TO: Peter Whiting, Director of SAGES

CC: Kimberly Emmons, Director of Composition, English

FROM: Timothy Fogarty (Accounting), Ashley Seitz Kramer (SAGES), Megan Jewell (English), Daniel Lacks (Chemical Engineering), and Alan Rocke (History)

SUBJECT: SAGES Portfolio Faculty Evaluation Committee Report

DATE: 26 June 2009

Introduction

     The SAGES Portfolio Faculty Evaluation Committee, consisting of university faculty from Chemical Engineering, History, English, SAGES, and Accounting, read and evaluated 423 student writing portfolios submitted to the SAGES office between May 2008 and May 2009. The following report outlines the methodologies used during the evaluation process, provides the results of the committee's assessment of student writing, and offers suggestions for SAGES and English department writing program administration regarding the SAGES portfolio requirement.
     Our chief finding is that students are producing an overall good quality of writing in the SAGES program, but would benefit from more instruction in argumentation. We also recommend revising the portfolio submission guidelines and procedures to eliminate, as much as possible, the presence of vague and/or contradictory expectations.

Background

     As part of a new system of evaluating portfolios, the committee met for two weeks in mid-June 2009 to assess students' writing progress during the first three writing-intensive SAGES courses, and to provide programmatic feedback to SAGES and English Department writing program administrators. Previous faculty evaluation procedures during the SAGES pilot and first years of implementation (2002-2008) focused solely on assessing individual portfolios in order to provide feedback to students submitting them as a graduation requirement. These evaluation procedures were revised in January 2009 due to issues with inconsistent evaluation, lack of systematic program assessment, and cost (appendix 1). The 2008-2009 portfolios submitted in order to meet the composition requirement were instead certified as complete, representing students' "good faith" efforts in content, length, and mechanics.[1]

Methodology

  A. Overview
     The committee met as a group over the course of two weeks, in order to establish a reading and evaluation program that would meet the goals of SAGES writing program assessment. Committee members followed a schedule drafted by coordinators (appendix 2). The first two

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[1]   Approximately 1/3 of these portfolios were submitted before the implementation of the new SAGES portfolio guidelines in January, 2009, and were retroactively certified as complete.

days were spent developing and testing a rubric for accurate and efficient evaluation. Readers designed a rubric to meet the following objectives: identify strengths and weaknesses in writing instruction; establish measurable benchmarks for future reading sessions; and contribute to ongoing research in portfolio-centered writing pedagogy in use at other colleges and universities.

B. Rubric Generation

   In order to accomplish our goals, the committee developed a rubric for evaluation of particular essays as well as for a holistic reading of the portfolios (appendix 3). The committee decided to focus specifically on two components: the reflective essay, composed to introduce readers to portfolio contents and to provide an assessment of perceived gains in writing; and the 10-12 page research paper assignment, which is designed to demonstrate students' abilities in sustained argumentation. The first part of the rubric (addressing the reflective essay) focuses on students' perceived gains in SAGES and their process of assembly; the second part of the rubric (addressing the research paper) measures ability in argumentative writing and use of sources; and the last part of the rubric allows for a holistic evaluation of students' writing skills. Skills were identified by the committee as those in which students should be proficient by the end of their second University Seminar. The criteria were generated from both a group discussion of disciplinary writing standards and the recommended writing outcomes for SAGES seminars developed by the English Department. We spent a significant portion of the first day establishing a consistent ranking system and clarifying definitions of writing criteria for the purposes of evaluation (appendix 4).

   The committee discussed whether to attempt to assess changes in each student's writing ability over time – i.e., from an essay in the First Seminar to an essay in the final University Seminar. The advantage of performing such an assessment is that it would determine the "value–added" effectiveness of the SAGES program in regard to writing ability. However, the committee concluded that it would be very difficult to accurately determine these changes, as there would likely be a substantial variation inherent in the written products due to other factors (e.g., level of interest in a topic, time constraints on the student, personal issues, unavailable materials), as well as potential problems involved in comparing different types of written products (e.g., research papers vs. personal narratives). For these reasons, the committee decided not to attempt to evaluate progress across courses at this time.

Results

   The committee evaluated 423 portfolios. Approximately 80% of these portfolios were "standard," in that they included the requested materials without substitution. The evaluation of the portfolios focuses on the reflective essay, the research paper, and a holistic evaluation of the writing throughout the portfolio.

1. Reflective Essay

   The committee examined the reflective essay in regard to several criteria. Most importantly, the committee tallied the number of students who attributed gains in their writing ability to their SAGES courses. Also, the committee looked in these essays for substantial reflection by the student on their writing abilities, whether these reflections referred to the essays in the portfolio, and whether the students discussed why they chose their essays in assembling their portfolio. The results of the committee's examination are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Results of portfolio evaluation: Reflective Essay[†]

Criterion	% Yes	% No	% Not Present
Expressed Gains	95 (90-100)	2 (0-4)	3 (0-7)
Substantial Reflection	79 (43-96)	21	
References Essays (Extensively)	62 (31-83)	31 (11-58)	7 (1-11)
Discusses Process of Assembly	57 (16-86)	6 (1-9)	38 (6-78)

[†]Values in parentheses represent the range of averages obtained by each of the five evaluators.

Expressed Gains. It is gratifying that 95% of students indicated that they experienced gains in their writing ability, and only 2% of students reported that such gains did not occur. Gains mentioned by students were diverse. Examples include an increase in the following skills: organizing papers; citing detailed and meaningful evidence; crafting more focused arguments; writing more clearly and concisely; engaging in more frequent revision; thinking critically; writing in various styles and genres; establishing his/her own voice; critically reading other texts and his/her own work; portraying professionalism and sophistication; and utilizing other effective writing strategies. Students wrote that many of these areas were long-standing problematic concerns that they were able to improve. A few students noted success in superficial writing skills, providing statements such as: "I learned how to introduce quotations" and "I now know when to use commas." The committee found that such comments could be interpreted in both positive and negative ways: whereas the student expressing such gains may have intended to be very concrete and to provide a very tangible example, one might also wonder why he or she did not mention something more substantive and broad about writing, or the extent to which such students equated "good writing" with mechanical correctness.

Reported gains in writing ability appeared to be related to how students characterized their pre-SAGES relationship to writing. Gains were reported by students who found themselves coming into college at all levels of writing ability. Larger gains were more likely to be mentioned by those who saw themselves as weak or reluctant writers. The reflective essays contained many accounts of students who were skeptical about the need for such a prolonged and intense writing program as SAGES, but were ultimately persuaded of its value.

Of course, such comments cannot always be taken at face value. Some students seemed to be just "going through the motions" in their reflective essays, no doubt providing only vague comments about gains in order to please the readers or engaging in what a noted portfolio scholar refers to as the "schmooze factor." Some committee members felt that students tended to spend too much time engaged in self-promotion and this, in turn, made interpretation of gains more difficult. The 2% of students that did not report any gains often attributed this deficiency to one of two reasons: 1) the course(s) felt "remedial," or similar to high school writing instruction, or 2) the course(s) were compromised by either poor quality of instruction or individual conflicts.

In general, the committee would have liked to have seen more detail in the reflective essays that specifically attested to gains made in writing attributable to SAGES, with one committee member desiring more detail specifically regarding gains in argumentative writing. In some cases students expressed growth only in vague rhetorical terms, such as catching the reader's attention immediately, or finding his or her own unique "voice," or becoming more "impassioned." Still, one could view these gains—however vague—as an important first step in his or her development as a writer.

Students often mentioned varying expectations of their SAGES instructors. For the most part, students reported benefiting from the selective attention to different aspects of their work. Other students, however, were disconcerted by the variations in instructional style. Students

often reported that their writing difficulties were attributable partly or wholly to their lack of interest in the subject of the course.

Reflection. The reflective essays also demonstrated variations in students' interpretation of the prompt. Students quite often addressed areas other than writing. Many students were unable to clearly differentiate a discussion of writing from general reactions to their classes. Often, too much of these essays was devoted to discussing the subject matter of the themes written upon, or the background story of why the essay was written. In these instances, the committee speculated that part of the reason for students' failure to provide a more substantial discussion about writing gains may indicate problems in classroom instruction (learning to stay on topic and engaging in frequent self-reflection), or failure to comprehend the function of the portfolio requirement.

Process of Assembly. As Table 1 exhibits, the committee members interpreted this evaluation criterion in widely disparate ways; whereas one member concluded that very few students (16%) were addressing their process of assembly, another member concluded that most students were addressing it (86%). The committee's sense is that most students picked their best three essays, distributed, per the instructions, over their SAGES coursework. However, some students suggested other rationales for their choices, such as: selecting a set of essays most indicative of their development as writers; selecting essays that demonstrate both strengths and weaknesses; selecting essays that "stand out" to them for particular reasons; and selecting essays that demanded the most time and energy to produce. The committee feels that students' development occurred across the semesters, and that this objective did not bear upon which essays were selected from each course. Of the 24% of students who chose essays due to external circumstances, such as lack of appropriate assignments in the classes or missing papers, several noted that they had only one research paper that met the page and research process requirements. Many other students (38%) simply did not mention choice.

2. *Research Paper*

For the research paper, the committee focused mostly on the argumentative nature of the paper, and the presence and strength of the thesis. The committee also addressed the adequacy of the referencing sources for the paper, both within the text and in terms of the completeness of the citation. The results of this examination are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of Portfolio Evaluation: Research Essay[†]

Research Essay	% Yes	% No	% Not Present
Argument Present	66 (39-89)	34	
Strong Thesis Present	39 (24-68)	45 (28-65)	3 (0-7)
In text citations correct	75 (37-94)	25	
Works Cited - Correct	81 (46-95)	19	

[†]Values in parentheses represent the range of averages obtained by each of the five evaluators.

The committee judged that most of the research papers were strongly written in terms of clarity of expression, attention to secondary source material, and organization. The most prevalent weakness had to do with students' failure in these papers to demonstrate skills in argumentation. This section will focus primarily on observations dealing with this particular concern.

As shown in Table 2, only two thirds of the research papers presented an explicit argument. Note, however, that there is a very broad range in this result between the individual readers (39-89%).   The fact that readers interpreted this criterion differently, which has a potentially

significant implication: if evaluators gauge this criterion differently, it can only be assumed that students, too, have been taught many different—and perhaps dissimilar—ideas about argumentation.

The committee observed that the papers lacking argument were instead exercises in narration, description, or reporting. In these papers, students demonstrated that they had learned about a subject from several sources and then restated this information in their own words, occasionally demonstrating synthesis.   The committee concludes that this deficiency may be a result of lack of consistent classroom instruction in argumentative writing skills, so that many students may not fully comprehend this mode. An additional problem may be that for some instructors and students the definition of a strong thesis and argument is unclear and open to interpretation (e.g., is "Gandhi played an important role in history" a strong thesis, descriptions of his accomplishments being an argument in favor of this thesis?).

Ancillary problems often associated with the lack of argument or strong thesis are that many papers contained "fluff" or failed to demonstrate proper use of sources. Often, the fluff was filler material that was apparently included for the sole purpose of extending the report to the required page length, rather than to argue in support of a thesis. A less common problem is that some research papers were not really based on research. For example, some papers consisted of a narrative observation of a painting or a critical reading of a book. While these papers were analytical and insightful, the information comes from a very limited set of sources, and is not a product of the independent research that should be required for this assignment.

Finally, while students for the most part demonstrated a familiarity with the conventions of proper citation, their in-text source citation often appeared to be overly lax in about one quarter of the portfolios. Paraphrased material was not cited as frequently as is expected and, in these cases, students failed to differentiate their own writing from those of their sources. Additionally, one committee member remarked on the prevalence of errors in Works Cited pages when citing electronic sources and noted that often not enough information was provided.

3. Holistic Evaluation

The committee evaluated the overall portfolio quality in regard to six elements that underlie effective writing:
- (a) Style, Grace, Fluidity -- Includes facility with the sentence structures and rhetorical moves most common to academic writing; displays sophisticated prose.
- (b) Persuasive Abilities -- Includes ability to convince readers of a position by use of rhetorical appeals, structure, presentation, and, to some extent, use of appropriate evidence.
- (c) Grammar -- encompasses mechanics, spelling, and typos; consistency and clarity, included.
- (d) Organization -- Includes the "connectedness" or "trajectory" of a paper as conveyed through paragraphs and transitions.
- (e) Tone/Audience Awareness -- Includes ability to use tone appropriate to audience and assignment type and/or discipline, if applicable.
- (f) Use of Appropriate Evidence -- Includes ability to situate a debate in context and to follow up claims with appropriate evidence.

The committee also evaluated the effectiveness of the writing overall. Each of these elements,

and the overall effectiveness, were classified as:

    (a) "Above Expectation" -- equivalent to an "A," but not necessarily in the top 10%; excellent overall; very few higher order or lower order flaws.

    (b) "At Expectation" -- a broad "B"; may be in need of significant work in one area, not others; Average to slightly above-average presentation.

    (c) "Below Expectation" -- in need of significant further work in more than two or three areas; not necessarily bottom 10%.

In addition, the committee identified the top and bottom 10% of the portfolios, as well as the top and bottom 10 portfolios, based on the overall writing effectiveness.

The results of this evaluation are shown in Table 3. In regard to the overall writing effectiveness, the committee judged that about one fourth of the portfolios were "above expectation", and about one fifth were "below expectation". This result appears rigorous, as it was consistent within the committee – i.e., the results obtained by each of the five readers were within 10% of the average.

In all of the writing skills categories except style, grace, and fluidity, more than 50% of students were judged to be "at expectation," or above-average to average. Yet, 49% did achieve "at expectation" in that category. Categories indicating the largest percentage (23-24) of students coming in at "below expectation" were "persuasive abilities" and "style, grace, and fluidity," arguably the most difficult skills for students to attain and for readers to evaluate.

As mentioned, about one fifth of the portfolios were judged to be below expectation.   In all of the particular skills, the range of portfolios ranking below expectation was between 12-24% and were concentrated in "higher order" critical thinking skills and style rather than in clarity/grammar and organization.   Those that were particularly deficient could be characterized as sloppy, confused, immature, or colloquial. A small subset of the portfolios failed to display even basic elements of writing literacy, and was singled out for follow up letters. Only a small (but undetermined) proportion of these were non-native speakers of English.

The result that only one fifth of the portfolios were below expectation suggests that the SAGES writing curriculum meets at least a minimal standard of success. Writing instruction is usually quite effective at improving writing ability and skill. The SAGES program is convincing students across the university that writing is important and should be worked upon continuously during the college years and beyond.

The committee feels that overall there is a good quality of writing here. Some portfolios are truly superior, a real joy to read, and worthy of high praise by any standard. Students took their need to submit a portfolio very seriously, and in general, committee members were pleased with the overall care students put into their writing. Students took the opportunity to write in-depth on many interesting subjects that the SAGES seminars, in particular, permitted them to explore. It was clear to the committee that students, sometimes surprising themselves, actually delighted in the process.

Table 3. Overall Portfolio: Comparison to Expectations[†]

Criterion	% Above	% At	% Below
Clarity, Consistency, Grammar	33 (21-46)	50 (41-59)	17(15-22)
Persuasive Abilities	24 (21-30)	52 (29-67)	24 (2-50)
Style, Grace, Fluidity	28 (18-38)	49 (34-65)	23 (15-26)
Appropriate Evidence	26 (21-33)	56 (34-70)	18 (1-39)
Tone/Awareness of Audience	26 (11-37)	63 (51-81)	12 (6-24)
Organization, Connections, Transitions	31 (25-40)	54 (46-62)	15 (9-29)
Overall Writing Effectivenss	**26 (19-33)**	**57 (48-67)**	**17 (9-29)**

[†]Values in parentheses represent the range of averages obtained by each of the five evaluators.

Recommendations
A. Recommendations for Classroom Instruction

1. Writing Instruction Recommendations

Based on our interpretation of the numerical data and observations during reading, the committee recommends that more attention should be paid to writing instruction addressing persuasive abilities and argumentation.

Teaching Argument. The committee's most significant observation with regard to the research papers concerns the prevalence of report-style rather than argumentative papers. Our conclusions regarding this issue are as follows:

First, we suggest that instructors in both First and University seminars receive additional support in terms of teaching argumentative research writing. Many of our instructors come from non-humanities disciplines, so we feel they should be offered more guidance in developing assignments and classroom exercises or in productively using Booth, Colomb, and Williams's *The Craft of Research*, the recommended writing text for University Seminars. Along these lines, we might also suggest incorporating additional instructional texts and materials (such as handouts) that differentiate modes of, and encourage more practice in, academic argumentation. Such support could take the form of additional pedagogy seminars for English/SAGES writing faculty and Writing Resource Center workshops for all instructors.   More ambitious plans might involve the University Center for Innovation in Teaching and Education (UCITE) or the Center for the Study of Writing (CSW).

Second, the committee feels that some fraction of SAGES topical seminar leaders may be teaching their seminars in the same way as they teach disciplinary courses – emphasizing mastery of subject matter over a focus on more general speaking and writing skills. In other words, in topical First and University Seminars, there may be too much disciplinary and methodological instruction for its own sake, especially in science, engineering, and nursing subjects. The better approach, given the goals of SAGES, is for instructors to use their disciplinary material as a vehicle primarily to teach fungible analytical/critical skills, especially practice in presenting evidence to support an argumentative thesis. The paramount writing goal – clear, concise, persuasive argumentation – needs to be emphasized more than it currently is. In addition to providing topical seminar leaders more writing support in teaching argument, we would suggest that the instructions and policy statements given to both new and returning topical seminar leaders be reexamined to make sure that this message is communicated clearly.

Uniformity of Expectations. In their reflective essays, students often mentioned being disconcerted by varying expectations of their SAGES instructors. This was not such a strong

pattern, however, that it calls for alarm. For the most part, students reported benefiting from the selective attention to different aspects of their work. While continued quality control oversight by SAGES administration is recommended, more emphasis on argumentation as the primary aim might also help to align the expectations of all SAGES instructors.

2. *Curriculum Change Recommendation*
Offering Enhanced Courses.   An additional observation made by committee members concerns remarks made by students in their reflective essays regarding the first seminar course requirement. Some students felt strongly that the course was redundant with high school, and that they were not sufficiently challenged. The committee briefly discussed options for creating an "honors" or "enhanced" section or sections of First seminar offered to students who desire additional challenge and would suggest that administrators consider this as a future possibility.

A. Recommended Changes to Portfolio Guidelines, Procedures, and Contents

Changing Timing of Submission. The committee observed that a surprising number of the portfolios seem to have been submitted very late; we advocate the need for a stronger incentive to get them submitted in a timely manner.   The educational value of the portfolio is seriously compromised if students are allowed to graduate prior to the opportunity to read their portfolio. In such cases the evaluation exercise is merely bureaucratic. However, a few students commented that the very lateness of their submissions (just before graduation) was actually of great benefit, since the distance of time gave them better perspective on the whole process. We suggest that the timing of the portfolios be rethought. For example, portfolios might be due by the end of the student's third year, and we might make submission a precondition for registration for the fall semester of senior year.

Submitting Revised or Unrevised Papers. According to current policy, students are to assemble their portfolios by choosing three *unrevised* essays from their SAGES seminars. This instruction was not clear to a few students, who carefully revised their old essays before assembling them into the portfolio. We see advantages and disadvantages to both models, but prefer the current policy as it allows for more accurate program assessment, particularly in terms of instructional practices. (We realize, however, that this could render problematic the evaluation of the top and bottom 10% unless future evaluation committees employed more specific criteria.) Whichever policy is adopted for the future, greater clarity in student instructions would be advisable**.**

Rethinking Prescribed Lengths of Research Papers. Though most papers/portfolios use standard fonts, some do not. When this happens, prescribed page lengths are not meaningful. We suggest requiring a standard format for all SAGES courses (e.g., double-spaced 12-point Times New Roman with 1-inch margins all around). It may be preferable to adopt word guidelines as preferable to page guidelines—for then there is no motive for a student to fiddle with non-standard or large fonts to arbitrarily increase page lengths. Some committee members even advocated abolishing all word or page guidelines for the research paper submission—only stressing that the paper must treat the research topic in substantial depth. Moreover, students who are shy of the 10-page minimum often submit longer non-SAGES papers, and this somewhat weakens our ability to assess the writing program; eliminating the page minimum might resolve this difficulty.

Identifying Exemplary Portfolios. The committee discussed the possibility of creating a

recognition program for particularly exemplary portfolios. This could take the form of a letter of congratulations, a certificate, a keepsake, a dinner, a monetary award, or a notice in a campus publication. No one advocated returning to the impractical policy of detailed assessment of individual portfolios, in which each student receives an evaluative letter.

Modifying Selection of Papers. If we are not to attempt to assess the increment in a student's writing ability—and the committee is doubtful that this is a practical goal, then the sole criterion for paper selection should be writing quality across different types of papers. In other words, students should not be required to submit an essay from First Seminar. Students should be instructed simply to submit what they consider to be their three best papers from SAGES classes, including at least one longer research paper. One committee member advocated having students submit two SAGES papers and one written for a class representing their intended major in order to allow students to truly showcase what they feel is their best work; this would also encourage them to see connections between SAGES and disciplinary writing.

Revising Submission Guidelines. It was clear that some students did not understand the purpose of the reflective essay. We suggest that the submission guidelines be revised so as to prevent encouraging students to wax autobiographical without sufficiently discussing their writing gains and development; the guidelines could go so far as to provide a list of topics for students to avoid their essays. Though the page requirements for this essay were recently changed from 1-2 pages to 2-3 pages, we suggest being even more explicit about our expectations and reminding students that "two pages" means two full pages of prose.

B. Recommended Procedures for Future Evaluation

The committee felt that the efforts to assemble the committee from different schools was successful, with one member remarking that "we need both experienced hands and those that have not "drunk the SAGES Kool-Aide." As a group, we rapidly hit upon effective ways to divide the work and to discern what the information told us. We were not hampered by divergent pedagogical beliefs or disciplinary-based politics. Only a small amount of time was spent in clerical tasks, primarily due to the preliminary efforts of the SAGES staff.   Our recommendations for future reading sessions are as follows:

Continuing the Practice of Isolating Issues of Concern for Program Evaluation and Research. Our examination of "process of assembly" may not have been an immediately obvious criteria in portfolio assessment, but will be useful as submission guidelines evolve with the new process; comments provided insight into many of our recommendations for revised procedures, and, despite some variations in readers' interpretations, are useful in terms of preliminary research into portfolio-centered writing pedagogy. Our interest in the "process of assembly" is connected to our interest in students taking "ownership" of their writing. Encouraging students to make conscious choices when presenting their work, to identify and examine their strengths and weaknesses as writers, and to engage in authentic reflection increases the chances that they will desire—and work—to improve their writing. In addition to increasing their success in other courses, mindful portfolio assembly also increases their chances of success after college as both communication and self-presentation are important skills. We would urge next year's committee to continue the practice of singling out an issue for particular examination.

Clarify Program Assessment. Committee members felt that the effort was somewhat

conceptually hampered by dual purpose of student evaluation and program review, and members from other disciplines than English/SAGES felt that if the relationship were better clarified – that we are assessing the program through the evaluation of student writing – then the rubric could have been made more useful.