



# Writing assignments in disciplinary contexts

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# Canadian context: a primer



- With one or two exceptions, no required first year writing course
- Writing historically taught through the study of literature
- Wide range of writing centres; perhaps the closest point of comparison with US context
- Disciplinary support for writing more common—not **across** the curriculum but **in** the discipline



# Canadian context: a primer



- WAC programs that support faculty members are few and far between
- WAC programs more commonly support students (“How to write a psychology paper” workshops for students)
- Research: writing “inventories” to describe how departments use writing now (baseline data) and to inform discussions of how to expand, direct, or improve the use of writing for learning



# Previous study



- Graves, R., Hyland, T. & B. Samuels (2010). Undergraduate Writing Assignments: An Analysis of Syllabi at One Canadian College. *Written Communication* 27 (3): 293-317
- This study collected 485 assignments from 179 syllabi at a small liberal arts college in Ontario
- We have continued this work to include six (6) follow-up studies in Alberta:
  - Faculties of Nursing, Pharmacy, and Physical Education and Recreation;
  - Geography and Political Science departments; and a
  - Community Service-Learning program.



# Today's presentation



- Today we will discuss the following five (5) studies:
  - Liberal Arts College;
  - Faculty of Nursing;
  - Geography Department
  - Political Science Department; and
  - Community Service-Learning Program.
  
- Faculties of Pharmacy and Physical Education and Recreation are in process.



# Research questions

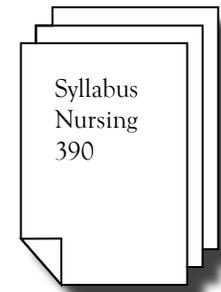


- What range of genres of writing assignments are students asked to write?
- Does this range vary over the 4 year program?
- Do these assignments get longer in the upper years of the programs?
- How frequently do instructors scaffold writing assignments within a course?

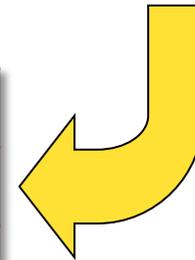


# Methods: Assignments

- We gathered copies of course outlines and assignments that were given to students
- All assignments and documents were coded by the researchers



✓ course year level	✓ source documentation
✓ genre	✓ provision of feedback
✓ word length	✓ method of assessment
✓ value (percentage of mark)	✓ audience





# Who isn't assigning writing?



	<b>Number of writing assignments</b>	<b>Percent of courses with writing assignments</b>
Liberal Arts	485	79%
Nursing	157	86%
Political Science	198	100%
Geography	186	77%
Service Learning	163	100%



# Number of assignments by year in program

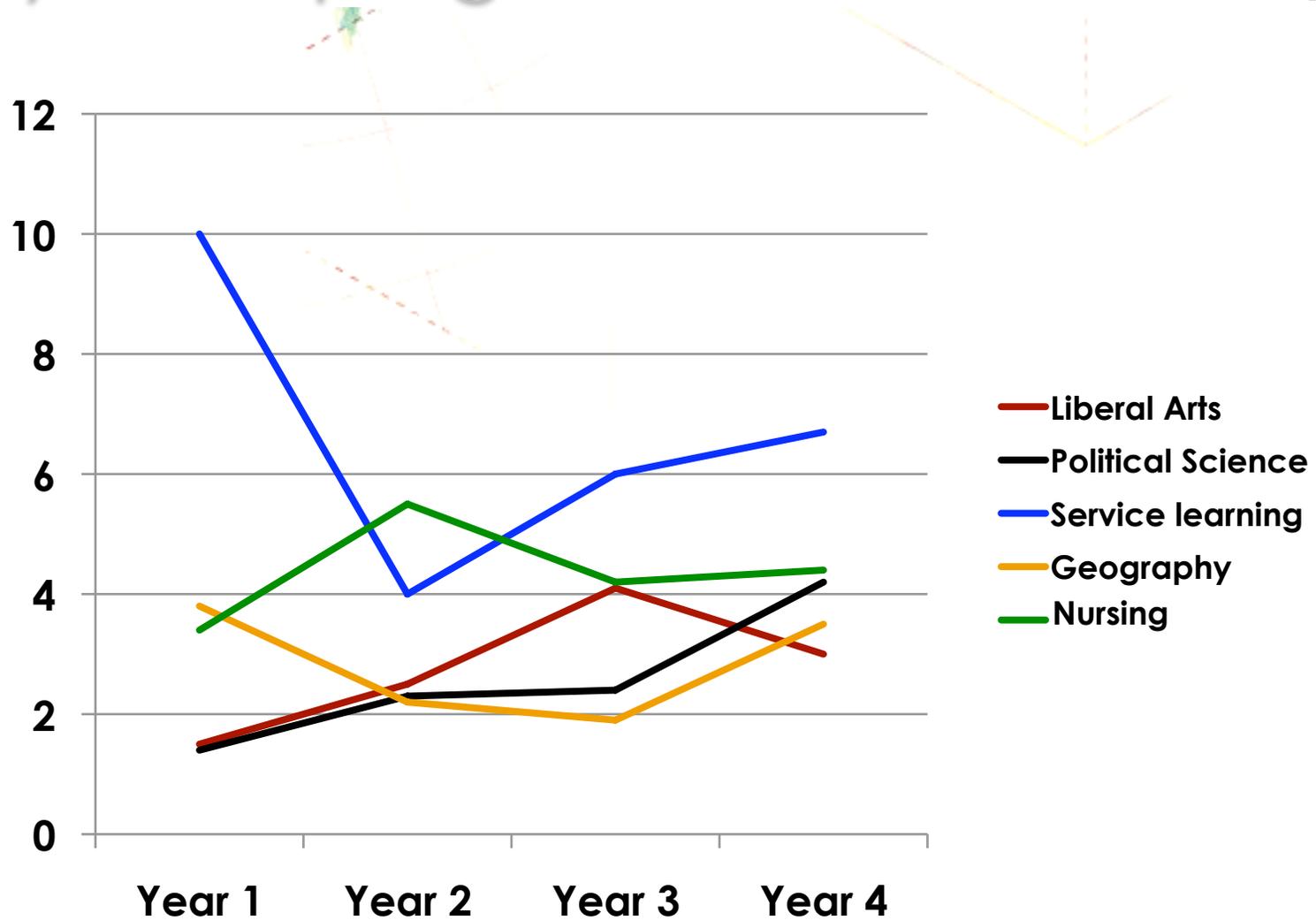


	<b>Liberal Arts</b>	<b>Political Science</b>	<b>Service-Learning</b>	<b>Geography</b>	<b>Nursing</b>
Year 1	34/ <b>1.5</b>	7/ <b>1.4</b>	42/ <b>10</b>	15/ <b>3.8</b>	17/ <b>3.4</b>
Year 2	225/ <b>2.5</b>	39/ <b>2.3</b>	12/ <b>4</b>	40/ <b>2.2</b>	33/ <b>5.5</b>
Year 3	189/ <b>4.1</b>	40/ <b>2.4</b>	35/ <b>6</b>	24/ <b>1.85</b>	50/ <b>4.2</b>
Year 4	56/ <b>3.0</b>	112/ <b>4.2</b>	74/ <b>6.7</b>	107/ <b>3.5</b>	57/ <b>4.4</b>

First number is total number of assignments.  
Second number is average number of assignments per course.



# Number of assignments by year in program





# Genres vary across the disciplines

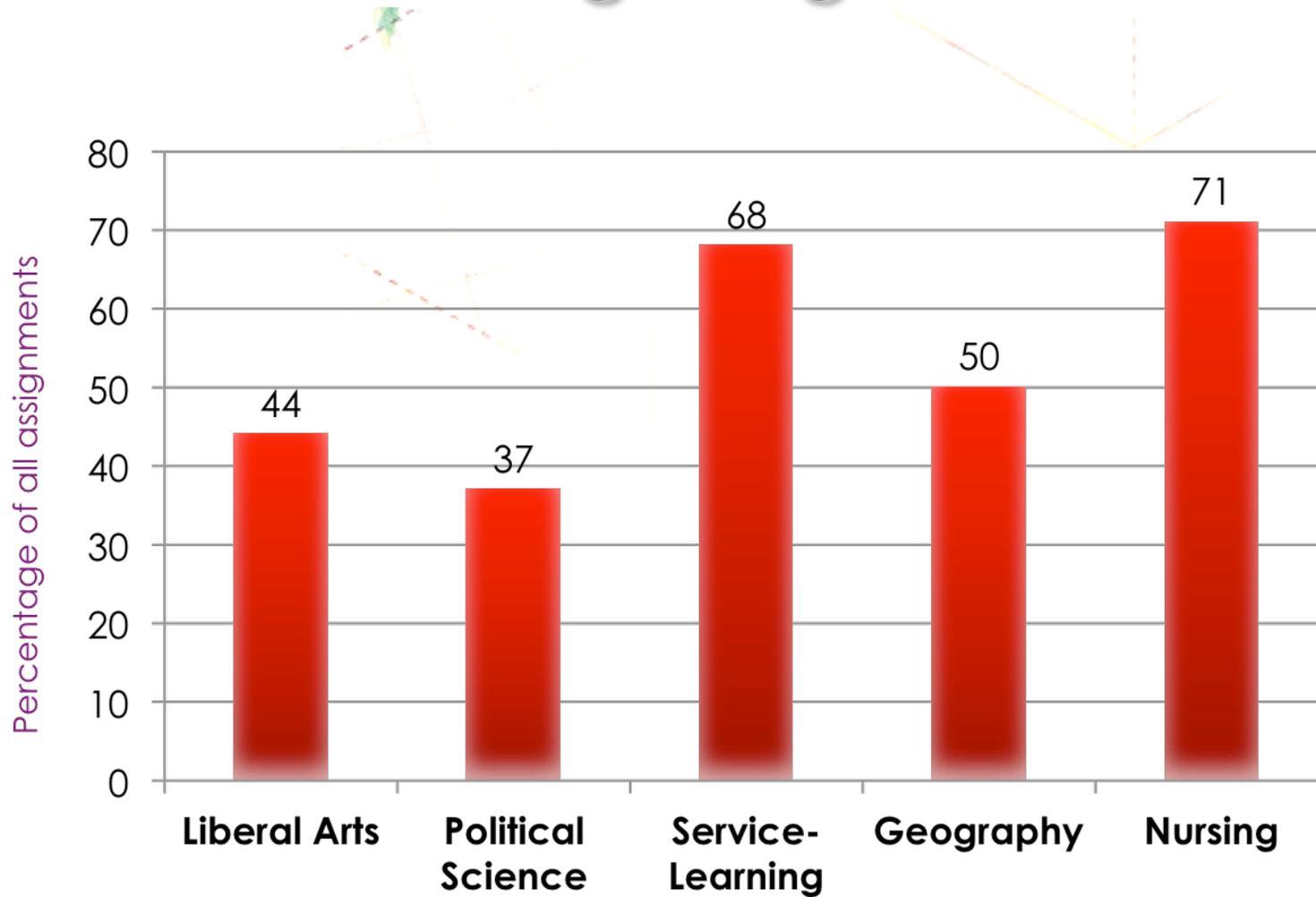


	<b>Liberal Arts</b>	<b>Political Science</b>	<b>Service-Learning</b>	<b>Geography</b>	<b>Nursing</b>
<b>Papers</b>	20	32	22	25	18
<b>Reports</b>	18			30	12
<b>Essay</b>	27	21		12	
<b>Summary</b>					
<b>Self-evaluation</b>					24
<b>Handouts</b>					11
<b>Presentation</b>		15	17	13	
<b>Journal</b>			10		

Note: numbers are reported in percent of all assignments.



# Nested writing assignments





# Length of writing assignments



Length in pages	Liberal Arts	Political Science	Service-Learning	Geography	Nursing
 <b>under 2</b>	<b>31</b>	5	16	18	0
 <b>2 - 4</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>74</b>
5 - 6	12	15	14	<b>19</b>	2
7 - 10	17	<b>23</b>	14	18	18
11 - 12	8	11	6	5	0
13 +	6	19	11	6	6

Note: numbers are reported in percent of all assignments.



# Audience of writing assignments



	<b>Liberal Arts</b>	<b>Political Science</b>	<b>Service-Learning</b>	<b>Geography</b>	<b>Nursing</b>
<b>Instructor or peer</b>	90	92	91	100	99

Note: numbers are reported in percent of all assignments.



# Feedback on writing assignments



Liberal Arts	Political Science	Service-Learning	Geography	Nursing
14	21	41	12	96

Note: numbers are reported in percent of all assignments.



# Rubric for writing assignments



Liberal Arts	Political Science	Service-Learning	Geography	Nursing
30	25	13	20	60

Note: numbers are reported in percent of all assignments.



# WAC, writing assignments, and disciplinary contexts



- Light (2003) noted student engagement correlated to frequency of writing:
  - how we use assignments to engage students is perhaps best answered within specific disciplines.
- Melzer (2009) reported WAC-associated courses contain more writing assignments than non-WAC courses:
  - Would WAC initiatives increase the amount of writing done throughout the university as Melzer observed?
- Our data considers the disciplinary context in Canada:
  - Do we really want CSL students writing more than 10 assignments in 12 weeks?
  - What is the upper limit?
  - Who decides?



# WAC, writing assignments, and disciplinary contexts



- Haswell (1991) argued that student efficacy requires sequential composition over the student's entire college career:
  - How does this happen sequentially over a student's career within a discipline? Without first-year composition?
- Consider how disciplinary programs implicitly or explicitly structure assignments (over the course of the entire program) to maximize student engagement and efficacy
  - For example, we can show the structure of writing assignments in the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Alberta



# WAC, writing assignments, and disciplinary contexts



- The writing inventory in our study provides a tool for instructors and administrators to:
  - examine the kinds of writing students are doing across and within the disciplines;
  - evaluate the extent of student writing required in disciplinary curriculum;
  - review curricular goals and outcomes.



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