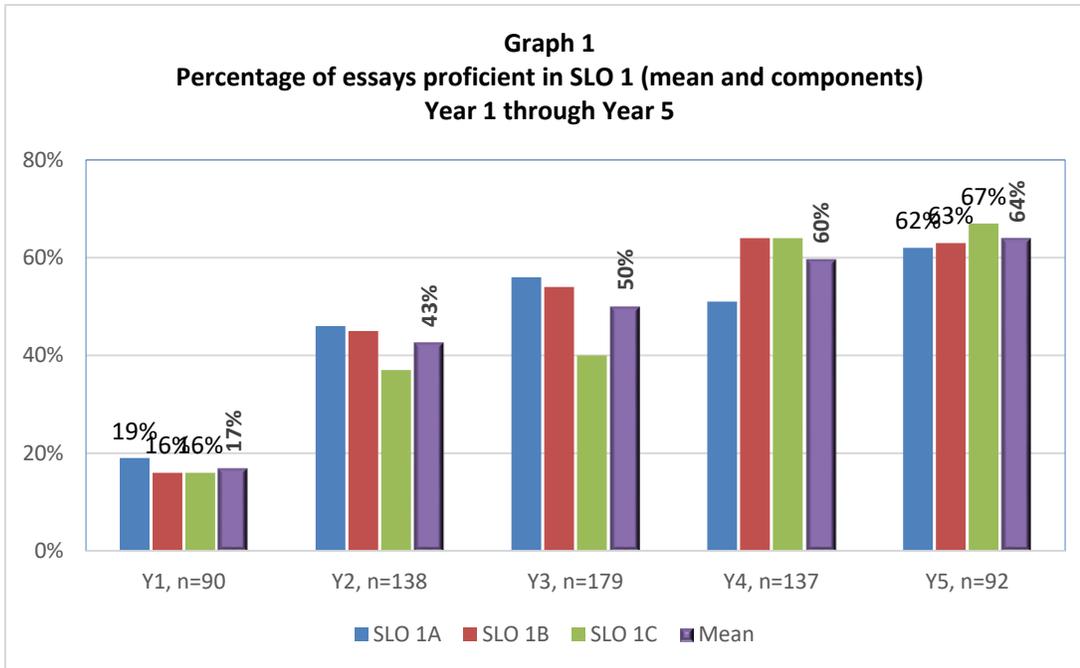
Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)

We will first address SLOs 1, 3 and 4, as each of these was evaluated using one assessment tool, the 500-word essays written at the end of each WE course. SLO 2, which was evaluated via a different assessment tool, will then be addressed.

SLO 1: Students will be able to produce written texts

- 1A: that are logically and coherently structured.
- 1B: whose arguments are warranted and persuasive.
- 1C: supported by evidence from reliable sources.

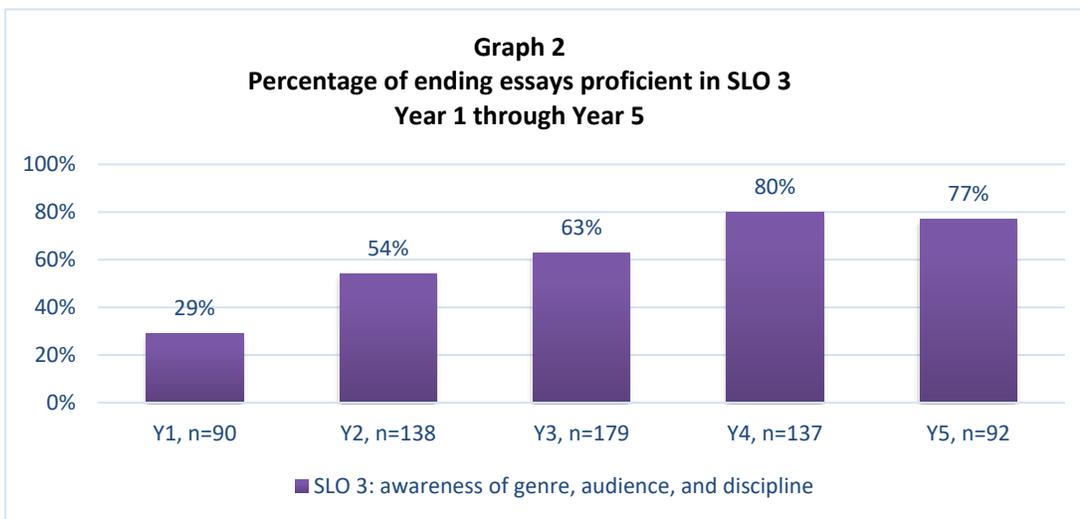
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With elements concerning organization (SLO 1A), argumentation (SLO 1B), and production of evidence (SLO 1C), SLO 1 focused on essay content. Graph 1 expresses the improvement in SLO 1 in two ways: by individual component (SLO 1A, SLO 1B, SLO 1C) and then as the mean (purple with black border) of the percentage of end-of-semester

essays proficient in SLO 1 increased from 17% in year 1 to 64% in year 5. Likewise, the percentage of proficient end-of-semester essays increased across each component of SLO 1: from 19% in year 1 to 62% in year 5 for SLO 1A; from 16% to 63% for SLO 1B; and from 16% to 67% for SLO 1C. However, please see the interpretation section below.

SLO 3: Students will be able to produce written texts that show awareness of genre, audience, and discipline.



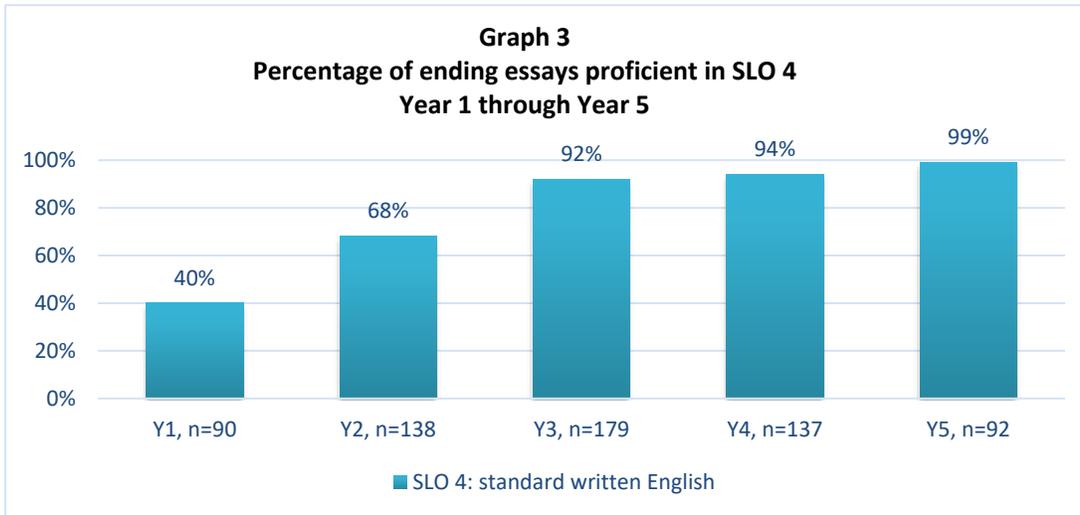
Graph 2 demonstrates the even greater success of SLO 3, which regards genre, audience, and discipline. We attribute this success, in part, to the universal nature of the assessment; i.e., genre and audience did not vary. For SLO 3, 80% of ending essays were judged

proficient in year 4, and 77% were judged proficient in year 5. As with SLO 1, the increase from year 1 to year 5 is dramatic. However, see the interpretation section below.

SLO 4: Students will employ standard written English--its syntax, grammar, and conventions--in writing free of serious grammatical and mechanical errors.

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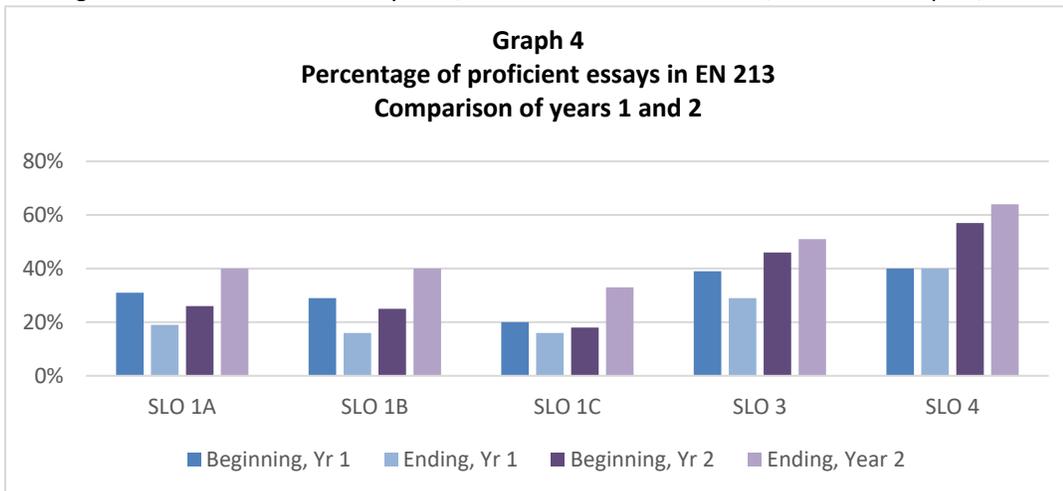
Following best practices in teaching writing, QEP pedagogy emphasized content (SLO 1) and audience (SLO 3)-- both of which should be addressed early on--over syntax and grammar (SLO 4), which are most effectively postponed until very late in the drafting process.

We did so, with mixed success, to counteract the widespread misconception that effective writing equals good grammar. Nevertheless, as Graph 3 shows, we saw the most improvement in this SLO, with 99% of the year 5 end of semester essays judged proficient. We think this is so because syntax, grammar, and mechanical errors are “low-hanging fruit,” quickly identified and remedied by both instructors and students.

Interpretation of results for SLOs 1A, 1B, 1C, 3, and 4:

The dramatic improvement in SLOs 1A, 1B, 1C, 3, and 4 must be interpreted in the light of this understanding: effective writing is always highly contextual and more faculty-dependent than we realized. As faculty and students became more familiar with this particular writing assessment, as the instructions for the assessment developed and improved over the 5 years, as faculty gained experience in disseminating and collecting the assignment, so did student writing improve. That is to say, we found that the improvement in student writing was faculty-dependent not only in the expected way, via an increase in student writing, but also in an unexpected way: via the quality of the design and dissemination of the writing assignment itself.

We began to see this connection in year 1, when our data from EN 213, as seen in Graph 4, showed that the percentage of



proficient end of semester essays (light blue) was actually lower than the percentage of proficient beginning of semester essays (dark blue). In year 2, EN 213 faculty had administered the assessment for the second or third time, and there we saw the improvement we expected (purple). The poor results in

year 1 can most likely be attributed to two factors: our elimination of Criterion and the faculty’s greater facility in administering the assessment. This conclusion is also supported by this finding: essays produced in EN 213, where faculty participants remained fairly consistent over the 5 years, showed greater levels of proficiency in SLOs 1A, 1B, 1C, and 3 than those produced in the upper level WE courses, where new faculty were added in each year.

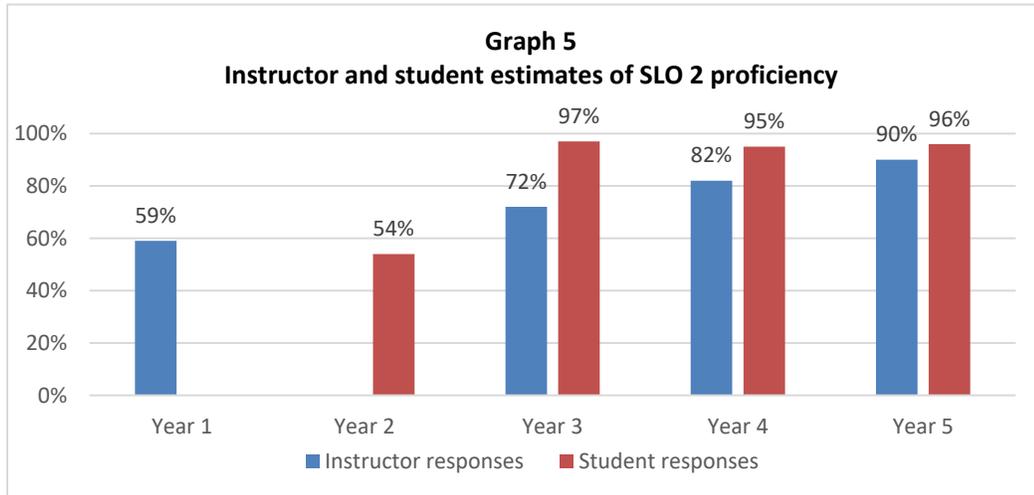
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SLO 2: Students will write in a recursive process. They will plan, generate, revise, and edit drafts and will critique their own and others' written work.

We evaluated SLO 2 through surveys of instructors and students. All QEP instructors responded to the survey in years 1, 3 and 4; in year 5, only the new QEP instructors responded to the survey. Among other questions, one asked instructors to estimate how many students engaged in process writing fully enough to have seen its benefits. We then conservatively calculated the percentage of students whom teachers judged to have proficiently used a recursive process.

Beginning in year 2, students completed a survey, one question of which asked them to indicate their level of agreement with this statement: Overall, I engaged in process writing to the best of my ability. We then calculated the percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Results from both sets of surveys are reported in Graph 5.



Student estimates of proficiency were consistently higher than faculty estimates; we consider the faculty estimates to be more reliable. Nonetheless, student responses ratify faculty's overall consensus that students used a recursive process.

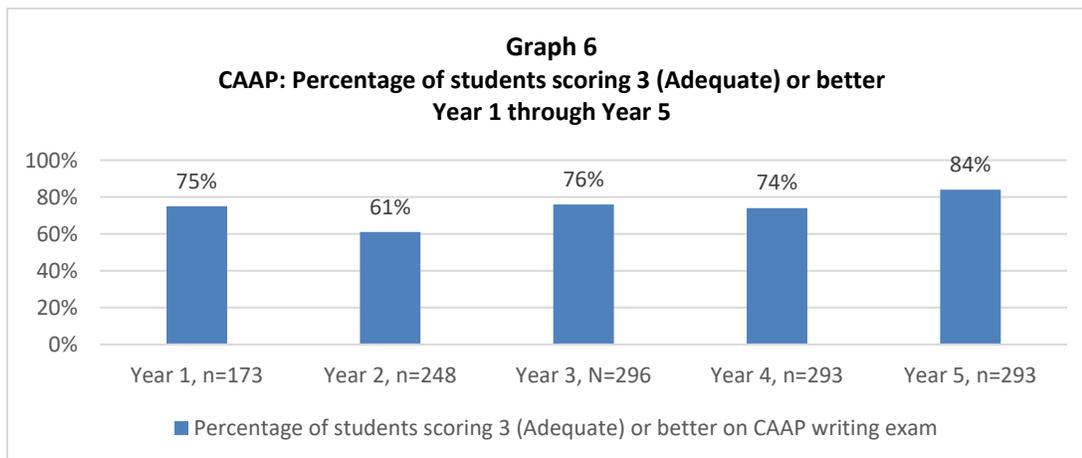
Years 1, 3, and 4: all QEP instructors. Year 5: new QEP instructors only.
 Year 2: 400 (54%) student respondents; year 3: 433 (54%); year 4: 473 (65%); year 5: 618 (74%).

Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) Writing Exam

The CAAP writing exam served as a generalized, external measure of writing proficiency among the entire upper level student body. Therefore, examinees were selected regardless of prior QEP participation. In the first four years, our mean remained below the national mean, as seen in Table 1. In year 5, our mean was the same as the national mean. The CAAP writing exam is scored on a 6-point scale, with the score of 3 described as "Adequate."

Table 1: Comparison of national and ASU mean scores on CAAP writing exam

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
National mean score	3.2	3.2	3.3	3.3	3.3
ASU mean score	3.1	2.9	3.2	3.1	3.3

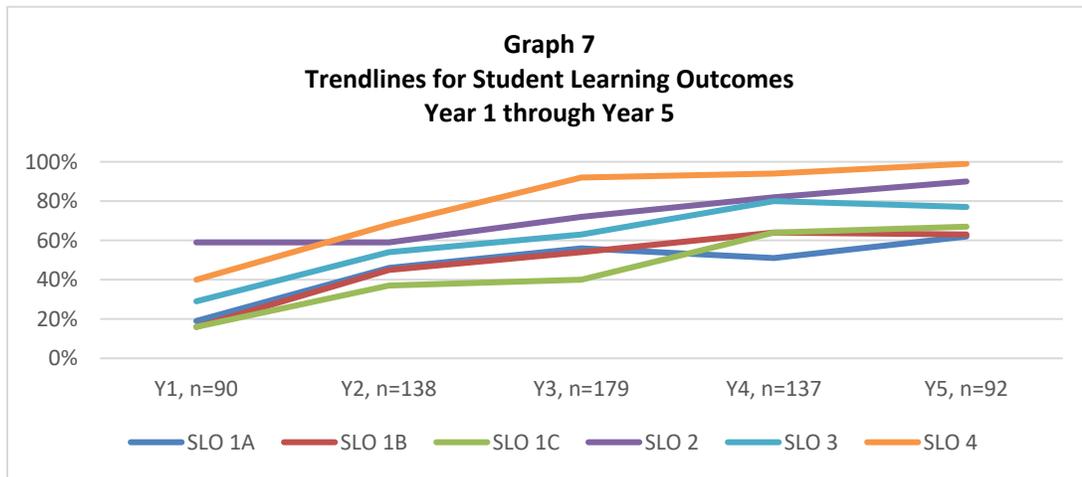


Graph 6 shows the percentage of students who scored a 3 or better in each year. In year 3, we increased the projected number of tested students from 250 to 300 to improve the reliability of our results.

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Recap of Student Learning Outcomes

Finally, Graph 7, which summarizes the results of all Student Learning Outcomes, offers a visual representation of the QEP's

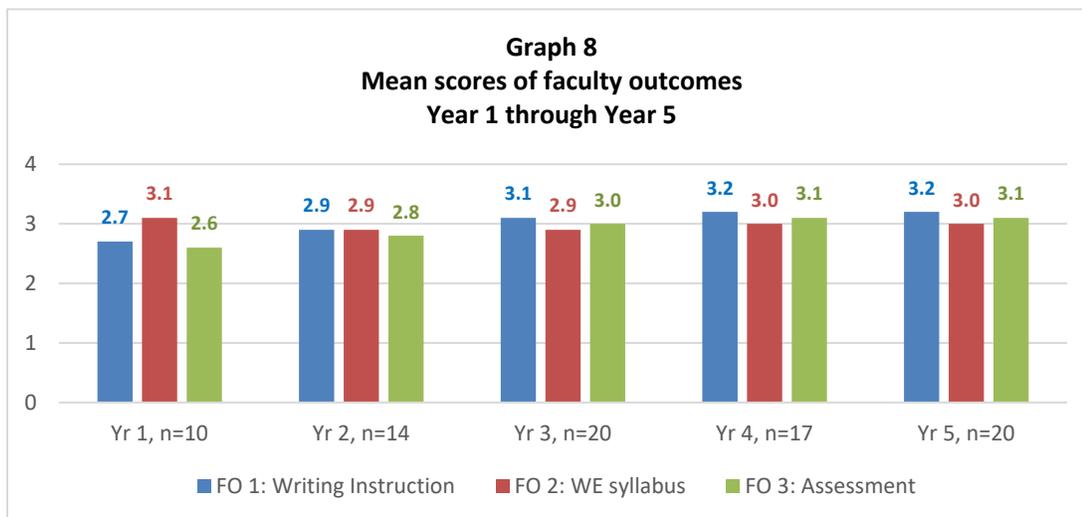


positive, significant impact on student learning over the 5-year period. We find it striking that no SLO shows a proficiency level greater than 60% in year 1, while no SLO shows a proficiency level less than 60% in year 5.

Faculty Outcomes

As a result of participating in writing workshops, faculty will be able to

1. conduct courses which include process writing and other writing instruction.
2. produce course syllabi that detail the “writing enhanced” elements of the course, especially process writing and other writing instruction methods.
3. apply a variety of assessment applications to student writing.



Faculty portfolios, submitted each semester in which a WE course was taught, provided evidence that each element of the faculty outcomes was met. As discussed in the “Rebalancing QEP Priorities” section of Part 2, we expanded faculty training each year in two ways: by working with

individual instructors whose portfolios had below proficient elements and by providing additional writing workshops. Instructors revised their portfolios until each element of each outcome was at least proficient (a score of 3), at which point they were no longer required to submit portfolios. As shown in Graph 8, the mean score of all faculty outcomes reached the level of proficient by Year 4.

Unanticipated Benefits

Writing Center Enhancement

In his report, the on-site QEP lead evaluator stressed the importance of the Alcorn Writing Center as a support structure and suggested that the physical space be improved. As a consequence, the Writing Center was moved to a newly

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constructed, larger, and more easily accessible space in the university library, which greatly enhanced the appeal of the Writing Center to all constituencies and improved the Writing Center's reach across all disciplines. In the academic year immediately prior to the QEP's implementation, university constituents used Writing Center services 3581 times. In the five years of the QEP, the average annual number of client usages was 6238.

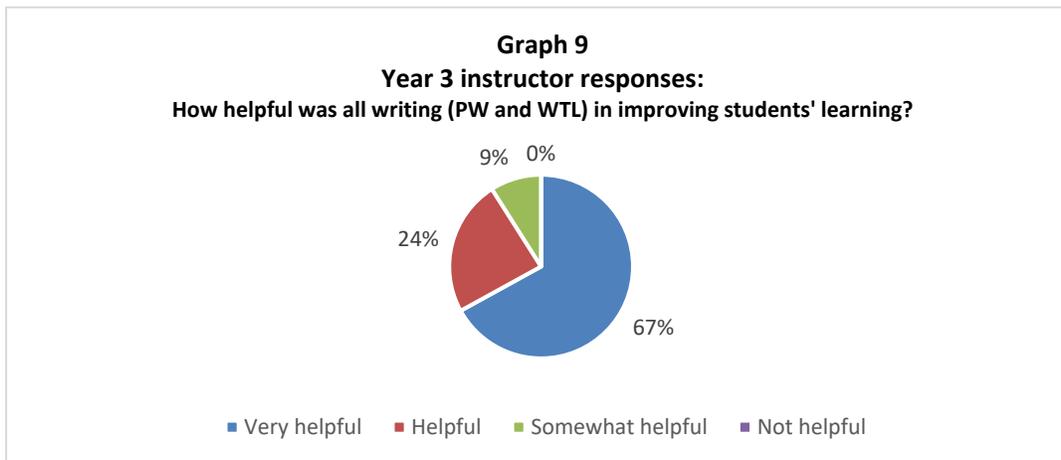
Additional Faculty Training and Incentives

In response to faculty demand, we greatly expanded the amount of training offered by implementing monthly lunch mini-sessions, with lunch provided, along with annual all-day training sessions, for which faculty received additional compensation. (Additional funds were available due to our inability to hire an outside QEP Director). Faculty were given their own copies of multiple books concerning teaching writing. We also developed a collection of QEP training videos. The benefits of this emphasis on training are discussed in more detail in part 4.

Improvement in Student Learning

Although our QEP measured writing proficiency, not learning, we were pleased that 100% of instructors found the increased writing helpful in improving student learning, with 67% reporting that the additional writing was very helpful, 24% reporting that it was helpful, and 9% reporting that it was somewhat helpful.

In a post-QEP survey, with 26 faculty responding, 100% planned to continue assigning at least one process writing



assignment in their courses. Twenty-four indicated that they would continue providing professional or peer models to students and the same number indicated they would continue assigning writing to learn activities in the classroom. We are gratified to see that

instructional changes adopted by faculty during the QEP will outlive the QEP itself.

Conclusion of Part 3: QEP Impact on the Environment and Student Learning

The QEP's positive impact on the environment and student learning is evident. Our results show that we successfully improved the writing proficiency of the measured undergraduate students by requiring them to write more. While the positive results from our external measure, the CAAP test, affirm in a general way the specific positive results reported above, the almost negligible improvement in CAAP scores reveals a failure on our part: we did not extend student writing to upper level discipline-specific classes as thoroughly as projected. All sections of EN 213 were WE courses throughout the five years, and more than 2500 unique students enrolled in EN 213 during this time. However, by year 5, we should have also had 24 active QEP instructors outside of English; instead, for reasons discussed in Part 4, we had 11 in year 5 and five additional instructors who taught at least one year but not in year 5. Therefore, far fewer students than projected had WE principles reinforced through upper level WE courses.

We further improved the learning environment with the expansion of the Alcorn Writing Center and the development of a multi-disciplinary, supportive community of faculty, as explained in Part 4.

Part 4: Reflection

Improving student writing across the university requires a cultural shift, not simply among students but also among faculty. We learned that effecting a shift of this magnitude is no easy task. Despite our best efforts to include 24 active QEP

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instructors by year 5, we were not able to reach as many faculty or students as anticipated. However, where we did reach faculty and students, we reaped great benefit.

As discussed in the “Rebalancing QEP Priorities” section of Part 2, we realized that training faculty in new principles of teaching writing was very much like teaching students to incorporate new writing practices. It takes a great deal of learning, practicing, and revising. Only those who were able to commit to the process were successful. We learned that two factors hampered our efforts: attrition and disposition.

Unfortunately, attrition happens, particularly when success requires that faculty accept and sustain large time commitments. Our failure to establish 24 WE, non-English courses was not, however, due to lack of support at any level. In years 2 through 5, 31 faculty were chosen by departments to participate. Nine withdrew at various phases of the 4-day required training workshop. The remaining 22 faculty were fully trained. Of those, six never taught a QEP class, and five taught for at least one year but not in year 5. In the majority of cases, this attrition was due to circumstances, we now realize, that arise within any 5-year time span: increases in other responsibilities within the university; unexpected personal obligations; separation from the university, and even death.

In only a few cases, faculty withdrew because they were not willing to adopt the QEP’s writing pedagogy or make the commitment to writing within their classrooms. The desired cultural shift, we learned, requires faculty to embrace a certain disposition of intellectual curiosity and openness to change, the very traits we seek to cultivate in students when we use process writing and writing to learn in our teaching. Successful faculty were willing to examine their pre-QEP teaching methods and redesign their courses to weave writing and writing pedagogy into the fabric of their content. Those who were not successful seemed to consider writing as an “add-on” to what they were already doing. Just as students fall all along the spectrum between ignoring or embracing the benefits of process writing, so do faculty exhibit greater or lesser openness to critiquing and revising their teaching practices.

When we realized faculty needed more time and training, we offered optional training workshops. QEP and other faculty welcomed these workshops, which then blossomed into something more than strictly training opportunities. Workshops created a space for cooperative problem-solving. Using anecdotes from classroom experience, data from our essay assessment tool, and data from instructor and student surveys, we identified weaknesses in our implementation and offered provisional solutions, which we implemented, evaluated and revised again as necessary. This resulted in one of the most delightful benefits of the QEP: a multi-disciplinary, supportive community of faculty devoted to effective writing and effective teaching.

The positive impact of the group training and community building is evident in responses to a post-QEP survey, which asked this (optional) question of QEP participants: What do you value most about your participation in the QEP? Twenty-five of 26 respondents chose to answer this question. All 25 responses related to some aspect of the training. Several valued the opportunity to learn best practices: “Process writing rocks!” Others valued the chance to interact with colleagues in a workshop setting: “I value most . . . the workshops during which I had the opportunity to exchange ideas . . . with my colleagues.” And perhaps this participant best expressed the sense of community that developed: “The greatest legacy of the QEP is that it nurtured and sustained a community of like-minded writing instructors across the curriculum. We came together to discuss pedagogy, how to design and assess writing assignments, and this conversation built a community of instruction on campus. The benefit of this is hard, perhaps impossible to measure.”

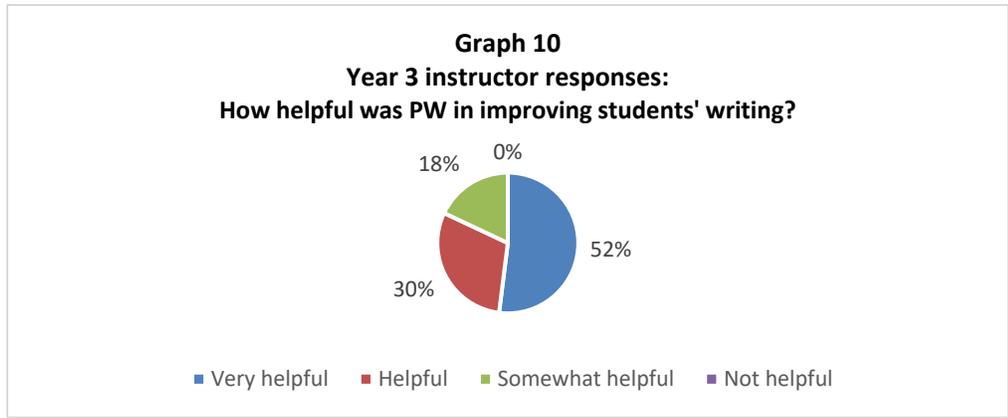
We also learned how challenging it is to develop locally meaningful, valid, and reliable assessments of writing. Our 500-word essay assessment tool was modified in some way in all years except year 5. In the earlier years, we identified the major problem as follows: students did not value the essay as a legitimate part of the course. For example, some “wrote” ending essays by changing the beginning essay from future tense to past tense, while others uploaded 500 random words from the Internet. To address this, instructors began collecting hard copies rather than simply requiring students to upload the essays. To create a vivid sense of audience, we changed the essay format to a letter format, in which student addressed previous teachers in the respective disciplines. To avoid the end-of-semester panicked rush, instructors moved the essay due date from the last week of the semester to sometime within the last three weeks. When EN 213 instructors realized that students were recycling essays from prior semesters, they required that students address audiences that varied semester to semester. In other words, implementation of the QEP required us to adopt the process-oriented approach that

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we urged students and faculty to adopt. As we did so, we contributed greatly to the university’s culture of continuous improvement.

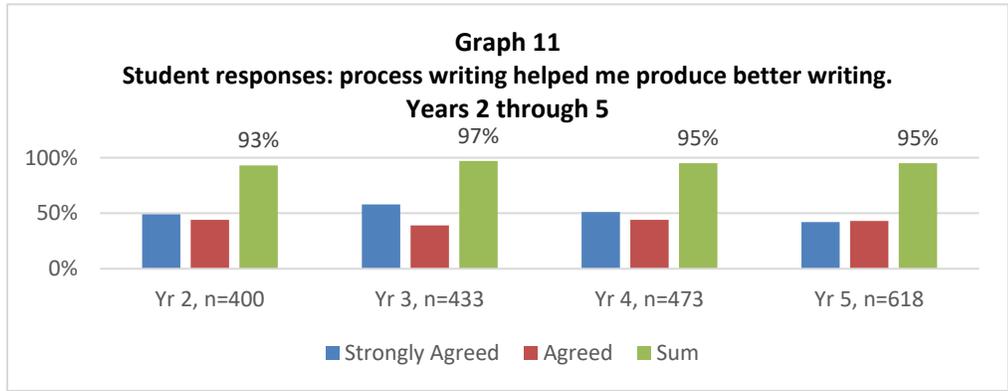
As the assessment tool evolved and as faculty became more adept at administering the assessment, student learning outcome results also improved. We were, frankly, quite surprised to see the strength of this relationship between the quality of the assignment itself and the quality of the resulting student writing. This has convinced many of us to be far more intentional about assignment design.

We were also gratified by how quickly and thoroughly both instructors and students grasped the efficacy of the QEP’s two most important classroom interventions, process writing and writing to learn, as shown in their survey responses.



For example, see Graph 10. In year 3, with 20 faculty teaching multiple sections of WE courses, and with all instructors responding, 100% reported that process writing (PW) helped, to some degree, improve student writing, with 52% finding process writing very helpful.

Likewise, as demonstrated in Graph 11, between 93% and 97% of students either strongly agreed or agreed that process writing helped produce better writing.



Writing Matters sought to inculcate three big-picture best practices in teaching writing: process writing, writing to learn, and writing to models. The literature in the Rhetoric and Composition field is clear: these practices improve student writing. Our experiences and data confirm this, as well. Simply put: where our QEP was adopted, it was successful, but it was not adopted as extensively as planned. Our ongoing goal, therefore, is to continue our QEP by training more faculty in other disciplines. To do so, we have included in our budget projections a Ph.D. line for a faculty member with an emphasis in Rhetoric and Composition. This faculty member will continue and expand upon the training program we have begun. Moreover, we intend to expand the QEP’s positive experience with faculty training by starting a modest Teaching and Learning initiative. Those of involved in *Writing Matters* very much hope to see this effort become the basis of our next Quality Enhancement Plan.