

ACADEMIC SENATE
of
THE CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY

Item 1

AS-2627-03/AA
November 13-14, 2003

A Review of the California State University Graduate
Writing Assessment Requirement (GWAR) in 2002

- RESOLVED: That the Academic Senate of the California State University (CSU) thank the CSU GWAR Review Committee and commend them for their efforts, which resulted in *A Review of the California State University Graduation Writing Assessment Requirement (GWAR) in 2002* and comparative campus charts and responses on various aspects of the GWAR; and be it further
- RESOLVED: That the Academic Senate CSU endorse the document *A Review of the California State University Graduation Writing Assessment Requirement (GWAR) in 2002*; and be it further
- RESOLVED: That the Academic Senate CSU recommend that campus senates and administrations review the report with the intention of adopting its content or implications as campus policy.

RATIONALE: In the 25 years since the Graduation Writing Assessment Requirement (GWAR) was instituted, the California State University (CSU) has undergone considerable change, including an emphasis on the assessment of student learning outcomes, large increases in student enrollments with modest (at best) increases in funding, and dramatic changes in the student body. All of these developments in the academic environment have had an impact on the assessment of student writing skills.

As required by Executive Order 665, a review of GWAR was undertaken by a committee of CSU faculty, administrators, and students. To conduct the review, the committee collected information from each CSU campus about local GWAR policies, processes, and products in 2001–02 and organized the data by looking at the key features of systemwide GWAR policy, which include the following:

- ***Flexibility in choice of assessment method:** Ten campuses require a writing exam; two campuses require completion of a course; three campuses*

require both an exam and a course; and seven campuses require either an exam or a course.

- **Procedure for evaluating student writing samples:** *Nearly all campuses using a standardized essay exam follow the policy requiring essay exams to be written under controlled conditions and evaluated by at least two readers. Although the policy for standardized essay exams is quite specific, systemwide GVAR policy is silent on procedures for writing samples produced in academic courses. It appears that, in most GVAR courses, student writing is evaluated by the instructor of record. In these cases, the committee recommends that campuses implement measures to ensure consistency and common standards across courses.*
- **Variety in writing samples:** *Systemwide GVAR policy permits many types of writing samples to be used for certification, and campuses vary in the nature of the writing task expected of the student. Campuses differ by offering students shorter or longer reading passages, more or less complex reading passages, and varying rhetorical situations.*
- **Quality of writing performance:** *To evaluate the quality of the student writing performance, the review committee considered two types of evidence. Information on student passrates showed that no campus had a passrate exceeding 90 percent for first-time test-takers and that passrates are low for students who have to repeat the test because they did not pass the first time. The data also show that student passrates in GVAR courses are similar to passrates in other academic courses. The second type of evidence was a sampling of actual student GVAR essays that were scored by campus evaluators and then reviewed by the committee. The committee, by and large, concurred with the judgments of campus evaluators. The committee believes, however, that campuses should devise writing prompts that challenge students to demonstrate the comprehensive writing skills expected of college graduates, not just the proficiencies required of students when they enter the university.*
- **Timing of the Administration of the Writing Assessment:** *Although students are expected to complete the assessment in the junior year, many do not, despite the fact that CSU institutions use a variety of incentives and motivators. Data on passrates show clearly that students who must retake the test or course need extra services and assistance to help them pass.*
- **All-campus responsibility:** *CSU faculty from disciplines across the curriculum have participated in GVAR processes as instructors of GVAR*

courses, readers of timed essay examinations, and members of oversight committees. To ensure all-campus responsibility, it would be helpful if campuses treated GWAR like they do all other academic programs and require a program review every five to seven years.

In addition to considering these systemwide GWAR policies, the review committee also examined emerging issues. The most significant of these is the large numbers of non-native speakers of English in CSU classrooms. The heterogeneity of today's student body places extraordinary demands on CSU faculty and heavy burdens on students who succeed in their coursework but have not attained proficiency in standard written English.

Another interesting finding from campus data lies in the many different ways GWAR is implemented—or not implemented—in graduate programs. Instead of offering a campus-wide certification, most graduate programs delegate the assessment method to the department level. Some campuses were unaware that a GWAR requirement at the graduate level exists.

With the flexibility and independence encouraged by the Board of Trustees, CSU institutions have developed assessment procedures that are, with a few exceptions, rigorous and sound. In some areas, the review committee has offered recommendations for improving campus GWAR processes. By and large, however, the campuses have identified assessment methods appropriate to their individual missions and student populations, and they have adapted to an evolving academic milieu.

The recommendations of the report are as follows:

- ✧ Recommendation #1: Each campus should implement measures to ensure consistency and common standards in faculty evaluations of written documents produced in courses through which students can achieve GWAR certification.*
- ✧ Recommendation #2: Each campus should review GWAR writing prompts to ensure that they will elicit the skills expected of graduating students rather than the proficiencies of entering students.*
- ✧ Recommendation #3: The CSU system should develop and maintain a systemwide repository of writing topics, prompts, and assignments for GWAR.*

- ✧ *Recommendation #4: Each campus should develop a process that ensures students attempt the assessment in their junior year.*
- ✧ *Recommendation #5: Campuses should discuss and implement advising and assistance to enable GWAR “repeaters” to be successful.*
- ✧ *Recommendation #6: So that students can have effective individualized instruction in GWAR courses, course section enrollments should be capped at 20.*
- ✧ *Recommendation #7: Each campus should collect and disseminate data that report the percentage of students who have completed all requirements for graduation except GWAR.*
- ✧ *Recommendation #8: Each campus should involve CSU faculty from all disciplines in GWAR processes such as reading essays, teaching GWAR courses, providing opportunities for students to improve their writing, and serving on GWAR committees.*
- ✧ *Recommendation #9: To ensure all-campus responsibility for GWAR, every CSU institution should conduct a five- to seven-year review of GWAR on the campus. GWAR should be added to every campus’s program review calendar as one of the regular academic programs to be reviewed periodically.*
- ✧ *Recommendation #10: Each campus should discuss and implement practices that help ESL students to be successful in passing GWAR.*
- ✧ *Recommendation #11: Each CSU campus should develop a campus-wide GWAR policy for graduate as well as undergraduate programs.*
- ✧ *Recommendation #12: Graduate programs should be included in the annual five- to seven-year GWAR reviews on campus.*

APPROVED UNANIMOUSLY – January 22-23, 2004