

# Summary Report from FWIL Focus Groups on First Year Writing/Research Experience Fall 2016

## PART 1: PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

### ***Background:***

The student-led focus group project at UVM was launched in March of 2016, after a team comprised of one faculty member, one CTL staff member and two students attended a three-day training at Wabash College's Teagle Institute over spring break. The training offered examples of successful initiatives at a range of institutions that use student-led focus groups to provide qualitative data on student experiences and incorporate student voices into evaluation of campus initiatives. After the training, a group of three students conducted several pilot focus group projects associated with program assessment at UVM.

In the Fall semester of 2016, four students participated in a semester-long online and in-person trainings and practice sessions, preparing them to conduct their first full-scale project. Under the direction of Provost's Faculty Fellow for Assessment J. Dickinson and CTL staff member Henrietta Paz-Amor, the team offered support to Gen Ed assessment committees through the student-led focus group service. The Foundational Writing and Information Literacy (FWIL) Director, Libby Miles, expressed interest in using student focus groups to gather student feedback on their FWIL class experiences during this semester.

### ***Preparation:***

The student focus group leaders met with Prof. Miles in October to gather information that served as the basis for a draft moderator guide. With further input, the moderator guide was finalized and tested with the first scheduled group. The focus group leaders evaluated the guide after this first group and did not find any areas that needed clarification or changing. A copy of this moderator guide, used for all six groups, is attached as Appendix A.

In collaboration with the Office of Institutional Research, Prof. Miles identified a subset of FWIL courses that would provide a representative sample of first year students taking FWIL courses. Selected FWIL faculty members were then asked to invite their students to sign up for focus groups. Of the students who were emailed, 58 signed up for a focus group. We conducted 6 focus groups, the smallest of which had only two attendees, with other groups ranging from 5 to 9 participants.

### ***Summary of Findings:***

The moderator guide focused students' discussion on their research process, their familiarity with different types of writing and information literacy supports available at UVM, and how they experienced the transition from high school research to the expectations of college-level work. Students discussed how they begin the research process, and their strategies for finding,

reading and utilizing sources for their research. Their responses to these questions are summarized in the themes in Part 2 of this report.

One strong finding of this research is that most students enjoy having the freedom to choose research topics; however, they also like having some guidance in choosing their topics. As discussed in the body of this report, this finding was particularly evident in the comments from HCOL students, who expressed a desire to have more freedom to interpret prompts and have some choice of topic. In general, students expected the assignments they would be given at UVM to be more rigorous than what they had been given in their FWIL courses at the time the focus groups were conducted (about a month before the end of classes). Many of the focus group participants shared that they were disappointed by what they perceived as the lack of rigor in their FWIL classes, typified by the long period of time over which assignments were spread out. These students compared these step-by-step projects to similar assignments they would have a week or two to complete in high school.

### ***Recommendations:***

Based on the similar experiences of students across the focus groups and types of FWIL classes, we are able to make several recommendations to improve first year students' awareness of and access to information literacy and research supports at UVM. Students were aware of some resources available on campus, but many students revealed that they did not "know what they did not know," making it hard for them to seek out and make use of available supports. One student stated the general opinion that the University "tell[s] us a lot... oh we have this writing center, and we have a tutoring center, but we don't actually know where any of those places are or how to get to them or how to contact them."

- One suggestion to combat the lack of information being passed to first years was to have a short presentation during orientation or the first week of school that goes through each of the resources, where to find them, and how to make an appointment.
- Students noted that they would benefit from better advertisement of research and writing supports such as the writing center, for example, through flyers posted around campus. Another idea from students was to have a poster or email where all of the resources could be found together. Many students felt that approaching these places was intimidating or confusing, and felt that they would use them more if more students knew about them and they were easier to access. One student summed up this feeling saying, "I just think it's a matter of understanding what they are and where to find them."
- Participants in our focus groups also had very positive feedback regarding the in-class library resource sessions that many teachers held at the library. Individuals who did not have this opportunity expressed that they wished they had. Including these in-class library research sessions as an expectation or requirement for FWIL classes could benefit the students' knowledge and confidence regarding research.

## **PART 2: DISCUSSION OF FOCUS GROUP THEMES**

### ***Theme #1: Comparing research from High school to College:***

Very few participants indicated that they did not do any research in high school. A majority of students had completed research projects in junior and/or senior year of high school. However, students did discuss differences in research expectations between high school and college. When discussing high school, participants often said that research was more about finding and properly citing sources. In college, the emphasis was on interpreting and analyzing the data. Individuals who took AP classes in high school appeared, on average, to be more experienced with college-level research papers than people who did not take AP classes. The AP students were also more familiar with research databases. Lastly, students found that UVM required more application and practicality regarding research. Participants also felt that the professors in college had higher expectations than their high school teachers. Typical comments related to this topic included:

- “In high school it was kind of like okay you have to have 10 cited sources. But here at UVM you feel like the research is more meaningful because it’s going directly into the project.”
- “I feel we do it a lot more frequently, in high school we would do a big paper with multiple sources, and it was kind of a thing where people dreaded going to the databases because people hated it. It was like ripping off a bandage. Here the databases are better – JStor is fantastic and were just doing it for regular homework assignments in class.”
- “I’d say it’s definitely a lot different in college. I think it is more just specifically what kind of articles you need. Like I know in high school they never really said oh it needs to be peer reviewed, it has to be within a year or two, requirements like that. High school was more just like find an article, it wasn’t really like requirements.”
- “I feel like my professors in college, I think that they expect the articles you pick to be more scholarly and that you understand them better.”

### **Expectations coming into college**

Most of the participants had more rigorous expectations for college work than they encountered upon arriving at UVM. Their expectations focused on paper length and amount of time given to complete research assignments. For example, several students noted that high school teachers would “scare” them about the rigors of college, telling them that they should expect to complete longer papers in shorter amounts of time. These expectations were seen in students from English 001, TAP programs, and HCOL. While this topic will be re-addressed further in section three, typical student comments related to this topic included:

- “I certainly expected the papers to be longer because I heard stories of college papers being 10-20 pages.”
- “She [the High School teacher] kind of told us in college they won’t tell us you need this this this. They are just going to assign a paper and that is going to be it, you’re going to have to do it and they’re going to expect you to know how to do it and they are not going to require you to like here is your preliminary sources and here’s your notecards and here’s this and that, they are just going to assign it and you’re going to have to do all that on your own and turn in the paper when its due.”

- “I thought coming in I’d have papers due every week and in every class I am going to have a different paper, but so far I’ve had one class that I’ve had to write 4 papers for so far.”
- “One thing that surprised me a bit was I was expecting more like longer less frequent papers. So I thought it was going to be like a six page paper every few – every month or something, but we have more 2 short essays every month kind of thing. I don’t know like 750 words isn’t a huge essay so that was really surprising to have that the norm.”
- “High School scares you for college and then college is easier than you thought it would be.”

### **Level of work in college**

No one mentioned that the work they are doing in their FWIL classes was “too hard.” Most participants indicated that they came in with enough background knowledge to succeed, or their classes properly taught them and guided them along the process. Typical student comments related to this topic included:

- “I think that throughout this conversation we’ve been mentioning how college is not that [much] harder, like it might be deceptive. I think what we mean is that the assignment itself, because of our past knowledge of high school and middle school, the teachers have prepared us well, it’s easy to do the assignment itself when we get started but I think some problems beforehand may be like time management, things like that. I think that is what makes college hard, trying to balance 5 classes and a sport or something like that and I think that’s what’s difficult but not the paper itself because we’ve been prepared it’s been easy to start and complete once we get started.”
- “There is much less work than I thought there be, not that it’s a bad thing because it’s cool because we get to explore these ideas, but it’s definitely not the level of work that I expected.”

### ***Theme #2: Awareness of library and supports***

The topics listed below were brought up multiple times over the 6 focus groups. Overall, all students felt that there were enough resources throughout the university to support their research. However, many were concerned that they did not know what these resources actually do, or how to find them. One statement that conveyed the general opinion was “I feel like the university has resources... I just don’t feel like especially at least as freshmen you don’t reach out and utilize them that much.”

### **Class librarian**

Students felt that what they identified as a class librarian was a helpful resource, but many said that they hadn’t used the librarian outside of their class session. Many students who did not have a class librarian said they wished they had one, but those who had one seemed apathetic. Typical student comments related to this topic included:

- “We were kind of given a librarian who had set up a whole website for us and our project that we were doing. And that was a great resource for people even though I didn’t personally utilize it”
- “I know which one I think [is assigned], but I just go to the library in general”
- “So far I don’t think anyone has actually used her. And that’s probably just because we did all the research in class, so any outside work is kind of like superfluous I guess.”

### **Library Session**

Similar to their comments regarding the value of having a class librarian, students who did not have a session in the library felt that they were missing out on helpful information. Students who did receive this session found it very helpful for both understanding how the library works, as well as how to navigate the library website and various databases. Typical student comments related to this topic included:

- “If we didn’t have it I probably wouldn’t know how to work the UVM website at all.”
- After attending the session, “I felt pretty prepared for the entire research project.”
- “Maybe it would be helpful if each class made sure they did library sessions. That way everyone, all the first years got the same experience and would be able to work with the library website.”
- “[The librarian] taught us everything he possibly could so there was really nothing else I feel like I need to know about research.”

### **Writing Center**

Most students were aware that the writing center exists, but few have actually taken advantage of it. Those who have used the writing center use it frequently, but others felt that it was too confusing to sign up for, or was intimidating. Typical student comments related to this topic included:

- “The writing center is extremely helpful.”
- “The writing center was a very scary thing to figure out.”

### **Databases**

The first resource that came up in most of the groups were the databases accessed through the library’s website. Though almost all students were aware of these databases, some who did not receive a library session felt that the databases were hard to find on the website. The commonly mentioned databases/search engines were: Academic Search Premier, EBSCO, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and CatQuest. Typical student comments related to this topic included:

- “They also do a really good job listing out the different databases on the library website and it makes it easy to navigate to all the different databases you can get. And they also have specific databases for specific research.”
- “I’ve struggled a little bit [using databases] cause I just am not familiar with them.”
- “[At UVM] I have better databases, I have a better understanding of how to use the databases.”

## **Faculty and WID Mentors**

Students also consider their professors a valuable resource. Several participants mentioned that they stop by office hours when they have questions, and others had required meetings that they consider to be essential to understanding the assignments. The undergraduate WID Mentors are a good resource for students who feel uncomfortable meeting with their professor, or have questions more related to the student experience of doing schoolwork. Mentors were only mentioned in two of the groups, but students who had them seemed to like that they had another person to talk to. Typical student comments related to this topic included:

### ***Professor:***

- “I’ve been to office hours a few times and it’s always really helpful. I feel like my professors at least have always made an effort outside of class to help me out on whatever question I have.”
- “[My professor] sets up meetings with everybody... and he kind of looks through [our annotations] and points out things that you haven’t gotten and how to find them and things like that.”

### ***WID Mentors:***

- “[The TA] was totally willing to do whatever she needs to do to make sure we knew what we were doing.”
- “For --- we have two really great TA’s who are also great resources for when we have questions or when we want them to look over our papers.”

### **Other:**

Although the Inter-Library Loan, CatQuest, Eli Review, and *The Norton Mix* were only mentioned briefly, it is important to note that students are aware of their existence as a resource.

## ***Theme #3: Papers are shorter and spread out over a longer period of time than expected.***

When we asked students about the rigor of the FWIL classes in which they are enrolled, many responded that they were disheartened by how easy they found their classes. Some students described their TAP class as their “lazy class” - a class that they felt assigned papers and projects too far apart from each other. In general, students felt like the generous time period given to them was enabling them to procrastinate on aspects of their writing assignments, rather than encouraging students to use the time wisely. Students assured the focus group leaders, however, that the quality of work they produce is also expected to be higher than that expected in high school, and that although there wasn’t as much writing as they hoped and expected, the quantity and difficulty of reading assignments given to them was much. Below we have included quotes, comments, and insights as examples for this summary, divided by section.

### **Duration of assignment:**

- “I submitted a rough draft every week, and I would peer review and [the professor] would give me feedback and [they] did that over and over on the same paper, and it was getting really repetitive.”

- “I feel like I’m being almost babied to getting to my research.”
- “But in that way, some of the assignments are just like, there’s not a syllabus for it, you don’t know when things are due.”

**Procrastination:**

- “You can tell in the Honors College when a paper is due, everyone procrastinates - the night before no one is out.”
- “It feels so long and drawn out that I almost procrastinate it more because I’m like, ‘Oh I don’t have a deadline yet, I have four weeks to do this.’ So I almost procrastinate it until the last minute so I have motivation to do it.”
- “Before class you have to write 300 words. It’s easy, the essays. Success comes down to how much time you leave for that.”

***Procrastination as a Result of Lack of Guidelines:***

- “Yeah it’s getting to the point where I really have no idea what’s going on. Like from now to the research paper I’m kinda stressed.”
- “Well I was like, ‘I’m going to get ahead and start writing my paper’ and then I sat down and it was like, ‘I have no instructions on this, okay.’”

**Rigor in high school vs. at UVM:**

- “Coming here, it’s a huge step down. My English class is the easiest class I have by far.”
- “I certainly expected the papers to be longer because I heard of college papers being 10-20 pages.”
- “So far in college I think that getting sources and analyzing sources to make sure you use them right in your papers is a lot easier and I don’t know if that’s just because our professor makes sure we really understand the source, that we are able to apply well to whatever concept the paper is on or something else.”

**Miscellaneous and Positive Responses to Lack of Difficulty:**

- “It’s [ENGS 001] is a pretty easy class overall, I’d say, so that makes it more enjoyable.”
- “I expected the professor to expect more of us. I thought that they would want us to know how to write a perfect essay and exactly what they would want in a thesis. But they’re actually really understanding and they know that we’re freshmen and they’re really open to helping us make our essays better, giving us advice and resources on how to do it.”

***Theme #4: Student knowledge of the research process***

When participants were asked how they begin their research process, the most common answer was that they started with databases. Oftentimes, students would begin the research process with an Internet source or a google search, and then go to better databases, libraries, or other sources after having established a general understanding of the topic. A few students mentioned using article citations as a place to begin their research. Some students did admit to using Google, and some mentioned using their professor as a step in the process of finding

more reputable sources. Many students brought up their use of keywords in the research process. Some students stated that they read complete articles, while other students ‘spotlight searched’ or ‘plucked’ good quotes. There was also some variation in how students engaged with search results. Some reporting picking the first few articles that came up, while others discussed coming out of a search with more articles than needed. Some students mentioned the reputability of a source as being important and something that should be checked. Overall, students seemed more comfortable with the research process when they were researching topics that they were interested in. For this reason, many reported that they like when they can choose their own topics, yet some would like more guidelines to help narrow their choices—this will be expanded upon below. This also held true for the HCOL students (Refer to the separate HCOL theme, #5 below, for more details). The following are representative quotes from students broken up into their respective subthemes.

### **Research Starting Point:**

- “I kind of start with databases and try to find as many articles as I can and if I can’t find too many, I just go to Google and search for sites that I believe to be reliable and after reading over a little bit, kind of like databases and surfing the web.”
- “I usually go to Google first to get a broad idea of my topic, and then from certain articles that I find on Google--like if they have cited a source or something, I go to that source and that usually brings me to a database like JSTOR or Academic Search Premier.”

### **Keywords:**

- “I put like two, three keywords in and kinda go through it.”
- “I had to put in tons of keywords just to find something that was sorta relevant to what I was hoping to get integrated to my paper.”
- “They really push trying different keywords. Cause you can start with the top one being whatever your subject is and then the second line is just something more specific. You just repeatedly change your keywords to find different articles and narrow your searches down from like 200 hits to like 12.”

### **Plucking quotes, reading whole paper through vs. skimming:**

- “I usually try to see if the whole article connects to the topic. Because if only one little part has to do with my topic, it’s not really an article I want.”
- “Me personally, I’ve been guilty of just spotlight searching what I need from articles, so I’ll type in a few words and it takes me to what I need to know, instead of reading the entire thing, but I know you have to narrow it down to what’s important--what you specifically need. And I think skimming or focusing in on what that is, is more useful management time.”
- “For me it kind of depends on how long the article is. If it’s really long, I might not analyze the whole thing, I might just pick out 1, 2, 3, 4 quotes and use them. But if it’s a shorter article I’ll usually read the whole thing and pick out points from the entirety of it.”

### **Gathering articles and sources**

Some students pick the first few articles they come across. Oftentimes this is because they feel these sources are more reputable:

- “I just stop there because usually the most relevant articles are the first ones, like in my opinion.”
- “It’s kind of the first couple I trust to be more accurate or easy to understand, judged to be more relevant by the program so I usually select those.”

Others search in depth, and they look for more articles than needed:

- “I like to do more than I need just because I want to read a bunch of the articles to make sure I know what I should be talking about, and then I feel like it’s better to pull a little bit of information from a lot of articles about the one topic than just depending on one article for all of it.”

#### **Skimming skills to determine usefulness of article:**

- “I take the one that has a title that I might want and then I probably skim through it and look for if it has the kind of stuff I want and then I cite from there if I want it in my writing piece, but usually I don’t pick the first one, it usually takes a little bit while to find the article I need.”

#### **Like having a choice of research topic:**

- “He said that since we were working on it for so long, it needs to be something you wanna be working on and be interested in for that amount of time. I’m glad that it was something I liked so that I had motivation to keep researching even on my own time because I found the topic interesting.”
- “I got to pick a neuroscience topic that I was interested in. So that kind of made research easier because I kind of enjoyed what I was looking at.”

#### **Don’t like lack of guidelines:**

Many students brought up their distaste for the lack of guidelines in their prompts and classes. There was one particular Focus Group that discussed this topic heavily, and this group seemed to dislike the lack of guidelines because it relates to the duration of their assignments and procrastination. Students voiced that they didn’t like having no instructions for the next step, and they felt that certain steps in their writing processes took too long to accomplish as a class. Students seemed to want the ability to work ahead on their assignments, and the lack of guidelines inhibited their ability to do that. In other Focus Groups, students spoke about how they did not like the way their smaller assignments were structured as opposed to their bigger essays. They felt like there weren’t solid deadlines on the smaller assignments, and that this induced procrastination. Not every student agreed that there was a lack of guidelines in their FWIL course, and some brought up positive things about the guidelines they were given in their courses. Examples of these quotes are listed at the bottom of the quotes provided. The students who discussed this topic were primarily English 001 students, but there were students from other courses in this group as well. After each quote below, we have indicated what course the quote is in reference to.

- “I like the whole aspect of being able to do whatever I want, but I kinda don’t like the lack of guidelines, that kind of throws me off a little bit.” (English 001)
- “I feel like not having guidelines is okay as long as you’re really driven. But this is a little out of the comfort zone of that and I think it’s pushing us to be more independent. Which is good and which is what college is about, but it’s getting close to out of the comfort zone.” (English 001)
- “I mean I like my English class right now because it does have that freedom of like I could pick whatever topic I wanted to research, but I also kind of don’t like it because there really isn’t any guidelines at all...I feel like from the time I presented—I presented my research last week, by the time I start writing my paper, a lot of the information that I have like ready to go—ideas in my head might be gone by then. And even if I do start to write them down, I don’t necessarily know what he’s looking for, for the paper.” (English 001)
- “Well I was like I’m going to get ahead and start writing my paper and then I sat down and it was like I have no instructions on this, okay.” (English 001)
- “Yeah, I kinda need a basic idea, like a guideline to follow for when I start writing my paper. Which I mean, we haven’t gotten to portfolio three yet because our presentation overspilled, but I almost feel like after we presented he should have given like each of us a little handout of like this is the general idea of how you need to write your research paper.” (English 001)
- “We know we have to write a research paper, but we have no idea what to do with that, that’s just like the umbrella.” (English 001)
- “I like being ahead in this class so I can focus time onto other things. But without having that guideline for the next section, like I kinda like I don’t know I’m a little stressed about it.” (English 001)
- “I don’t mind the lack of guidelines in English 001, I just don’t like how long it takes to do everything and I think that I could have done my presentation and everyone else in my class could have put together our slideshows in maybe like three days or like two nights because it was like five slides and you just talked about what you found.” NOTE: This student recommended doing the slideshow before really getting into the research because this sequence makes more sense. (English 001)
- “Um, yeah I find myself procrastinating a lot because my professor, he tends to like change what his deadlines were for when he wants assignments, like when he wants us to decide on a topic. And he keeps pushing those dates back. Or he doesn’t necessarily give us an outline of when we need everything specifically due. Like he doesn’t have a date for when we need a thesis, or when we need to find our first few sources by. So I think that’s sort of leading me to procrastinate a little bit.” (IHP)
- “Also sometimes, it’s kind of talked about in passing before we go in back towards our dorms and it’s just – oh, you have an assignment, do this, but you don’t really know – you never really talked about the topic, if that makes sense. Kind of just writing without any sort of discussion.” (HCOL)
- “Like the, the big projects, the big first paper we did and the final paper we’re doing, and all this stuff. That the content is good and it makes sense, but the in class workings, there’s smaller things that he’ll assign like he’ll assign study questions or he’ll assign a

paper that's like a page long that's due randomly. And you don't know when and like sometimes there's not like a prompt for it, he just wants you to turn in something and it's just, that can be a real headache cause it's not hard, it's just you don't know what's happening.” (TAP)

- “It's like pretty clear like he tells us, he gives us a list of everything he wants us to turn in with each portfolio so like there's really only one due date for everything which makes it pretty nice.” (English 001)
- “They just kinda like gave you a sheet of paper about what the assignment was and were like take it and run, you just kinda like did whatever you felt like doing.” (English 001)

### ***Theme 5: HCOL***

Honors College students had a strong voice that stood apart from other participants in the focus groups that they participated in. In general, students liked when they were able to interpret prompts as they wanted, and they liked writing responses to prompts they found interesting. Students also felt that the prompts that were given and their professors led them in a specific direction in which they were expected to write according to a specific perspective--even if it was not the perspective they wanted to take. That being said, many students pointed out that if they talked to their professor about the prompt, it was useful and helped them answer the prompt. In terms of research, HCOL students have done little to none outside of the readings they have been given in class. Those who had been introduced to databases by their professors had a strong preference for JSTOR, and used it almost exclusively. A few students were minimally informed about their capstone project. Those who have been told about it appreciate the fact that they get to choose what they are going to be writing about. See below for quotes on this theme.

#### **Preferred Prompts:**

- “Definitely being able to write a paper with a little more freedom would make writing the paper much easier for different majors.”
- “I really liked when the prompts give you a cool idea and then you feel free to interpret it as you choose.”
- “I thought that it was a fantastic prompt and it really gave us the control that I feel was lacking in our prior two papers.”

#### **Prompts Push Specific Perspective:**

- “I feel like this kind of style--the FWIL classes--are supposed to be the kind of classes where there's no right answer. And the prompts have very much led us like this is the right answer, our teacher has said, this is the answer I want you to write, and then they are pushing you a certain way that isn't necessarily the way you thought about that.”
- “They box you into arguing one side of the argument and make the other side seem less desirable.”
- “You have to learn to write for the teacher.”
- “Our ability to draw our own conclusions is being erased by our teachers.”

- “I think the prompts are too focused for everyone to truly express themselves, what they think about what they read.”
- “I don’t like the prompts, it doesn’t give you an option really to choose what you want to write about.”

#### **Philosophy Readings:**

- “Us that are in STEM tend to be struggling a little more with the philosophy readings just because it’s not how a lot of our minds work.”
- “It’s just Descartes, Hume, and Negativity.”
- “I really enjoyed reading about all of the different philosophers through the ages, I just think of the curriculum is really good towards the pursuit of knowledge.”
- “Philosophy and talking about Hume and Descartes, it was hard for me to understand that in the first place, so to write a paper on it didn’t make it any better.”

#### **Talk With Professors:**

- “It is a little bit of pressure that some people might think that, ‘oh if I do this, then I’m gonna get a bad grade,’ and I think that’s where talking to the professor is useful.”
- “Depending on what professor you have and what their discipline is, definitely changes what kind of perspective you take in the class.”
- “I’ve met with her for the essay prior to the one we just submitted, and I got a lot of insight about what she was looking for.”
- “Luckily I was able to work with my teacher and I ended up writing an essay that I really really liked because I just interpreted the prompt in a certain way.”

#### **Minimal Outside Research So Far:**

- “We’re basically just using the text that they provided us with and then also the video that they gave us, and it’s basically just formulating your own opinion on the things that are talked about.”
- “We’ve never been required to go outside of the course packet or books that we read.”
- “I thought it would be a lot more research-intensive just because of what they told us at Orientation.”

#### **Capstone:**

- “We’re given a pretty free range which is awesome. It is just like it has to somehow connect to anything we’ve read or talked about during the semester, which is very loose.”
- “In my HCOL class, we haven’t had any choice. The first choice that we get is the capstone paper.”

#### **Use of databases:**

- “I have better databases, I have a better understanding of how to use the databases.”
- “I didn’t have JSTOR in high school and JSTOR is dope.”

**Other perspectives from HCOL students:**

Contrary to the overarching theme of the focus groups, some HCOL students appreciated the assignment prompts and the course topics for various reasons. Typical comments by these students are below.

- “We haven’t had any choice. The first choice that we get is the capstone paper, but all of the readings and questions that she’s been asking for like prompts have been really interesting. And like I really enjoyed reading about all of the different philosophers through the ages, I just think the curriculum is really good towards the pursuit of knowledge, which is what the class is.”
- “So as an Engineering major, I don’t get a lot of choice throughout my four years. I’m in a lot of science classes right now already, so it’s kind of nice that I’m forced to be in the philosophical world because if I weren’t forced into it, I would definitely be doing something science-y.” (In response to the follow up question: “Would you say that you would have preferred to have more choice or do you think there is some benefit on having more assigned to you?”)
- “I think in a class that’s focusing on writing, they shouldn’t be focused on what opinions they think answer the questions best - they should be focused on how the students answer the question, and I think [the HCOL 085 professors] do a pretty good job at that.”
- “If there was no prompt, then I probably wouldn’t read the text, just sparknote it, just read it quickly. The prompts force me to read it and it’s good for me as a student.”

## APPENDIX A: Moderator Guide for FWIL Focus Groups Fall 2016

*As students come in: Greet each person, and ask people to sign in with their name and email, as well as the name of the professor who is giving them extra credit. Then invite them to get some refreshments and sit down and write a pseudonym on the name tent in front of one of the places. They can choose their own name if they want, but a fake name is fine too.*

### **Welcome:**

Welcome and thank you for joining us for this group discussion. I'm \_\_\_\_\_ and I'll be leading our conversation today. *[Introduce notetaker and explain their role]*. We are part of an initiative at UVM that helps programs and colleges get student feedback on specific areas where they would like to improve the student educational experience.

Today we are going to have a conversation about your experiences with the FWIL distribution requirement. In case this term is unfamiliar to you, it basically means that you are in a class which fulfills the Foundational Writing and Information Literacy university-wide requirement. So all of you should be students who are currently taking either a TAP class, HCOL 085, English 1, or are enrolled in an integrated program. Is that correct? Is anyone not taking any of these classes? *[Politely ask anyone who does not qualify to leave.]*

The Director of Foundational Writing and Information Literacy has asked us to conduct a series of group discussions with first year students to find out more about your experiences with learning Information Literacy skills, and to understand what experience you had regarding this before you started college. We really value your honest feedback, so I am going to ask you to think about all of the questions carefully and to answer them honestly. We'd like you to focus on your own experiences as much as possible, so try to stay away from talking about an experience that your friends may have had. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers to the questions we are asking today. We want to hear many different viewpoints and we would like to hear from everyone. We hope you will be honest even when your responses may not be in agreement with the rest of the group.

The information we gather today will only be used to evaluate and improve the University experience for students, and all comments we include in our report will be anonymous, so please do not be afraid to answer honestly. Please respect the privacy of others in the focus group and keep this the contents of this conversation confidential.

### **Consent form:**

We will have a notetaker writing down the main ideas of what you say in the discussion, but we will also be recording this so that we can make sure our notes and our understanding of your main points are as accurate as possible. The recording will not be shared with the FWIL Director, and it will be erased at the end of the semester after we complete our summary of the discussion. We have short consent forms for each of you, outlining that you agree to be recorded, with the understanding that all quotes will be anonymous, the material will be used

only for program evaluation, and that the recording and all copies will be erased by the end of December, 2016. Please take a moment to read over the consent form and sign it.

**Questions:**

*[Plan on 8-10 minutes per question, including the final question]*

1. I'd like to start by having everyone go around and introduce themselves. Please tell us your name, major, and which class you are taking this semester that fills the Foundation Writing Information Literacy, or FWIL requirement.
  
2. Take a minute to think back to your high school experience. In what ways did your high school classes incorporate working with sources from other writers or authors?
  - a. What skills did you learn through these projects? For example: searches using academic databases (other than google), generating and refining keywords, note-taking and/or highlighting to understand the text, weaving research into the body of your text, and keeping tracking of quoting and citation information.
  
3. So we've already been talking about research in terms of working with sources from other writers or authors. Have you been given an assignment that has required this type of research in your FWIL class this semester? If you have not been given an assignment this semester, think back to your experiences in high school. How have you been going about this research?
  - a. What research methods do you use?
  - b. If they need ideas: Take us through what steps you take when you're doing research, beginning with deciding on the research topic.
    - i. Where is the first place you would look for sources?
    - ii. How many sources do you try to find? Do you usually just pick the first ones you find or look for more than you need?
    - iii. Once you have your sources, do you read all of them? Or do you stop once you find a good quote?
  
4. Please describe an assignment you have been given this semester that has required this type of research in your FWIL class. If you haven't received one yet, are you aware that you will be given one sometime in the future?
  
5. Keeping in mind your experiences in high school, how similar or different is the research you did there compared to the research you are doing at UVM? If you haven't been given the assignment yet, you can speak to any information you have been given about it.
  - a. Optional: Does this fit your expectations regarding research from when you were applying to colleges?
  
6. What resources are you aware of that are offered by the university to help with research? There may be some both programmed into your FWIL class as well as throughout other offices.
  - a. Is this enough support? If yes, please explain. If not, what do you as students need from your professors and from the courses you enroll in?

7. Now that we've talked a bit about the kind of work you are doing in these classes, how do you feel about the types of assignments you have been given so far?

- a. Were they the kind of assignments what you were expecting? If not, how are they different from what you were expecting?
- b. Have you found your assignments so far to be interesting?

This has been a really helpful discussion, thank you all for taking the time out of your busy schedules to talk to us today. As a final question, we just want to ask if there is anything you think we have missed. Are there any other aspects of FWIL that you think are important for us to know? If you think we've covered everything, thank you again and have a wonderful night!