

General Education Assessment Report
Category 1A: English 101—Composition
March 30, 2007

Executive Summary

In Fall 2006, the English department created an ad hoc committee to conduct a periodic review of English 101—Composition as a General Education requirement. Unlike previous committee assessments, this assessment focused on students' writing *processes* as well as *products*. The committee successfully reviewed nearly 20 percent of the students enrolled in English 101 during the Fall 2006 semester, basing decisions according to the course competencies provided in the Undergraduate Bulletin:

Students will be able to:

- a) demonstrate and practice strategies for idea generation, audience analysis, organization of texts, drafting, evaluation of drafts, revision, and editing;
- b) write papers of varying lengths that demonstrate effective explanation, analysis, and argumentation;
- c) become experienced in computer-assisted writing and research;
- d) locate and evaluate material, using PALS, the Internet, and other sources;
- e) analyze and synthesize source material, making appropriate use of paraphrase, summary, quotation, and citation conventions;
- f) employ syntax and usage appropriate to academic writing and the professional world.
- g) employ syntax, usage and analytical techniques appropriate to academic disciplines and the professional world.

Artifacts that were assessed ranged from research-based essays to in-class writing activities reflecting one or several of these competencies. Unlike past methods of assessment, students assumed the role of co-assessor of their own work by supplementing it with an explanation on how their writing product reflected their writing process (i.e. the competencies).

This year's committee chose to change the evaluation methodology in three important ways: (1) course competencies were broken into a more holistic approach; (2) the committee conducted a "blind review" for this assessment; and (3) the assessment of student work was conducted online. This holistic approach centered on English instructors' concern for whether students were able to demonstrate each competency in a *developmental*, *foundational*, or *comprehensive* manner. This concern allowed the assessment team to better understand what areas in the curriculum were successful and what areas needed more attention. The committee felt this approach may be more effective at assessing the curriculum more effectively than traditional, product-based approaches which typically do not assess students' work across the entire course.

The committee conducted online blind reviews using external reviewers unaware of the students' work they were evaluating, except in the rare occasion when a student did not remove student, course, and instructor information. The competencies showing the highest percentages/competencies were students' ability to write papers with different purposes and of different lengths (competency b), students' ability to use computer-assisted writing and research

(competency c), and students' ability to use appropriate, professional and discipline-specific language and analytical techniques (competencies f & g).

Competencies receiving respectable percentages included students' ability to demonstrate various stages and of the writing process (competency a), students' ability to locate and evaluate sources (competency d), and students' analyses of source material (competency e). However, the data for competency (e) is somewhat misleading; students who analyzed their sources well may not have cited them adequately, implicating the following factors:

- 1) an inconsistency in the teaching of APA/MLA style;
- 2) an inconsistency in the evaluation of APA/MLA style;
- 3) the numerous styles of documentation available to ENG 101 instructors and students; and
- 4) an influx of automated citation machines

It is clear from this data that even more attention needs to be given to helping students with the research elements of the writing process. Further, this area of the composition curriculum has been an evolving problem for the last decade or more. The findings in the 2002 report noted seven common problems in the research essays of English 101 students, and six of the seven problems are directly related to source identification and use. The findings of the 2007 study indicate the persistence of the problems related to understanding and using source material in academic writing.

The 2002 report neither defines nor gives percentages for these problems, preventing a reliable comparative analysis of improvement. The number of students who presumably showed proficiency in 2002 (scoring either a six or a seven on an eight point scale) was 33 out of 50, or approximately 66 percent. Data from the 2007 project suggests the department has improved in teaching English 101 since 80.9 percent of students were deemed proficient.

Based on these findings, the 2007 committee makes three suggestions to improve student achievement in certain competencies and to measure and retain this achievement longitudinally:

- 1) The development of a two-semester, eight-credit composition sequence—the first semester focusing on the instruction of traditional writing methods and forms and the second semester emphasizing effective online researching and writing strategies. This approach will serve as a transition for students from the development of general writing skills to the development of discipline-specific researching and writing skills;
- 2) The creation of a one- or two-hour co-requisite course in information literacy to supplement Composition 101;
- 3) The adoption of more defined competencies used in this assessment project by English Department at Minnesota State University, Mankato. The committee believes these competencies will assist instructors and curriculum designers in helping students demonstrate necessary objectives, especially since the course is taught almost exclusively by teaching assistants and adjunct instructors.