Written Communication – Scoring Results & Brief Analysis
Joan Hawthorne, Director of Assessment & Regional Accreditation
Ryan Zerr, Director of Essential Studies
December 2016

<u>Overview:</u> In February 2016, senior students (n = 84) in ES Capstone courses volunteered to take a specially designed "performance task" that presented them with a scenario asking for them to produce written work. The task was designed by UND faculty members to determine the level of accomplishment of UND students relative to the ES Written Communication learning goal. The task was aligned with both UND's ES Written Communication criteria and UND's Written Communication Assessment Rubric. In December 2016, faculty and academic staff (n = 20) participated in a "scoring session" in which they assessed the students' work from February 2016. Below are summarized the results from the scoring session.

Total Score Results from December 2016 Scoring Session

Overall Score Frequency Distribution
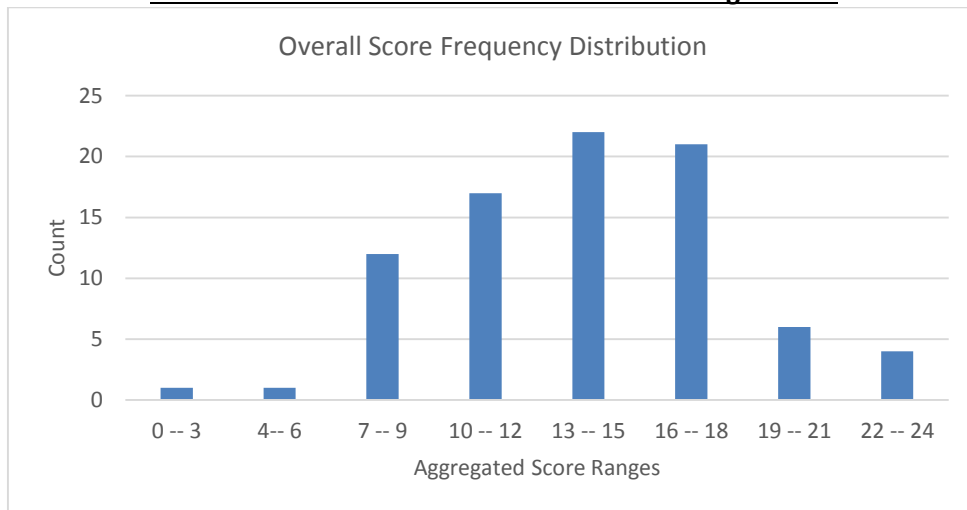
Scores for Individual Criteria on the Written Communication Rubric

Rubric Criteria	Student Scores (Percentage)							Median Criterion Score
		Low		Middle		High		
	0	1-2	2-3	3-4	4-5	5-6	6	
Sense of Purpose	1	8	14	26	26	20	4	4-5 **Upper Mid**
Synthesis, Analysis, and Evaluation	4	20	28	27	14	7	0	3-4 **Lower Mid**
Guidance for Readers	0	11	19	39	20	11	0	3-4 **Lower Mid**
Clarity and Conventions	0	6	12	37	31	11	4	4-5 **Upper Mid**

Total score results were calculated by adding each student's criteria scores to obtain a total for each student across all rubric categories. The score distribution indicates that the median total score was in the range 13-15, which is approximately 60%. Higher resolution results are summarized in the table above, where scores in each rubric criterion are given. Median scores for each of the criteria are in the middle score range. The applicable rubric criteria definitions are:

Rubric Criteria Definitions: Descriptors for Scores of 5-6 (High Level)

Sense of Purpose:
- Writer is sophisticated in his/her ability to signal purpose to reader.
- Focused and incisive, the paper reflects a writer with a strong sense of what s/he is trying to do or say.
- The various sections of the paper make sense together and the writer has indicated the larger implications or importance of the written work.

Synthesis, Analysis, and Evaluation:
- Writer carefully integrates written sources and the ideas of others into the paper in a manner that supports but does not overshadow the writer's own purpose. The ideas of others are clearly marked as such.
- Writing in this category does not merely "present" what others have said; instead, the writer can offer thoughtful, complex analysis or evaluation of those ideas.

Guidance for Readers:
- The writer demonstrates a sophisticated awareness of his/her reader.
- Writing flows smoothly from one idea to another. The writer has taken pains to assist the reader in following the logic of the ideas expressed.
- The writer has taken pains to explain and develop his/her ideas.

Clarity and Conventions:
- Clarity of ideas is enhanced by careful expression.
- Writer seems to be in command of conventions of writing and uses them to rhetorical advantage.
- Visual presentation of written work formatting, and/or documentation is polished.

Written Communication Performance Task

Designed for Essential Studies by UND faculty: Harmon Abrahamson (Chemistry), Chris Basgier (English), Debra Hanson (Occupational Therapy), Thyra Knapp (Languages – German), Minou Rabiei (Petroleum Engineering), Shane Winterhalter (UND Writing Center), and Ryan Zerr (Mathematics and Essential Studies).

Task summary: During the last several months, many educators have been debating whether or not they should find ways to caution students when assigning content that might be distressing through the use of "trigger warnings." As the attached document library indicates, some schools have even proposed policies recommending the use of "trigger warnings." Imagine the UND Student Senate is considering a similar resolution that would urge all faculty members to include "trigger warnings" when teaching content that might be stressful for some students.

Student's role: You will compose an open letter to the UND Student Senate that, if this were not a hypothetical situation would be published in the Dakota Student. After quickly reviewing the attached document library, you will take a position on whether or not faculty should use "trigger warnings" in the classroom. Your letter will not only address whether or not UND faculty should use "trigger warnings," it will also discuss how and why such a policy should be implemented or prohibited. Think of this as an

opportunity to help shape how ideas are taught and presented that will have an impact on both current and future students.

Document library:

1. **A Resolution to Mandate Warnings For Triggering Content in Academic Settings Resolution #805, by Nikki Calderon & Second: Derek Wakefield, February 25, 2014**
   This resolution from the Associated Students Senate at UCSB supports using trigger warnings on course syllabi with triggering content and includes specific guidelines for faculty.
2. **OUCH Blog: "Trigger Warnings: What Do They Do?" BBC News, February 25, 2014**
   This blog briefly introduces the concept of trigger warnings, provides examples of different types of triggers, and addresses the generally accepted perceptions of these warnings.
3. **"The Coddling of the American Mind" by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Atlantic*, September 2015**
   This article discusses potential negative effects of trigger warnings on college students' mental health and argues that potential content censorship could deprive students of developing critical thinking skills.
4. **"Trigger Warnings Encourage Free Thought and Debate" by Bailey Loverin, *New York Times,* May 19, 2014**
   In this op-ed, a second-year literature student at UCSB argues that trigger warnings are an opportunity to debate and discuss difficult mental health issues on campus.
5. **"Trigger Unhappy" by Colleen Flaherty, *Inside Higher Ed*, April 14, 2014**
   This article discusses of the controversy surrounding Oberlin College's trigger warning policy and the ultimate decision to drop it.
6. **"Why I'll Add a Trigger Warning" by Angus Johnston, *Inside Higher Ed*, May 29, 2014**
   In this article, a History professor at Hostos Community College discusses his reasons for providing students with a trigger warning. Included is a practical example of the warning he uses on his syllabi.

Summary Notes from Campus Debriefing
(Scorers' thoughts from discussions immediately following the scoring session.)

1. Strength of the students' work:
   - Students recognized complexity and built it into their arguments
   - Arguments were generally coherent
   - Students were quite articulate and often wrote clean and sophisticated sentences
   - Students usually recognized content relevant for making their point and used it
2. Weaknesses of students' work:
   - Less use of sources than would be ideal
   - Sometimes there was clumsy integration of sources
   - Students were not always sure about how to draw from the sources
   - Arguments were not always as well framed as they could have been
   - There were often well-made points, but weak development of those points
   - Students were better at listing or describing content than they were at developing a position
3. General comments on students' work:
   - There was inconsistency in the use of personal experiences as part of the arguments given

- Arguments would sometimes evolve throughout the letter, making for a less "hung together" document
4. What's the campus message about this student work?
    - Audience awareness could have been better
    - There's a pretty positive message: students generally used critical thinking and wrote clearly
    - The task made clear how the ES learning goals build on one another: written communication skills require information literacy and critical thinking, etc.
5. What implications should these results have for requiring a mid-level communications course, such as through separating the Advanced Communication requirement from the Capstone?
    - Keep capstones as advanced communications courses, but create a new "intermediate communication course" that would build on the requirements of the introduction communication/composition courses, and prepare students for the skills they need to fulfill the advanced communication requirement
    - Weaknesses in the student work argue for a communication course before the capstone
    - Students need to learn to write more broadly than just within their discipline
    - Students in technical fields (sciences) don't get as much experience writing for other audiences as they should
    - Perhaps, rather than certifying courses for communication, ES should certify programs as "writing enriched"
6. Any issues/concerns with the rubric?
    - Criteria that was the most difficult to utilize was Synthesis, Analysis, and Evaluation. For instance, if a student simply cited a source, did that automatically make the paper a 6 for the category? If so, that's not likely what's intended.
    - Could Synthesis, Analysis, and Evaluation be split into two categories: "Use of Sources" and "Analysis and Interpretation"? And for "Analysis and Interpretation," perhaps the focus shouldn't (as is currently the case) be only on analyzing and interpreting others ideas/works. It seems there should also be a place for the author's personal experiences and ideas.
    - Would it help to have a "Genre" category?
7. Any issues/concerns with the performance task?
    - Task doesn't explicitly ask for sources to be used
    - Should the task be clarified to make it a true letter to the editor or a true letter to the Senate – in other words, one or the other with no ambiguity. Perhaps addressed to "Senate, campus leaders, and the campus community"