SAGES WRITING PORTFOLIO READING COMMITTEE (SUMMER 2009) SUMMARY

The chief finding of the Summer 2009 Portfolio Reading committee is that overall, students are producing writing of good quality in the SAGES program, but that they would benefit from more instruction in argumentation. 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. In addition, some portfolios are truly superior, a real joy to read, and worthy of high praise by any standard. The full report is available online: http://www.case.edu/writing (under “News” in the right-hand column).

SAGES WRITING PORTFOLIO HISTORY

SAGES Pilot & Initial Implementation (2004-2008) – Portfolios read individually (by writing instructors, primarily non-tenure track lecturers and graduate students) for gate-keeping function. Students whose portfolios were not deemed acceptable were referred to the Writing Resource Center to revise and resubmit their work.

SAGES Full Implementation (2008-present) – Individual portfolios are certified as complete (all documents are present and complete, showing at least acceptable effort in terms of content, length, and mechanics), giving students credit for fulfilling this component of the SAGES program.

Over the summer, a team of faculty from across the disciplines assembles to read the collected portfolios for a general program review, which the Writing Programs use to enhance pedagogical and curricular support for SAGES faculty. Each year, the reading will focus on specific questions (in summer 2009, readers read for reflection and researched argumentation).

In addition to making recommendations to the Writing Programs, the portfolio review identifies the most outstanding and the most problematic student portfolios for additional attention. Currently, portfolios that suggest a student is not meeting expectations in her/his writing are flagged and students notified and referred to additional writing resources (e.g., English 180, Writing Resource Center consulting, etc.). Outstanding portfolios will be recognized publicly (e.g., with an ad in The Observer and/or a gift card to the SAGES café).

SUMMER 2009 PORTFOLIO READING DETAILS

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


Reading Rubric: The committee read holistically and rated the writing on six elements that underlie effective writing: (1) style, grace, fluidity; (2) persuasive abilities; (3) clarity, consistency, and grammar; (4) organization, connection, and transitions; (5) tone and awareness of audience; and (6) use of appropriate evidence. In addition, the summer 2009 committee spent additional time reading the reflective and research essays included in the portfolios.

In addition, the reflective essays were read for evidence of growth as a writer over the course of the SAGES seminars, presence of substantial reflection, references to the essays included in the portfolio, and discussion of the process of assembly. The research essays were read for the presence of an argument, a strong thesis, appropriate in-text citation, and correctly formatted works cited lists.

Summary Reading Results: Summary results for each of the three specific readings are presented below; additional details (including the individual readers’ assessments) are available in the complete report of the committee.
**Holistic Reading Results:** Approximately 25-30% of the portfolios reviewed were deemed to “exceed expectation” on all six measures of effective writing. Over 50% of the portfolios were “at expectation,” and approximately 18-20% of the portfolios were judged “below expectation” on the measures of effective writing. Student writing portfolios were rated highest in: Organization, Connection and Transitions (31% exceeds expectation) and Clarity, Consistency, and Grammar (33% exceeds expectation). Portfolios were rated lowest in: Persuasive Abilities (24% below expectation), Style, Grace, and Fluidity (23% below expectation), and Use of Appropriate Evidence (18% below expectation).

**Reflective Essay Reading Results:** An overwhelming 95% of student reflective essays attributed significant writing gains to SAGES coursework. Nearly 80% of these essays included substantial reflection, and 62% of the essays demonstrated a strong use of specific references to students’ own work (as examples of growth). This summer’s reading clarifies the goals of this particular assignment, namely: that students analyze their progress as writers after their first three SAGES seminars in specific and substantial ways (i.e., not simply asserting that they are “better writers”); that students use specific examples from their own work to support their analysis of their progress as writers; and that students describe the process of assembling the portfolio in ways that demonstrate their awareness of an academic audience and of their own writing practices.

**Research Essay Reading Results:** 65% of the research essays read show evidence of a primary argument, but only 39% of those read included a strong thesis statement unifying the argument. In 45% of the essays, a weak thesis was present, and in 16% of the essays there was no identifiable thesis statement. In 80% of the essays, a works cited list was present and appropriately formatted, and in 74% of the essays in-text citations were appropriately used to reference others’ work. This reading suggests that students need additional instruction in argumentation and thesis development.

**Recommendations: Programmatic**

1. A recognition program for the strongest portfolios should be developed to encourage students who are doing exceptionally well in their writing.
2. A surprising number of student portfolios were submitted later than the program requires; a stronger incentive for submitting portfolios immediately after completing the first three SAGES seminars is needed.
3. Specified page lengths are not meaningful unless standard fonts are also used; students should be given a standard formatting guide, and perhaps paper length should be specified in words rather than pages.
4. Students should receive more explicit guidelines for their reflective essays. Modified guidelines (based on the results above) would encourage students to focus on their own writing practices and to engage in more developed and substantial reflection.
5. The committee also recommended the following items for further discussion:
   a. Because assessing individual student growth is not feasible in this model, students might simply submit their three best papers (including one longer researched essay) without regard to which course they come from.
   b. An advanced FSEM could be developed for writers whose academic writing skills are already strong and need more challenging assignments and instruction.

**Recommendations: Writing Instruction**

1. Students need more instruction in persuasion & argumentation.
2. Instructors should receive additional support for teaching argumentative research writing.
3. Instructors should not teach for content (disciplinary) mastery, but for argumentative reasoning.