

**Report on the Timing During which Students Attempt to Complete the GWR  
Prepared by the GWR Academic Senate Task Force**

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**Charge:**

To ensure that students satisfy the Graduation Writing Requirement (GWR) in order to comply with CSU Executive Order 665, which states: "Certification of writing competence shall be made available to students as they enter the junior year. Students should complete the requirement before the senior year." The most recent Cal Poly WASC report also recommends that the university, "Require Cal Poly undergraduates to satisfy the GWR as juniors, i.e., as soon as possible after completing ninety units, so that they can receive additional writing instruction if necessary before attempting the senior project."

**Current Practice:**

Students can attempt to fulfill the GWR after completing ninety units; students must complete the GWR in order to graduate. Students may select one of two pathways to fulfill the requirement:

- 1) Earn a passing score on a Writing Proficiency Exam (WPE);
- 2) Earn a passing grade on an in-class, timed essay exam and earn a C or better in a GWR-approved upper-division English course.

If students fail to satisfy the GWR after two or more attempts, they may opt to fulfill the requirement via a third pathway:

- 3) Earn a passing score on a GWR Portfolio submitted upon completion of ENGL 150.

**Background:**

- More than 1,000 students take the WPE on the second Saturday of fall, winter, and spring quarters.
- 84% of test-takers are seniors.
- 76% of test-takers pass upon the first attempt.
- The pass rate increases to 97% after the second attempt.

- About 100 or more students take (or re-take) the WPE during finals week of their final quarter on campus.

**Problem:**

The group of students that waits until their senior year to attempt completion of the GWR through the WPE is clearly anxious. Some test-takers are so nervous during the exam that they freeze: they write one or two lines, close the exam booklet, and give up. The majority, nonetheless nervous, manages to complete the exam, yet many are not relieved of stress until they learn of their passing score. Those who take the exam during their final quarter and have jobs pending particularly fear that they will not be employed if they do not pass the exam. Of those that do not pass, some come into the Writing & Rhetoric Center office in tears or enraged because they must re-take the exam during final exam week.

In order to accommodate these students, the Writing & Rhetoric Center office coordinator counsels them, sets them up with one-to-one feedback from a tutor and/or offers consultation with the WPE coordinator, and works with each of them individually to provide support to pass the exam. In addition, the office coordinator schedules as many as four different exam times and locations during finals week, scrambles to hire exam proctors with the three hours available in their schedule to sit with the exam-takers (because we allow graduating seniors an extra hour to take the exam in hopes of decreasing their test anxiety), and tasks WPE faculty readers with additional assessment needs during their already full grading schedules. During the assessment of the final exam batch of WPEs, readers may feel pressure to pass student essays because they are fully aware that students' degree completion is riding upon doing so.

About 10 to 12 students each year are denied graduation because they do not satisfy the GWR through the WPE. Although these are small numbers, these students move on from Cal Poly without their degree, with some contacting the Writing & Rhetoric Center office years later with a request to return to take the exam. After being away from school for an extended period of time, these former students struggle to meet the requirement and often opt to complete the quarter-long GWR Portfolio Program. They must then hire and pay for a personal tutor instead of having the benefit of working with the Cal Poly tutors and resources to meet the requirement.

In all, when students choose to take the exam during their last year on campus, and especially during the quarter they hope to graduate, the university is not afforded an opportunity to utilize the GWR as a pedagogical tool, one that helps students determine whether they would benefit from additional writing instruction to meet the level of expected writing proficiency for successful completion of senior-level capstone coursework.

Rather than being viewed as a hoop that students must jump through in order to earn their degree or as a barrier to graduation for those who wait to the last minute to attempt to satisfy the requirement but do not, the GWR should be viewed more accurately as a diagnostic exam for the higher-level writing to be encountered in capstone courses. The task force members believe that this perspective on the GWR more closely mirrors the intention behind EO 665.

**Considerations:**

Two senate resolutions were passed in the early 2000s that address the timing of GWR completion on campuses:

- 1) Cal Poly's AS-550-00/CC Resolution on the Graduation Writing Requirement, adopted on October 24, 2000, resolved the following: to "encourage students to attempt the GWR early in their junior year;"
- 2) AS-2627-03/AA of the CSU Senate, adopted January 22-23, 2004, accepted the recommendations of a 2002 CSU report of campus GWR policies that states, "Each campus should develop a process that ensures student attempt the assessment in their junior year."

To ensure assessment in the junior year, a number of CSU campuses institute registration holds for students that do not fulfill the GWR by the end of their junior year, including CSULA, CSULB, Cal Poly Pomona, Sac State, Northridge, and Dominguez Hills. As a for instance, at Dominguez Hills students receive a letter from advising, which indicates that they have not met the requirement; they receive a hold on their registration; and they must meet with an advisor and sign a contract that states that they will register for the next exam before the hold is released.

The task force considered the option of placing a hold on registration but believes that students will view a hold as a punitive measure, and the task force would like to avoid "mini crises" that may result from such an approach. The task force also understands that a registration hold will be cumbersome to enforce. Finally, a hold on registration may become a barrier to graduation, which the task force determined to be an unproductive approach to this issue.

As well, the task force considered recommending that the senate resolve that all departments require students to complete the GWR as a prerequisite for senior project/capstone work and that the Office of the Registrar builds the prerequisite into the system to block students from enrolling in senior project coursework until the requirement is fulfilled. The task force believes that this type of prerequisite might be difficult to enforce and may become cumbersome, especially if departments simply decide to override the requirement by providing students with permission numbers. And, the task force understands that this solution has already been attempted, i.e. that there were several departments that built this into their programs but removed it from the "hard" prerequisites once the Registrar's Office more strictly enforced prerequisites.

**Task Force Recommendation:**

In an effort to comply with EO 665 and subsequent senate resolutions, the GWR Academic Senate Task Force recommends that the following actions be implemented to incentivize students to attempt to fulfill the GWR during their junior year:

1. The Writing & Rhetoric Center will coordinate with the Office of the Registrar to revise the catalog language to reflect the recommendation that students complete the requirement during the junior year (90-135 units in a 180-unit program).

2. The Writing & Rhetoric Center will collaborate with the Office of the Registrar to revise the language on curriculum flow charts to reflect the recommendation that students complete the requirement during the junior year.
3. The Writing & Rhetoric Center will partner with constituents across campus to improve outreach to students who have earned ninety units and encourage them to complete the requirement during their junior year.
4. The Office of the Registrar will update PASS so students can search for GWR-approved English classes. (Students can currently search PASS for USCP classes, but they cannot search for GWR classes.)
5. The English Department will reserve for juniors some seats and/or sections in GWR-approved English classes. The number of seats/sections will be determined by the department in collaboration with the Writing & Rhetoric Center and the College of Liberal Arts.
6. The Writing & Rhetoric Center will coordinate with the Office of the Registrar to attempt to program the Milestone Effective Date in PeopleSoft so that students earn their graduating senior registration rotation for their final quarter by completing the GWR two or more quarters prior to their graduation quarter.

Further, the task force considered the following three approaches to addressing this issue:

1. Require that by the curriculum cycle for the 2017-2019 catalog programs/departments identify at least one upper-level capstone course (such as a senior project course or another course that involves senior-level writing) for which the prerequisite would be completion of the GWR and are thereby compliant with the Executive Order.
2. Encourage that by the curriculum cycle for the 2017-2019 catalog programs/departments identify at least one upper-level capstone course (such as a senior project course or another course that involves senior-level writing) for which the prerequisite would be completion of the GWR and are thereby compliant with the Executive Order.
3. Require that by the curriculum cycle for the 2017-2019 catalog programs/departments develop a concrete action plan so that their students take the GWR during junior year and are thereby compliant with the Executive Order. Programs/departments may design a plan that works best for their students. The GWR Academic Senate Task Force recommends that the action plan consist of identifying at least one upper-level capstone course (such as a senior project course or another course that involves senior-level writing) for which the prerequisite would be completion of the GWR. Other options include: increased advising, department holds on registration, and/or revised flow charts.

As well as recommending that action items 1-6 be implemented in order to address this issue,

on April 2, 2015, the task force voted, and the majority of members supports promoting option three as an additional approach to regulating a change to the time during which students attempt to complete the GWR on campus.

The task force also recommended that the Writing & Rhetoric Center in collaboration with the Office of the Registrar be granted oversight over monitoring completion of the above once the senate determines the best approach(es) to attending to the charge.

We recognize the challenges of shifting the WPE to junior year, but we believe that doing so is imperative in order to comply with EO 665 and avoid unnecessary stress to both the students that take the exam at the last minute and the faculty and staff that support them.