

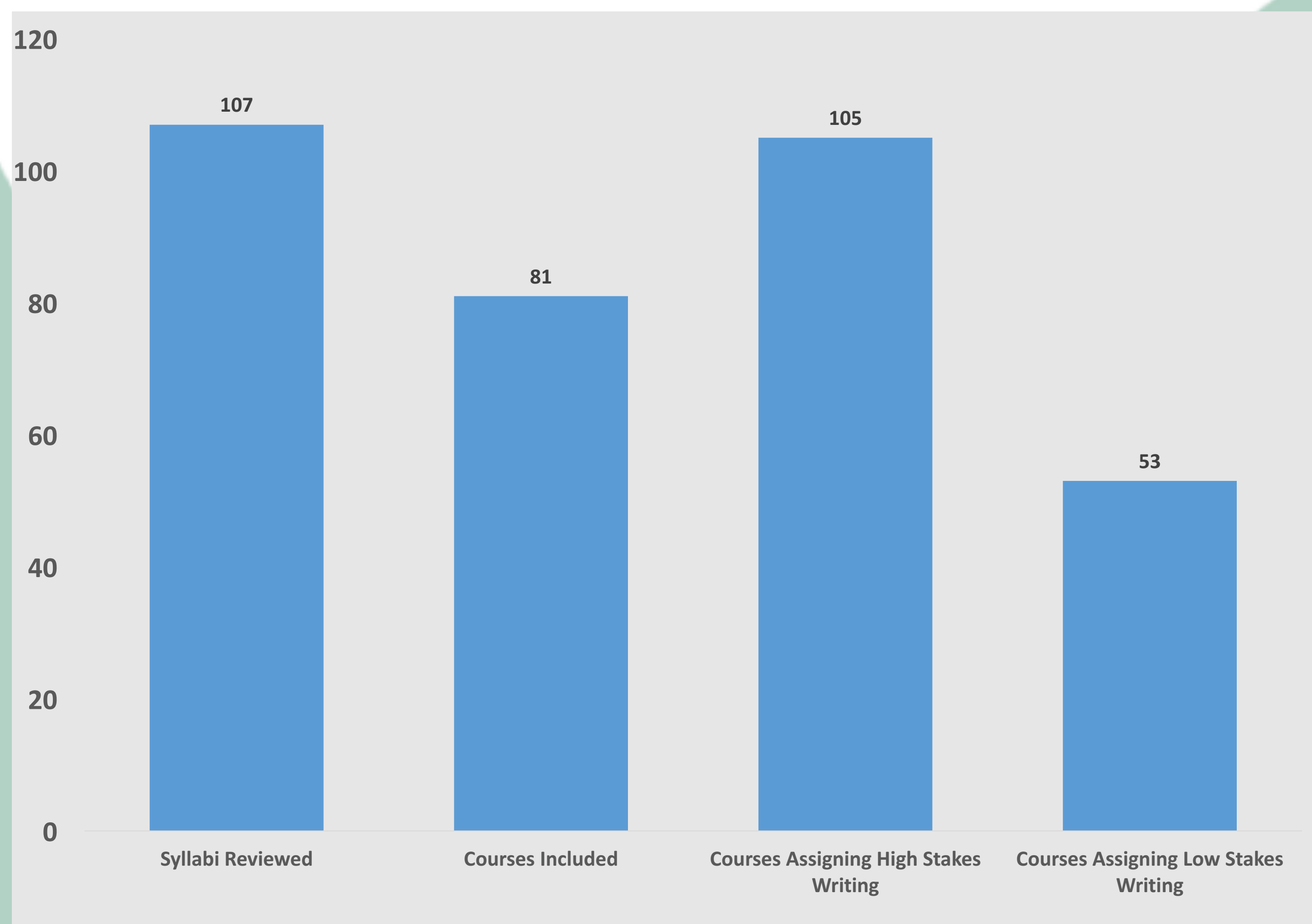
Writing in the Digital Age?

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Writing Across the Curriculum | George Mason University

BACKGROUND

In fall of 2016, as part of its on-going Re/View project, the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program staff conducted a review of syllabi from all writing-intensive (WI) courses on record. Our review of syllabi focused on answering one question: What types of writing (or genres) are being assigned in WI courses?



INTRODUCTION

Kathleen Yancey (2015a) contends that the digital age provides writers with increasingly diverse opportunities to write and that writers need to experience variety in their writing lives in order to develop effective and flexible writing habits (2015b). Dan Melzer (2003), unfortunately, reports that writing assignments across the country expose students to only a few types of writing; the limited variety might result in the inhibition of growth in student writers. Using the data we collected from WI syllabi, we wanted to learn how much variety Mason's students are experiencing.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

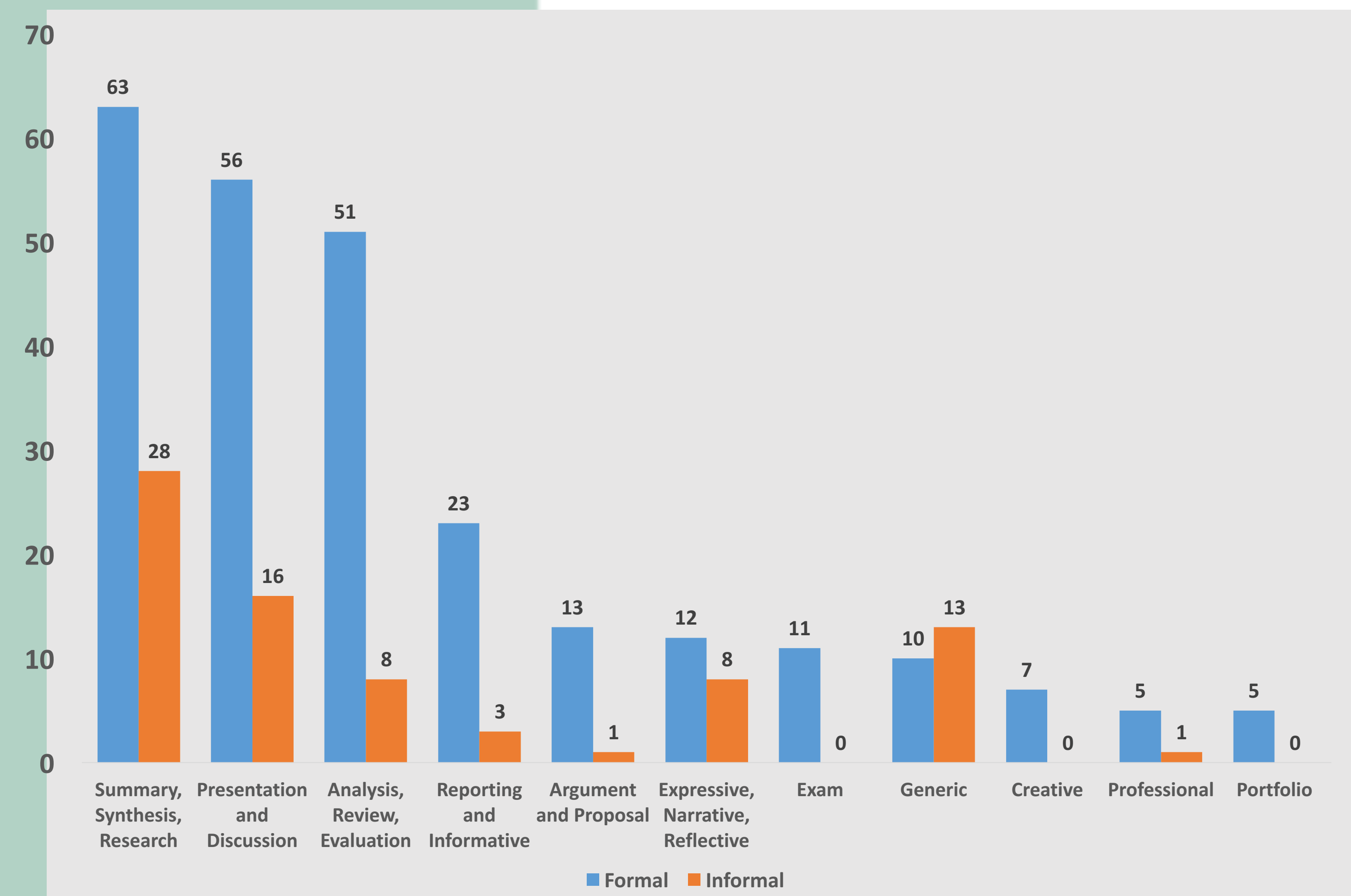
What types of writing are being assigned in WI courses? How much high stakes and low stakes writing is being assigned? How much variety in writing situations are students experiencing? Are WI courses helping to prepare students for writing in the digital age?

METHODOLOGY

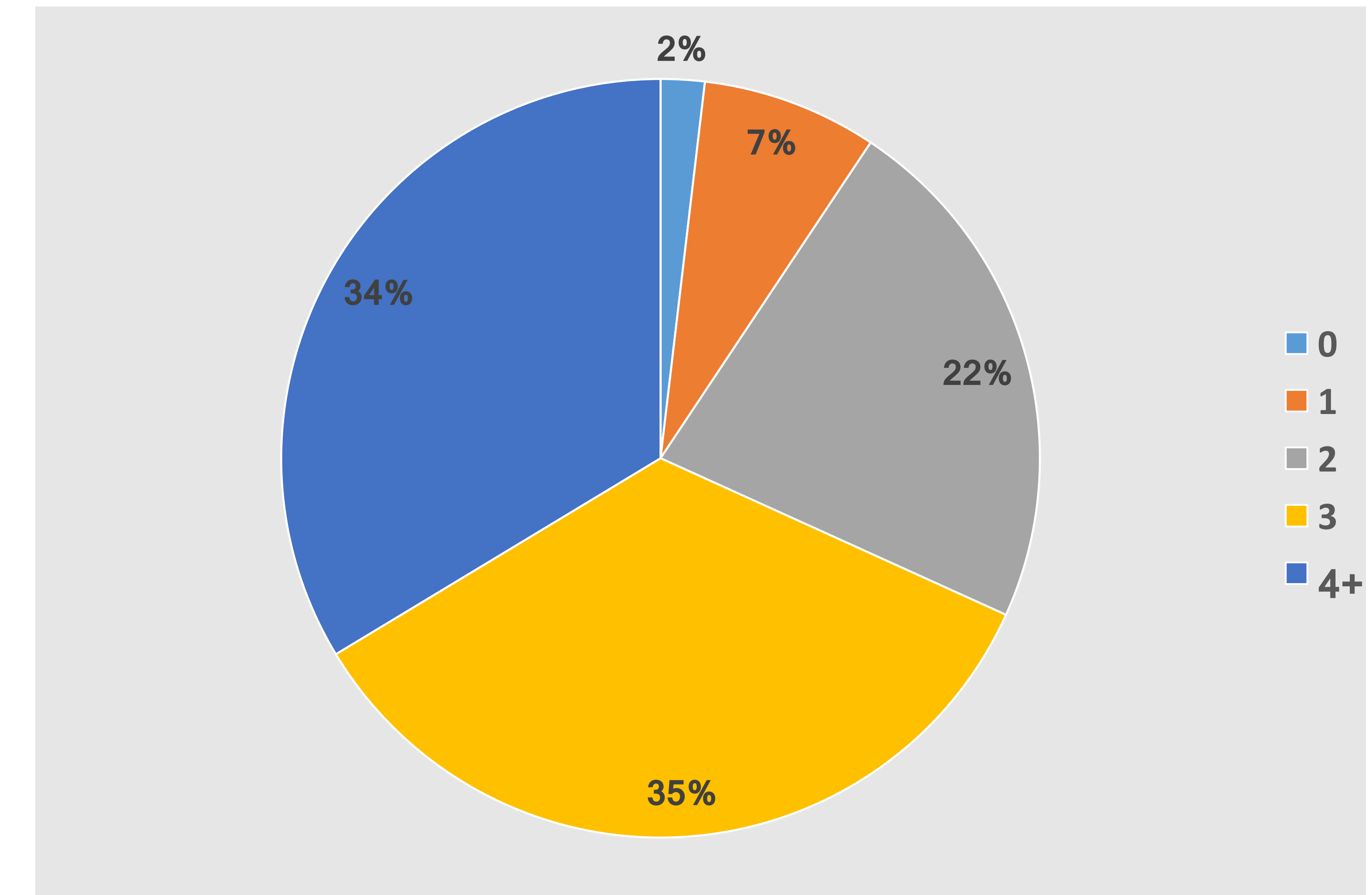
For this project, we used genre as our unit of analysis because writing studies research has demonstrated that learning the genres of a discipline is a critical step toward gaining membership into a discipline. As we reviewed writing assignment descriptions in course syllabi, we identified genres through the general purpose the writing was expected to perform, which is why our categories in the graph below reflect actions (analysis) more than documents (lab reports). Our initial identification split genres into high or low stakes writing based upon the grade weight of the assignment. Low stakes writing often served a formative role and had a minimal impact on a student's final grade; high stakes writing served a more summative role and carried significant grade weight.

RESULTS

We found that nearly all classes assigned writing; 105 out of the 107 (98%) syllabi analyzed assigned some type of writing. 105 out of 107 (98%) syllabi assigned high stakes writing. However, only 53 (50%) of the syllabi analyzed detailed some type of low stakes writing. Finally, 97 (91%) of the reviewed syllabi describe 2 or more types of writing assignments, and 73 (68%) WI syllabi assign 3 or more different types of writing. WI courses most frequently assigned 3 different types of writing assignments (37 courses or 35%) with a range of 0 to 7 different types of writing assignments.



Number and Type of High Stakes and Low Stakes Writing Assignments



Variety of Genres Assigned (by percentage)

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

The majority of WI courses (68%) assigned 3 or more types of writing. If we consider this number to satisfy Yancey's statement on the necessity of variety in writing experiences, then WI courses seem to be contributing to the development of our students' writerly dexterity, an important attribute for writing in the digital age.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this review, the WAC Program encourages faculty to incorporate into their WI courses the following best practices for teaching with writing:

- Increase the number of low stakes writing assignments.
- Increase or continue to assign a variety of writing types.

Please visit wac.gmu.edu for more information and resources.

REFERENCES:

- Melzer, D. (2003). Assignments across the curriculum: A survey of college writing. *Language and Learning Across the Disciplines*. 6(1), 86-110.
- Yancey, K. B. (2015a). Writers' histories, processes, and identities vary. In L. Adler-Kassner & E. Wardle (Eds.), *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies* (pp. 52-54). Logan, UT: Utah State UP.
- Yancey, K. B. (2015b). Learning to write effectively requires different kinds of practice, time, and effort. In L. Adler-Kassner & E. Wardle (Eds.), *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies* (pp. 64-65). Logan, UT: Utah State UP.