

Perceptions of English 110

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Background

English 110, Introduction to College Writing, is a five-credit writing course that fulfills the University's composition competency requirement for graduation. Nearly all students at UW-Eau Claire take English 110; about 40 sections of the course are offered each semester and over 2,000 students move through the course each year. A smaller number of students take the two-credit version of this course, English 112, which is designed for incoming students with Advanced Placement or transfer credit in composition. About six sections of 112 are offered each semester. Most faculty in the English Department (about 45) teach 110 or 112 at least one semester each year. The English Department recently received a significant amount of Blugold Commitment funds to transform the existing composition courses into first-year, writing-intensive seminars. Beginning Fall 2011, the new version of 110 and 112, renamed the Blugold Seminar in Critical Reading and Writing, will be piloted in 13 sections. Blugold Commitment funds will allow for all sections of all composition courses to be transferred over to Blugold Seminars over three years. **The purpose of this study was to gather student input about English 110 and 112 for consideration as those courses are being redesigned.**

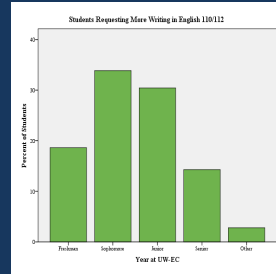
Participants

1,083 current students at UW-Eau Claire who had taken English 110 or 112 before the spring 2011 semester participated in this study.

Survey

The survey was comprised of 43 questions and was disseminated through mass email to roughly 6,000 students who had been enrolled in English 110 or 112 between Spring 2008 and Fall 2010. The survey questions ranged in topic from students' feelings about the course, to the amount and kind of reading and writing they were required to do, to the degree of improvement students perceived in their own writing as a result of the class. Participants were allowed to offer free-form comments throughout the survey, and they were prompted specifically for positive and negative comments about the course at the end of the survey. The survey was available to take for one week, March 28 – April 4, 2011.

Thank you to the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire and Office of Research and Sponsored Programs.

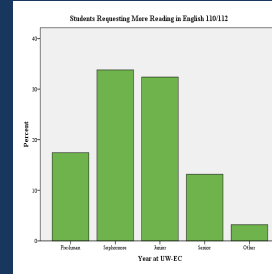


"I'd like more meaningful reading and writing, college-related or job-related."

Junior female, Music Education

"More writing assignments a mixture of big and small."

Junior male, Psychology



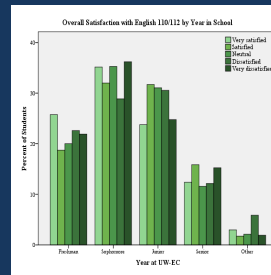
Regardless of the variation among sections, students freely commented about the need to incorporate more relevant and consequential reading and writing assignments.

"We did a lot of reading and writing, and I received a lot of positive and constructive feedback from my professor that helped me increase my skills."

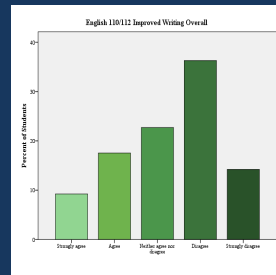
Sophomore female, Psychology

"The standards for the writing were very low. I was never challenged..."

Sophomore male, Music Education



There was large variation among satisfaction ratings. Responses ranged from elated to disgruntled about English 110/112 as a whole.

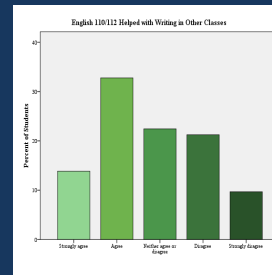


"I feel that the course prepared me for all of the future writing I needed to do as I entered higher level courses."

Senior male, Biology

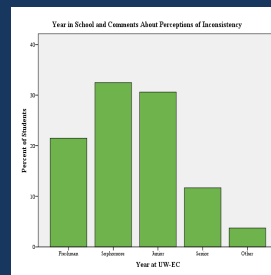
"I feel it didn't help me improve my writing, and I didn't learn anything."

Senior female, Sociology



The results present a puzzling contradiction between students reporting, on the one hand, that English 110/112 did not improve their writing, and on the other, that it did help their writing in other classes. Future research is necessary to understand this phenomenon.

Over 40% of students commented freely on the lack of structure between sections of English 110/112. Others commented they were simply unaware of other sections. Overall, many unprompted responses called for greater uniformity for the course as a whole.



"The department should have a outline for what instructors need to cover. Assignment topics, amount of papers, and length of assignments should be consistent with every 110 class, regardless of the instructor. A general outline of a grading rubric for each assignment should also be required and would help prevent bias and inconsistent grading by professors. There was too much variety in the way these classes were taught so it needs to be more consistent, especially a class that is required for every student. This would help make every section more equal and fair."

Sophomore male, Information Systems

Controls

In order to have optimal data, several controls were placed throughout the survey. All participants were required to have completed English 110 or 112 before spring semester 2011. All participants were given information about the study, particularly about anonymity and confidentiality, and they were asked to provide informed consent before proceeding to the questions. The participants were also asked to agree to not mention specific professors in their written comments because the researchers were more interested in information about the course as a whole than in positive or negative comments about particular instructors. If participants did not agree to this, or if at anytime in the survey they did refer to specific instructors, their data was marked as invalid and not counted. Finally, the last question of the survey asked if the participants answered the questions honestly, and if participants answered "no," their data was also discounted.

Discussion

This survey suggests that English 110 and 112 is achieving fairly inconsistent levels of satisfaction and improvement for students at this time. Students seem to be quite split on these matters: many liked the course very much and feel they learned a great deal from it, while others were not convinced that it was useful for their writing development. Given that nearly 80 sections of composition are offered each year, it is not perhaps surprising to see such variability in responses. Moreover, students' perceptions of satisfaction, improvement or usefulness are inextricably tied to their feelings and attitudes about writing in general, their prior experiences with writing instruction, and their levels of satisfaction with their 110 or 112 instructor. Since writing is widely perceived as "subjective" and nebulous in terms of content area and evaluation criteria, it can be difficult to parse actual improvement or efficacy from emotion-laded memories of a course. That said, this survey does suggest the need for greater commonalities among the various sections of 110 and 112. Responses certainly point to a lack of understanding across campus about what the composition course is and what it aims to achieve. Students do not seem to disagree with the composition requirement itself. 76.3% agree that it is a necessary course. Rather students feel that, given the nature of the requirement, the course should be more clearly delineated and more uniformly articulated.