

# **Report to the Higher Learning Commission**

Academy for the Assessment of Student Learning

Results Forum Impact Report:

Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana

April 2011

**Template Question 1:** Describe your Academy project(s) as developed at the first Roundtable in 2006-07. Be as detailed as possible about the issues it was intended to address as well as the content and strategies of the project itself. Include in your discussion your reasons for joining the Academy and the degree to which you have dealt with those reasons. If you enrolled in the Academy in response to the recommendation of a site evaluation team, explain how your Academy work addressed the issues raised in that report.

Saint Mary's College joined the Academy based on the recommendation of the 2006 site evaluation team. The report of the 1996 evaluation team noted weaknesses in the area of assessment. The 2006 site evaluation team explained, "The team's expectation is that Saint Mary's College will ... be able to implement a systematic process for assessing student learning – both in the major and in general education – in ways that link: 1) learning outcomes, 2) reliable measures, and 3) program improvements...."

A team that included members of the College's Assessment Committee and the newly appointed Senior Vice President and Dean of Faculty attended the initial Academy Roundtable and identified the Writing Proficiency Program (WPP) as the focus of our Academy project for several reasons. It was a well-established program with significant, campus-wide involvement. It was well regarded on campus as being successful in promoting student learning. It had stable governance structures in place, including a Steering Committee and regular formation for all writing faculty, and, after years of rotating leadership, it was about to be led by two full-time faculty who made a three-year commitment to directing the program. It had well-established assessment practices, primarily a portfolio evaluation system using a rubric, that could be used to study student learning. The team specifically did not choose to assess the General Education curriculum because it was in the process of being significantly revised. Instead, the team selected a component of the current General Education curriculum—the WPP—to assess thoroughly, anticipating that the assessment of this program could be used as a model for future assessment projects, particularly other General Education components. Additionally, the team expected that, by focusing on a program that was well regarded and included many faculty members on campus, this project could also help to improve the climate for assessment. Our primary objectives included the following:

*Assuring the reliability of the portfolio system and rubric as assessment tools for student writing*, through reliability studies, a survey of portfolio readers, and content review of rubrics;

*Beginning to connect our Basic W requirements to students' writing throughout their college careers* through conversations with departments, campus-wide formation events, and study of survey data (NSSE, CIRP, CSS, alumnae surveys);

*Investigating how well the WPP is serving our students and understanding student success in the program* through student surveys, rubric analysis, and disaggregating assessment information to understand how we are supporting different student populations (e.g., less-prepared students, students whose portfolios were evaluated as borderline or "No W", multicultural students);

*Making data-driven changes to teaching and curriculum* that respond to the assessment results and follow appropriate best practices to improve student learning;

*Using our experience in the Academy to develop a template* that can be used to guide future assessment projects (see appendix A) and *to use our experience to support the development and further integration of systematic assessment processes on campus*.

The team wrote at the initial Roundtable meeting, "Our success will be measured by how well we are supporting the work of the Writing Program in assessment and the progress they make in actually assessing how well students are meeting our writing outcomes." We can now see that these goals have been accomplished: we have integrated assessment thoroughly into the WPP, establishing an effective system of assessing student writing and responding to the data collected.

In addition to the specific work done with the WPP, the College has invested significant effort in establishing and integrating assessment processes on campus during our time in the Academy. The College has addressed the issues raised in the site evaluation team report, including having developed an assessable General Education curriculum that is based on learning outcomes, and revising all departmental and program assessment plans to include well-written learning outcomes, reliable assessment measures, and collecting results that can be used for improving student learning. The work from the Academy WPP project has also been used to create a template that may be useful for assessing components of the General Education curriculum. The College has been and will continue to provide resources to support work on assessment; for example, instituting an assessment grants program and providing significant formation opportunities on assessment for faculty. To support our efforts, the Office of Institutional Research has been restructured to include assessment with a Director of Institutional Research and Assessment. The foundational structure for continued assessment is now well established.

**Template Question 2:** Describe any changes that you made to the project(s)—or that had to be made to it—other than personnel changes. What were the reasons for these changes? Did the changes improve the project?

As the project developed, it focused on the Basic Writing (or W) course to a greater extent than had been originally anticipated. This has lessened the focus on the Advanced W, which occurs in the student's major. Nevertheless, initial evidence suggests that the Advanced W (offered in different ways in each department) is successful and senior and alumnae surveys provide strong evidence of students' growth in and proficiency in writing. Since the Basic W course is shared by all students and is foundational to the curriculum, it certainly merited the significant effort that was spent in assessing its effectiveness.

During our time in the Academy, the College also expanded the scope of the project to include the improvement of assessment processes and practices across campus. As the General Education curriculum developed, a significant effort occurred to refocus a conceptually-driven curriculum to an assessable curriculum based on student learning outcomes. At the same time, the College created and strengthened assessment processes on campus, including integrating the revision of assessment plans into annual departmental reviews with the Senior Vice President and Dean of Faculty and reviewing learning outcomes for course approval in both the Curriculum and General Education Curriculum committees. The College now requires all new programs of study (majors, minors, etc.) to include learning outcomes. In order to strengthen these campus-wide efforts, we offered faculty development opportunities in assessment, including a very successful assessment grant program, web resources, and well-attended workshops.

**Template Question 3:** What challenges to the success of your project arose in your four Academy years? How did you deal with those challenges?

Two main challenges presented themselves during our Academy work. The first was the time available for our project. Because we were committed to making long-term changes—to making data-driven assessment a well-integrated part of our WPP and to seeking appropriate collaboration and ownership in decision making—our study of the Basic W proved very time-intensive. We were unable to make the same progress in assessing all areas of our writing curriculum; e.g. the Advanced W, that we made in assessing the Basic Writing course. Among the initiatives utilized to address this challenge were conducting research into faculty readers' perceptions of portfolio process, surveying students on their perceptions of portfolio feedback, and ongoing discussions in the Writing Program Steering Committee on faculty concerns about the time commitment involved in portfolio assessment. A significant accomplishment of our project has been using research into the consistency of readers to pilot a new portfolio review system that requires fewer, but more experienced, consistent, and trained readers. We will continue to evaluate portfolio review administration over the coming semesters.

The second challenge was anticipated: our earliest project post notes “the high level of resistance to assessment, including the development and assessment of student learning outcomes, on campus.” To respond to this climate, the Assessment Committee offered several “Essence of Learning” lunches in which faculty talked about teaching and learning in different disciplines. These set the stage for more specific workshops on assessment in the second and third years. All of these workshops were well attended and positively evaluated, and it was felt that the campus climate toward assessment was improving. During the fourth year of the project, significant faculty concerns regarding assessment were expressed, particularly around questions of faculty autonomy and institutional policies related to assessment, but also based in pedagogical concerns. For instance, as some departments explored assessment tools, some faculty raised questions about how tools such as rubrics function in different pedagogical contexts, and if their limits outweigh their benefits. Overall, the concerns have affected the morale of the Assessment Committee, which at times has felt isolated amid the criticism.

The College has responded to these challenges in several ways. The Assessment Committee was reconfigured by the new chief academic officer early in the project as a resource committee with faculty representation from all curricular areas, rather than an oversight or policing body, and this role has been communicated often to the faculty. In its newly defined role, besides offering the workshops mentioned above, the committee has continued to administer a program of assessment grants, which was designed to encourage innovative assessment. Grant applications that showed misconceptions about assessment were met with encouragement and education. Additionally, members of the committee worked with Faculty Assembly, departments, and individual faculty members to further discussion about assessment. The College has encouraged these discussions, and the Assembly has become a place to air concerns about assessment. The Senior Vice President and Dean of Faculty was recently invited to Faculty Assembly in order to discuss these concerns broadly with the faculty. In response to some of these concerns, she plans to change the Assessment Committee, which reports to her, into an elected rather than appointed committee. We hope that this would bring additional perspectives to the campus conversation. These conversations will likely continue and we hope, over time, will improve understanding and attitudes about assessment. Creating a campus climate that embraces assessment is an ongoing effort.

**Template Question 4:** What have you achieved as a result of your work in the Academy? Consider the range of these achievements, from the very specific (development of a rubric) to the more general (outcomes-based curriculum approval processes). To what degree have these achievements been institutionalized?

During the course of our work in the Academy, we have achieved each of our objectives, not only better understanding student learning in the WPP but also institutionalizing a variety of assessment processes across campus. These achievements are discussed in two sections below:

A. Four original WPP project objectives:

***1. Assuring the reliability of the portfolio system and rubric as assessment tools for student writing:*** The College statistically examined the Basic W rubric and found it to be both valid and reliable. To support portfolio evaluation, the Writing Proficiency Program Steering Committee (SC) has focused on recruiting the most qualified readers, strengthening training for all readers, encouraging readers to discuss student writing together, assuring consistency in the feedback readers give to students, and training readers to give formative feedback to encourage students in their future growth as writers. A fall 2009 survey found that portfolio readers believe the rubric to be an effective tool. As noted above, our research into the reliability of the rubric allowed us to pilot a change in the portfolio review process; since inter-rater reliability has been consistently high, we no longer require a second reader for portfolios evaluated as clearly receiving a “Pass” or “Strong Pass” evaluation. This change has reduced the number of readers we need to recruit and thus has allowed us to rely on the strongest readers—primarily our W faculty.

**2. *Enhancing W faculty formation:*** Attendance at monthly formation meetings continues to be twice what it was when the project began. Our early focus on working with adjunct and new W faculty has had a significant effect on the program. Formation for new faculty now includes training materials, an orientation, a mentor program, and ongoing communication with the WPP Directors. Adjunct faculty now receive a stipend for attendance at formation sessions; and they are now present at almost every session, contribute actively, and have even presented to their colleagues.

**3. *Beginning to connect our Basic W requirements to students' writing throughout their college careers:*** The Writing Program Directors have met with some departments each semester, using a set of questions designed in conjunction with the Writing Program Steering Committee and the Assessment Committee, to better understand writing in the major. This process is ongoing, and both the WPP Directors and chairs of departments who have been visited report that it has been an informative process that has helped them to thoughtfully consider writing in their academic program. Additionally, the College has examined survey information related to growth in writing ability during a student's four years in college. In analyzing NSSE responses from the same students as first-years and seniors, we found that 88% of first-year students indicated that the College has contributed to their growth in writing clearly and effectively. This number increased to 94% by senior year, an increase confirmed through faculty responses to this survey item on the FSSE. In analyzing CIRP-CSS responses from the same students as first-years and seniors, we found that, while only 54% of first-year students rated themselves as being above average or in the top ten percent of students in writing, this number grows to 65% by the end of senior year. Finally, another survey shows that the vast majority of alumnae report five years after graduation that Saint Mary's prepared them for their current writing tasks.

**4. *Investigating how well the WPP is serving our students:*** For the past three years, the College has surveyed students at the beginning and end of their Basic W course and asked them to reflect upon their writing strengths, weaknesses, and goals. Basic W students have consistently identified working on grammar as a goal for their W course; at the end of their courses, they note both improvement in this area and a desire for continued growth in grammar skills. Student concerns about grammar have been corroborated by comments on portfolio rubrics. When the Academy project began, grammar was considered the least important of the five areas evaluated; thesis, support, and development were emphasized. However, the culture of the WPP has changed as a result of our Academy project; we have addressed the topic of teaching grammar each year in faculty formation, added work on grammar in our classes, invited speakers on teaching grammar to offer workshops for the next two years, and sponsored campus-wide observances of National Grammar Day.

Another achievement in this area has been to better understand student learning in order to identify and help students who are most likely to struggle in reaching basic writing competence. We have learned that our one-semester courses have been more effective in helping less-prepared students attain basic writing proficiency than the full-year course (ENLT 103-104W) that was designed to help prepare them for college-level writing. Early in the project, we decided that one of our main research interests was the success of our less-prepared students. We have learned that most students who do not earn the Basic W after one course do so—and show improvement on all rubric areas—in their second course. As a result, while we continue to explore ways to support students who have difficulty attaining W level in repeated attempts, we are focusing on how to intervene with our less-prepared students during their first course.

Analyzing Basic W rubrics and data from our student information system, we have also learned the following:

***Comparison of W courses:*** Saint Mary's advisors have used GPA and test-score cut-points to recommend that incoming students enroll in either a one-semester Basic W course or a full-year course, ENLT 103-104W. This full-year course was designed to give students greater practice in basic reading and writing, as well as to allow them a full year to build a portfolio for evaluation.

*However, we found that students with comparable predictors were less likely to earn the W in the full-year course than in a one-semester course.*

**Predictors of student success in writing:** Institutional Research (IR) staff found that, in the past, the advising cut-point based on SAT or ACT Critical Reading and Writing test scores identified only 16% of the students who were likely not to earn the W in one course. During the project, it was determined that two factors—high school GPA and SAT Critical Reading score—are highly predictive of success in earning the Basic W. Other factors, including standardized writing examinations (SAT and ACT) and race/ethnicity, were not found to be consistently significant. Using these data, the College was able to establish a new advising recommendation based on SAT Critical Reading scores and High School GPA that identified more than two-thirds of the students likely to not earn the W in one course.

**Advising:** We also found that most of the students who were advised to take our full-year W course, ENLT 103-104W, chose to enroll in a one-semester course instead. Moreover, only one-third of the students enrolled in 103-104W was at or below the extant advising cut-point. On other instruments, the students who enrolled in 103-104W expressed a lack of self-confidence in their writing abilities. In contrast, two-thirds of the students enrolled in the full-year course had GPAs and test scores that would suggest they would be likely to earn the W in a one-semester course; these students show slight tendencies toward risky behavior such as increased alcohol use, cigarette smoking, and time spent on social networks. In the summer of 2010, the College used the assessment data to change the advising cut-point, in hopes that the 103-104W course would enroll more of the students who were likely to need additional support to earn the Basic W. However, we found in the fall of 2010 that the enrollment ratios had not changed; again, only one-third of students at or below the advising cut-point enrolled in the recommended full-year course. As a result, we have concluded that offering courses that we hope students self-select into may not be a sufficient intervention for our less-prepared students.

**Making data driven-changes to teaching and curriculum:** Curricular changes to the full-year course have included three pilots, each consistent with our findings so far. In the first pilot, students in one section of the course were given the same number of writing assignments in each semester as students in one-semester courses. Though results were not conclusive—the number of students was small and these students were less academically qualified than those enrolled in other 103-104W sections—it was nonetheless notable that these students were less likely to earn the W, and showed lower component scores, than students in other sections of 103-104W. Two pilots are ongoing in 2010-2011: one focuses on critical reading skills, with only shorter essays in the first semester; the other emphasizes revision, mechanics, and less-experimental, thematically linked texts. Though we will again be working with small numbers, we will evaluate these curricular changes following portfolio review in the spring. The 103-104W course has traditionally been staffed by experienced adjunct faculty with a special interest in working with less-prepared students, and class size has been comparable to that in other W courses (data suggest class size is not a significant predictor of success in our W courses).

In 2009-2010, and again in 2010-2011, the Steering Committee reviewed the 103-104W course in light of the findings. In 2010-2011, as the data showed the interventions so far had not been effective, the Committee considered a broader range of responses. In accordance with the project's commitment to include all stakeholders in deliberation, the WPP worked with the English Department and IR&A to develop proposals that would better serve our less-prepared students. Both the Assessment Committee and the Steering Committee of the Writing Program support the English Department's recommendation that all students take a one-semester basic writing course. This recommendation is rooted in the assessment results that indicate that our weakest students are better served by taking a one-semester writing course than by taking the current full-year writing course designed for weaker students. In future meetings this year and next, the Writing Program

Steering Committee and English Department will seek other interventions that may help our weaker students. Possibilities discussed so far include offering workshops on foundational skills, providing additional resources to the Writing Center, and developing a foundational writing skills course that would include a focus on grammar and mechanics, identified by our assessment as an area for improvement.

The College will continue to use the tools of portfolio review, student questionnaires, and pilot grammar studies to assess how this curricular change affects student learning and to devise appropriate curricular interventions. Looking forward, the WPP is also considering how to learn from other campus initiatives: the Student Success Program, begun in 2009-2010 to provide additional support services to less-prepared students; internationalization efforts, including a summer online course in basic English; collaboration with Critical Thinking Seminars, which will be offered for the first time in fall 2011; and integration of the advising program with teaching, as several teachers of CTS, W, and other first-year courses will take primary responsibility for the academic advising of students in their class in our Cross Currents' First-Year Faculty Advising Program.

#### B. Assessment processes across campus

*An assessment template* was developed that can be used to guide future assessment projects. Based on our experience in the Academy, the template emphasizes the communication and collaboration we found essential throughout our project.

*A new General Education curriculum* was developed over the course of four years with strong, widespread faculty participation. After an initial but unsuccessful attempt to base a new curriculum on a choice among several conceptual schemes, the faculty formulated three major mission-based liberal-learning outcomes and multiple sub-outcomes. They continued through monthly discussions to design educational experiences according to these outcomes, and brought an awareness of assessment to bear throughout the process. This new learning outcomes-based General Education Curriculum was approved by the Saint Mary's College Board of Trustees in April, 2010. In the fall of 2010, the elected General Education Curriculum Committee began to approve new courses for the curriculum, based on the submission of outcomes-based rationales tied to the proposed syllabi. This process will continue over the next two years, with the first new courses being taught in fall 2011. An Oversight Committee has been elected and will begin the work in April, 2011, of determining which aspects of this new curriculum will be assessed by the College (through College groups working with Institutional Research and Assessment, like the WPP) and which will be assessed by through department assessment efforts. Information from national surveys such as NSSE, the CSS and the HEDS Senior Survey will be used and will be modified to collect baseline information from our current graduating seniors for comparison purposes with our subsequent graduating classes who will have experienced the new general education curriculum.

*Departments and programs revised their assessment plans* throughout 2009 and submitted the final versions in fall 2010. Chairs are now meeting with the Senior Vice President and Dean of Faculty to review the plans, considering areas for improvement and moving forward in implementation. During these reviews, the Chairs receive an assessment of their assessment plan, using a rubric developed and used by IR&A and the Dean. In setting this example of assessment, the Chairs experience the use of a rubric and see results of an assessment project. Preliminary findings show significant improvement over previous plans: departments have identified their own learning outcomes and linked them to their curricular offerings, the College's General Education four-year liberal learning outcomes, and six specific General Education sub-outcomes expected of the major. These reviews will continue annually with the Senior Vice President and Dean of Faculty.

*The Curriculum Committee* continues to include review of learning outcomes and appropriate assessment measures in all course proposals. New programs of study must include learning outcomes. The

procedures for revising a major or minor are being changed this semester to include learning outcomes. The Academic Affairs Council is now reviewing new and revised programs of study (e.g. Music major, Environmental Studies minor, Communication Studies major, Gerontology minor) all of which are based in the results of an external review and/or student learning outcomes.

**Ongoing faculty formation** was provided by the Assessment Committee, which strengthened its own understanding of assessment in fall 2007 with a study of Linda Suskie's *Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide*. In winter 2008, it offered the first of several "E (Essence of learning)-lunches," faculty-led panel discussions about assessment as an integral part of good pedagogy that introduced sound assessment practice even to those who might be resistant to the technical language of the field. When department and program chairs were asked to update their assessment reports, the committee offered workshops designed to aid in this process. In spring 2009, it offered a series of three workshops, focusing on formulating outcomes, developing assessment tools, and using data to close the feedback loop. Both evaluations and attendance show these workshops were well received. Because of demand and schedule conflicts, one had to be offered in two sessions and drew a total of more than 45 attendees. In the next semester, Dr. Jodi Cressman visited campus for a workshop with the Assessment Committee and a faculty-wide presentation that focused on a new dimension of the General Education curriculum, the explicit assessment of critical thinking. This presentation was well attended, with more than 65 faculty participating.

Another aspect of faculty formation, a **program of assessment grants**, has been very successful. Applications were invited in three areas: individual, departmental, and travel. Reports from recipients were consistently of high quality and showed significant improvement in course and departmental assessment practices. More than half of all departments and programs have now received grants supporting assessment projects. Finally, the College has developed a new assessment website that posts information on conferences, grant reports, and numerous other assessment resources.

**Changing campus culture:** From the beginning, the WPP has worked to counter the common misconception that a student who earns the Basic W has achieved writing proficiency and need not continue to develop her writing skills. The WPP's published materials now emphasize writing across the curriculum and throughout a student's college career. Readers of portfolios write their comments—including encouragement to continue to improve—directly to the student author. In spring 2011, we surveyed previous Basic W students and found that our efforts seem to have succeeded beyond our expectations. The vast majority of student respondents read their comments carefully and found the portfolio review process helpful to their learning, and many wanted more specific feedback so that they could continue to improve as writers. We plan to build on the success of our efforts so far in making portfolio evaluation a meaningful formative, as well as summative, assessment experience for our students. The College is currently considering the adoption of an ePortfolio system (it is piloting Digication) which may be used to enhance the use of portfolio evaluation. The impact of a learning-outcomes based General Education curriculum has educated the faculty and changed the campus culture to think first about the intentionality of teaching .

**Template Question 5:** What effect has your time in the Academy had on institutional commitment to the assessment of learning on campus? How broad is that commitment? How has institutional capacity for assessing student learning changed?

The institutional commitment to assessment at the administrative level is strong, as shown through the significant progress on numerous assessment-related initiatives. The successful program of assessment grants has resulted in visible achievements in several curricular areas. The revision of all program and departmental assessment plans was connected to the new General Education curriculum, with each department articulating how its offerings support the six liberal-learning sub-outcomes that are partially fulfilled in the major. The Assessment Committee offered well-attended, positively evaluated workshops



that supported both classroom teaching and the revision of department assessment plans. The President, Senior Vice President and Dean of Faculty, and staff of the Office of Institutional Research all were trained and have participated as portfolio readers for the W program.

Additionally, the process of creating a new General Education curriculum was supported by numerous faculty development days that allowed the faculty to help shape and develop ownership of the program. The curriculum was allowed to progress slowly and carefully so that outcomes and governance structures could be formulated in light of the College's mission and character and could receive wide support on campus. While there are certainly areas of the curriculum that will require refinement in the future, embedded in the curriculum are several components that will provide a strong basis for implementation and assessment—among them, the mission-based outcomes that ground it, the faculty formation provided in assessment, and the balanced representation on the General Education Curriculum and Oversight committees.

In summer 2010, the administrative functions of assessment were merged with the Office of Institutional Research to form the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. This change will have a significant long-term impact on assessment, as providing a full-time staff of two has allowed data to be integrated into decision-making and is a clear illustration of the College's commitment to continue to support assessment. The office has worked closely with faculty members and departments, has been available for individual consultations, and has offered well-attended presentations to faculty on assessment results, including discussion about the implications of those findings. The Institutional Research and Assessment staff has developed strong relationships with the WPP and other departments on campus and has helped the W Steering Committee to regularly integrate assessment results into their decision-making.

The commitment to assessment among the faculty continues to vary over time, among departments, and among individual faculty members. For the most part, those faculty who have concerns about assessment share a commitment to understanding and improving student learning; but they have specific concerns about issues such as rubrics, jargon, the perception that findings need to be quantitative, communication of policies between faculty and administration, and fears about loss of autonomy. As a result, the process of revising assessment plans, which were submitted in December 2010, was difficult in many departments. Even so, each department and program produced a greatly improved assessment plan that included clearly articulated student learning outcomes, reliable measures, and in many cases, valuable assessment results. Overall, both administrators and faculty are now proficient in the development of student learning outcomes and have a strong sense of various assessment methods.

**Template Question 6:** What effect has your Academy work had on institutional culture, structures, and processes?

Our experience in the Academy has affected institutional culture, structures, and processes across the College. Many of these impacts were described in significant detail in template question 4. Several of these are highlighted below:

*The W program* was chosen as a focus because it was a successful, stable program. It now regularly integrates assessment data into its decision-making processes. Formation is now more effective, and adjunct faculty are supported and well integrated into the faculty. Writing classes incorporate more attention to grammar and mechanics and, through the student survey, encourage meta-cognition among students, a practice shown to enhance student learning. Campus-wide initiatives like Grammar Day, hosting Woodrow Wilson fellows, formation opportunities open to the whole campus, and conversations with departments about their Advanced W programs have enhanced the role of the WPP across campus.

In the *grant program*, faculty members and departments have developed innovative projects that support assessment in their programs and courses.

In *revised assessment plans*, departments and programs have developed well-written learning outcomes and a strong foundation for ongoing assessment of student learning in the programs of study.

In *external reviews*, department programs of study have learned the importance of basing potential revisions of their majors and requests for additional resources in learning outcomes.

In the *new learning-outcomes-based General Education program*, assessment has been integrated in course proposals and will be sustained through appropriate governance structures such as the General Education Curriculum Committee and the General Education Oversight Committee.

The *assessment template* developed throughout the Academy project provides a model for effective assessment that is collaborative and integrates assessment findings.

**Template Question 7:** What effect has your Academy work had on student learning?

Campus-wide, through the development of student learning outcomes, the Academy project has helped both students and faculty to be more aware of learning expectations. All new courses have clear learning outcomes incorporated within the syllabi, and all General Education courses will be approved by the General Education Curriculum Committee based on their attention to the specified student learning outcomes. Grant reports that have been submitted thus far have shown that faculty members are utilizing assessment information at both the course and departmental level to improve student learning in their courses. For example, a professor in the Sociology Department has utilized assessment results in order to clarify assignments and focus on additional curricular areas where students were struggling and has seen improvement in student learning in all assessed areas.

In the WPP, the program rubric—which, some years ago, many students never saw before portfolio evaluation—has been integrated throughout classes and is used to help students work toward the program standards. The College has learned through the assessment of student learning in the WPP that the vast majority of students are very successful in their Basic W course and tend to earn solid rubric scores in the areas of thesis, development, and support. The analysis of rubrics has indicated that students commonly struggle with the foundational skills of grammar and mechanics. This has also been seen in student reflections on their own writing. While students report making gains in all areas of writing, they often both report gains in grammar and mechanics and identify these areas as points of weakness after the course. The writing program faculty are more specifically attending to grammar and mechanics in the Basic Writing course, and it is hoped that improvements in this area will be seen in upcoming semesters of analysis. Also as noted above, students who are not successful in earning the W in their first Basic W course show significant improvement in scores on all component areas of the rubric, indicating that a second W course allows them to improve their learning significantly on all numerically rated component areas—thesis, development, support, and style. Since these areas have been shown to be connected to competence in mechanics (which is not evaluated numerically), students are potentially progressing in mechanics as well.

Throughout the process of assessing student learning in the WPP, the College has been better able to define predictors of student success in the Basic W course. As a result, the College was able to determine a more accurate advising cut-point so that we can better advise less-prepared writing students and investigate interventions that will help them learn more effectively. Surprisingly, we learned that our current curricular structure for less-prepared students, the 103/104W, was not as effective as the one-semester writing course in helping students successfully achieve the outcomes of the Basic Writing course. As discussed above, in the upcoming semester, our less-prepared students will be taking a one-semester course, since our assessment information has indicated that these courses could help them be more successful in achieving basic writing competence. Faculty will be working to develop additional ways to support our weakest student writers, including a possible course in foundational writing skills.

Additionally, portfolio comments are now provided to students, making the rubric a formative as

well as summative assessment tool; a small pilot study in one class showed improvement in mechanics; and several departments have reported that conversations about the Advanced W have led them to make changes that will improve student writing after the Basic W, throughout the major.

The changes we have implemented—for instance, gaining fuller knowledge of our student’s learning, integrating findings into decision-making, and establishing structures for ongoing assessment and improvement of learning— have laid the groundwork for improvements in student learning. We are confident that these changes will continue to have a positive impact on student learning in the future.

**Template Question 8:** What concrete evidence do you have to demonstrate the effects you described in questions 5-7?

The College has compiled a variety of reports that demonstrate the impact of our participation in the Academy, including what we have learned about student learning and changes to policies, processes, and culture on campus. In order to share assessment information from this project broadly with the College community, a website was created that houses reports detailing assessment results and the progress of the project. These documents include information such as the analysis of basic writing rubrics, survey data on the perceived change in writing ability over time, information related to mechanics, and results of the student self-reflection survey. This information can be found at <http://www3.saintmarys.edu/assessment-committee/hlc-academy-project>.

Additionally, the following web links and appendices provide evidence and documentation of the impacts described in the previous questions.

- **Assessment grant program and faculty reports:**  
<http://www3.saintmarys.edu/assessment-committee>  
<http://www3.saintmarys.edu/assessment-committee/previous-grants>
- **Departmental and Programmatic Assessment Report Guidelines:**  
<http://www3.saintmarys.edu/files/Guidelines%20for%20assessment%20plans1%282%29.doc>
- **New Advising Recommendation Cut-point:**  
[http://www3.saintmarys.edu/files/AcademicGuide2010\\_Web.pdf](http://www3.saintmarys.edu/files/AcademicGuide2010_Web.pdf)
- **General Education curriculum:** <http://home.saintmarys.edu/?q=academics/ge-curriculum/guide>
- **Workshops materials:** <http://www3.saintmarys.edu/assessment-committee/resources>
- **Assessment Template:** (See appendix A)

**Template Questions 9 & 10:** What do you see as the next logical steps for continuing the work you have begun in the Academy? In particular, what new student learning initiatives do you see developing from your Academy work? What plans have you made to sustain the energy and momentum of your Academy work?

Overall, there are three important next steps stemming from the work that was begun in the Academy: the full implementation of the revised departmental assessment plans and assessment of General Education, the continued assessment of the Writing Program (specifically curricular changes geared toward our weakest writers), and the continuation of efforts to improve the campus climate toward assessment.

During the next academic year, departments and programs will fully implement their revised assessment plans. These plans will continue to be discussed at each department’s annual review with the Senior Vice President and Dean of the Faculty. In addition, resources that have been made available to the faculty to support their work on assessment will continue through workshops, the assessment website, and the assessment grant program. In the realm of governance, a new General Education Oversight Committee will facilitate the development of a General Education assessment plan and will oversee that plan; they will have access to the template that was generated as part of our Academy project.

The WPP will study the proposed curricular improvements for less-prepared writing students. We

will also need to continue to work with departments in supporting students and assessing student writing throughout the major and into the Advanced W. The WPP will continue to use a collaborative model within the Steering Committee; further, working with the Governance Manual and administration, it will use the experience of 103-104W discussions to better define ways to collaborate with departments, furthering effective decision-making with all stakeholders. Particular areas of ongoing study include efforts to help less-prepared students; examination of how the WPP can learn from and collaborate with internationalization efforts, the Student Success Program, and the Writing Center; ongoing evaluation of portfolio results and the effectiveness and sustainability of the portfolio review process; and assessment of student learning in mechanics. These efforts will be possible with the assistance of the staff of the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment and the continuing support of the faculty who teach in the program.

Conversations about assessment will continue through Faculty Assembly, and moving to a faculty-elected Assessment Committee could facilitate open conversation and ongoing formation on assessment. The College is committed to facilitating conversation about assessment on campus and offering a variety of resources for faculty, including providing venues in which faculty can discuss the appropriateness of various assessment tools in relation to pedagogy. In particular, the College is committed to helping faculty members and programs develop strategies for assessment that, like those developed in the WPP, respond to the needs of their students and the best practices within their disciplines. The College believes that growth in the climate regarding assessment is not linear but has peaks and valleys. Over time, though, attending to the concerns raised by our campus community will help us be true to our mission and strengthen student learning throughout the College.