

GC Students and the Writing Intensive Curriculum: A Brief Examination

General College

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Some questions have recently arisen in the GC community regarding GC students and the writing intensive (WI) curriculum. Specifically, it was of interest whether GC students have more difficulty in WI courses than non-GC students and whether the GC composition courses (1421/1421) help prepare students for success in subsequent WI courses. Academic performance data gathered from the University of Minnesota reporting databases for GC ($N = 902$) and CLA ($N = 2618$) students who entered the University of Minnesota in the fall of 1999 were used to address these questions.

In order to examine whether GC students have more difficulty in WI courses than non-GC students, a repeated measures analysis of covariance was run with average post first year grades (WI vs. non-WI GPA) as a within-subjects factor and GC student status (GC vs. CLA student) as a between-subjects factor. Since some of the difficulty that students might have in courses after the first year is related to persistence and first year performance, cumulative credits taken (as a measure of persistence) and first year GPA were controlled for in order to address the research question when students are set on an equal footing regarding other factors that are related to course performance. First year grades were excluded from the analysis in order to compare GC and CLA students' course performance after GC students had experienced some of the GC curriculum and presumably become more similar to their CLA peers in terms of academic preparedness for college courses. Data were available for 70% ($n = 631$) of the GC students and 78% ($n = 2,033$) of the CLA students from the fall 1999 cohort.

If GC students experience more academic difficulty than CLA students in WI courses an interaction between GC student status (i.e. GC vs. CLA student) and GPA (WI vs. non-WI) should be present such that GPA in WI courses is markedly lower than GPA in non-WI courses for GC students but not for CLA students. The data did not support this hypothesis, since the interaction between GC student status and GPA was not statistically significant. Figure 1 below depicts the relationship between GC student status and WI vs. non-WI course performance. This figure demonstrates the finding that, for both GC and CLA students, grades earned in WI courses do not differ significantly from grades earned in non-WI courses. Also evident from Figure 1 is the common finding that GC students earn lower grades than CLA students. Because grades earned in 3000-level courses tend to be higher than grades earned in 1000-level courses and because there is reason to expect that WI and non-WI GPAs might not be equivalent with regard to the level of their constituent courses, the analysis was repeated using grades earned in 1000-level courses only. The results of this analysis did not differ from those in the analysis that did not restrict course level (see Figure 2).

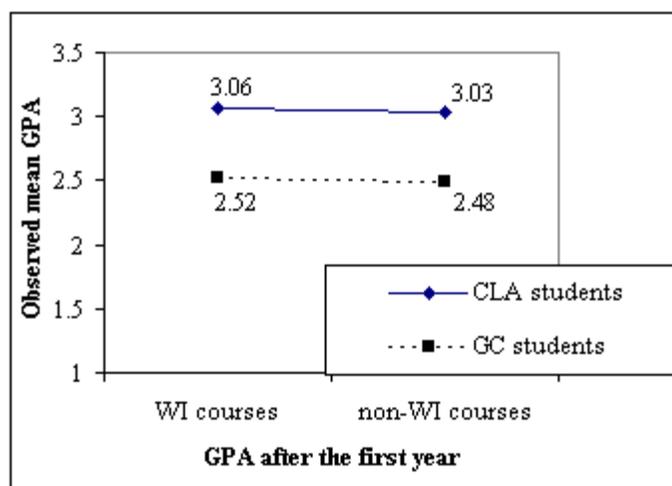


Figure 1. WI and non-WI GPA for GC and CLA students

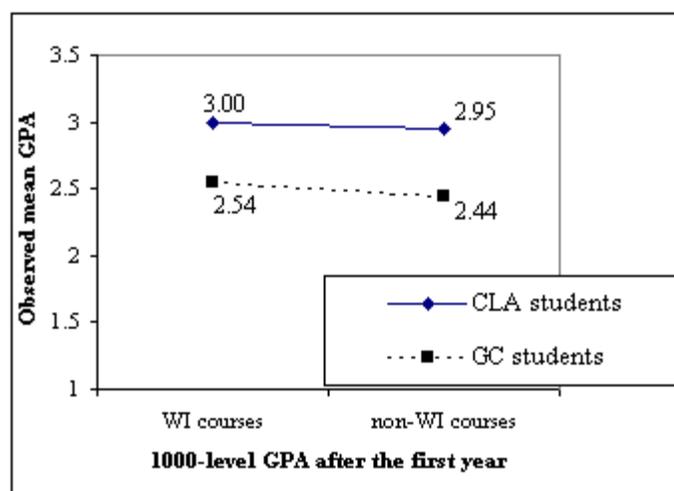


Figure 2. 1000-level WI and non-WI GPA for GC and CLA students

Linear regression models were used to examine whether the GC composition courses (1421/1421) specifically help prepare students for success in subsequent WI courses. If this is the case, then performance in GC composition should be more strongly related to performance in WI courses than to performance in non-WI courses. Two linear regression models were fit to the data: both contained cumulative credits (as a control variable) and average GC composition grade, with WI GPA as the dependant variable in one model and non-WI GPA as the dependant variable in the other model. The analysis only included GC students who had taken 1421 and 1422 in their first year and had completed courses beyond their first year ($n = 503$, 56% of the cohort). Though GC composition grade explained a greater proportion of variance in WI GPA (10.9% of variance explained above and beyond cumulative credits) than in non-WI GPA (9.5% of variance explained above and beyond cumulative credits), this difference was not statistically significant. There was insufficient evidence to conclude that GC composition grades relate more strongly to WI GPA than to non-WI GPA¹.

Based on these analyses described above it appears that: 1). WI courses are not more academically burdensome for GC students than for non-GC students; and 2). Performance in GC composition does not relate more strongly to subsequent WI course performance than to subsequent performance in non-WI courses. This latter finding suggests one or more of the following: a). composition courses, like the rest of the GC curriculum, function to prepare students for success in the general curriculum; b). grades in WI courses are not based very heavily on a writing component; or c). writing in WI courses is evaluated in a different manner than in the GC composition curriculum.

¹The equality of the two models was tested by fitting a structural model to the data, setting the coefficients associated with WI and non-WI GPA to be equal to one another, and testing the fit of this restricted model against the fit of the model in which the parameters associated with WI and non-WI GPA were freely estimated. The model in which parameters were constrained did not result in a significant decrement in fit, thus it was concluded that the relationship between WI GPA and GC composition grades was the same as the relationship between non-WI GPA and GC composition grades.

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