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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
IRVINE

Writing Proficiency and Student Placement  
in Community College Composition Courses

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Education

by

Jane S. Nazzal

Dissertation Committee:  
Professor Emerita Carol Booth Olson, chair  
Assistant Professor Rachel B. Baker  
Professor Holly Hassel  
Associate Professor Di Xu

2020



## DEDICATION

*He leadeth me, O blessed thought!*

You are my rock and my fortress;  
for your name's sake you will lead me and guide me.

Psalm 31:3

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Dr. Mark Warschauer and Dr. Brandy Gatlin-Nash, for your valuable feedback and encouragement on my second year paper, which, as you said, turned out to be two papers, not one!

Dr. Huy Chung, whose continual support of me and of this work has been invaluable. I will miss my pop-ins to your office down the hall and the unfettered mentorship you've provided. I have learned so much from you. Your gentleness and humility will never leave me.

Thank you to the scholars I've worked with in the Pathway Project Lab—Dr. Rachel Stumpf, Dr. Lauren Godfrey, Dr. Jenell Krishnan, Dr. Vicky Chen, Undaraa Maamujav and Jacob Steiss--for your feedback, support, and collegiality throughout this experience. I have looked forward to our lab meetings and I am inspired by your work!

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Dr. Irene Malmgren, a compassionate leader and a wonderful mentor and friend—you are a true gem. I am glad for your generous kindness and for the ways you've supported me through this experience. You encouraged my ambitions from the beginning, and while with every step forward I trembled, you called me brave. Thank you.

To the faculty and students that participated in this study—this work was done with the hope that you and those like you will be able to benefit from more streamlined educational structures that allow for the success of students and the accomplishment of their educational goals. I am grateful for your willingness to contribute.

My mother, Randa and my father, Sami—my accomplishments are the fruit of your continual sacrifices, by which all five of your daughters were projected into the ranks of higher education. You have endowed me with an ethic of hard, honest work. I can never repay you.

My sisters, Drs. Rania & Julie, Janet & Ann, who enrich my life in so many ways—I am proud of who you are and who you are ever becoming.

JohnLuke and Adrian, my jewels. I am so blessed by you and forever grateful for the blessing it is to be your mother and your friend. You have filled my life with so many moments of joy and have lavished me with your unconditional love—I cannot capture in words an adequate expression of my love for you—I only know that it is deep, and long, and wide.

My love Hussam, a remarkable husband and father whose constant love, continual support, and practical help has made this work possible. In our 20 years of marriage, I have yet to experience the boundaries of your love toward me. This accomplishment is both mine and yours.

The living Christ, who has allowed me to recognize His invisible hand along this journey. In my moments of reflection—when I realize that the details in my life are lining up in ways that I know not I, nor anyone else could have planned—the veil between heaven and earth seems to thin, and I am certain of these things: that there is a grand purpose in life, and that in it, I am loved.

# CURRICULUM VITAE

JANE S. NAZZAL

## SCHOLARLY INTERESTS

---

Higher Education Student Persistence and Success, Academic Writing, Faculty Development, Community Colleges

## ACADEMIC PREPARATION

---

Ph.D.	Education, University of California, Irvine with specialization in Language, Literacy, & Technology and Educational Policy	2020
M.A.	Education, University of California, Irvine	2018
M.Ed.	Education, University of California, Los Angeles	2002
B.A.	Communication Studies, University of California, Los Angeles with emphasis in Mass Communications Honors: dean's honor list, provost's honor list, college honors, departmental honors Independent Research: "Cognitive Benefits of the Tutor Perspective"	1999

## CREDENTIALS AND CERTIFICATION

---

National Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning (CIRTL)

Scholar-Level Certification: Evidence-Based Teaching, Learning through Diversity Fall 2019

Division of Teaching Excellence and Innovation, Center for Engaged Instruction, University of California, Irvine

Certificate of Teaching Excellence: Advanced Training in Evidence-Based Pedagogy Fall 2019

Course Design Certificate Winter 2017

Nature Masterclasses, Scientific Writing and Publishing Certificate March 2018

Human Subjects Research Credential November 2017

Skills and Pedagogy for Online Teaching Certification, Mt. San Antonio College, Walnut, California May 2011, 2020

California Professional Clear Multiple Subject Teaching Credential June 2001  
with Cross-Cultural Language & Academic Development (CLAD) emphasis

## FELLOWSHIPS, HONORS, & AWARDS

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National Writing Project, Inland Area Writing Project, University of California, Riverside

Fellow, Advanced Leadership Institute 2016-present

Fellow, Inland Area Writing Project 2011-present

Selection for University of California, Davis Wheelhouse Center for Community College Leadership and Research Summer Retreat 2018

Selection for San Gabriel / Foothill Association of Community Colleges Mentorship Program 2015-2016

National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program

Honorable Mention: Science, Technology, Engineering, & Math (STEM) Education 2017  
"Effects of Contextualized Learning in Community College Basic Skills Math Courses"

## **PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

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### **Current Academic Appointment**

Faculty, Mt. San Antonio College, Walnut, California	5/12-present
Department of English, Literature & Journalism. Courses Taught: ENGLISH 1A: Freshman Composition, ENGLISH 80: Writing Support	
Learning Assistance Department. Courses Taught: LERN 81: Improving Writing Skills, LERN 49: Basic College Mathematics	2007 – 2018
<b>College Service</b>	
American Association of Community Colleges, Pathways Initiative Workgroup member	2015-2017
Author's Chair Night Biannual student event, Organizer, Editor, Student Recruiter	2012- 2016
Student Equity Committee, Faculty Representative	2013-2016
Professional Development Council, Faculty Representative	2013-2016
Faculty Professional Development Committee, Member	2014-2016

### **Other Professional Teaching Experience**

Adjunct Faculty, Mt. San Antonio College, Walnut, California	2/06-5/12
Instructor, English as a Second Language (ESL) & Family Literacy Coach	8/04-7/07
Santa Ana College School of Continuing Education, Santa Ana, California	
Fourth Grade Teacher, Horace Mann Elementary School, Anaheim, California	6/02-6/03
Fifth Grade Teacher & GATE Program Lead Teacher, 99 <sup>th</sup> Street Accelerated School, Los Angeles, CA	8/01-6/02

### **Selected Work Experience**

University of California Analytical Writing Placement Exam (AWPE) Reader	2018, 2019
Mt. San Antonio College, Walnut, California	
Faculty Reader, College Writing Placement Exam	2012-2014
Trainer of Faculty, MoodleRooms Online Learning Management System	April-Sept 2012
Pearson Longman Educational Publishers	8/06-8/07
Editor & Text Writer, Side by Side ESL textbook	
Textbook Consultant, Adult and Higher Learning ESL	
University of California, Los Angeles	
Academic Advancement Program, University of Los Angeles, California	
Supervisor of Lab, Earth and Space Science & Computer Programming	10/97-6/99
Academic Tutor, Courses: Atmospheric Sciences 2: Weather Systems	9/96-6/99
Atmospheric Sciences 3: Introduction to the Atmospheric Environment	
Extramural Programs & Opportunities Center	
Director of Student Placement, Internships in Washington D.C.	Spring 1998
Amnesty International, USA, Washington, D.C	
Assistant to the Director of Media & Communications	Spring 1998
Pasadena Civic Auditorium & Convention Center, Pasadena, California	
Supervisor of Staff	5/93-7/98

## **RESEARCH AND SCHOLARLY ACTIVITIES**

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### **Peer Reviewed Journal Publications**

- Nazzal, J.S.**, Olson, C.B., Chung, H.Q. (under review) “Post-Reform Placement and Writing Proficiency in Community College Transfer-Level Composition Courses.”
- Nazzal, J.S.**, Olson, C.B., Chung, H.Q. (2020) “Differences in Analytical Text-Based Writing Across Four Levels of Community College Composition Courses.” *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*. Vol. 47, No. 3. pp.263-296. National Council of Teachers of English.
- Nazzal, J.S.**, Olson, C.B., Chung, H.Q. (2019) “Writing Proficiency and Student Placement in Community College Composition Courses.” *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*. Vol. 46, No .4 pp. 317-346. National Council of Teachers of English
- Nazzal, J.S.**, (in preparation) “Faculty Perspectives on Community College Placement Reform.”
- Nazzal, J.S.** (Revise and Resubmit) “e-Portfolios, Writing, and the Success and Persistence of Underprepared Community College Writers.” *International Journal of e-Portfolios*.

### **Invited Book Chapters**

- Nazzal, J.S.**, (2020) Community College Students at the Center: Supporting the Uptake of Academic Discourse in the First Year Composition Classroom, In Moe, Peter and Waite, Stacey (Eds.) *Inventing the Discipline: Student Work in Composition Studies*. Working and Writing for Change Series, Parlor Press.
- Olson, C.B., Chen, V., Krishnan, J., **Nazzal, J.S.**, (2018). Helping English Learners Navigate the Challenges of Academic Writing, In D. Basaraba, D. Baker, & Richards-Tutor, C. (Eds.) *Second Language Acquisition: Methods, Perspectives and Challenges*. Nova Science Publishing.

### **Research Presentations**

- Nazzal, J.S.** (July 2021) *Differences in Analytical Text-Based Writing Across Four Levels of Community College Composition Courses*. Paper to be presented at the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) National Conference, Reno, Nevada.
- Nazzal, J.S.** Hancock, N., Reid, C. (March 2020) *Placement Ideologies and Enacted Reform: Paper and panel* accepted for presentation at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Annual Convention, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
- Nazzal, J.S.** (March 2020) *Faculty Perspectives on Community College Placement Reform*. Poster accepted at Two Year College English Association (TYCA) National Conference, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
- Nazzal, J.S.** (April 2019) *Writing Proficiency and Student Placement in Community College Composition Courses*. Paper presented at American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting, Toronto, Canada.
- Nazzal, J.S.** (March 2019) *Writing Proficiency and Student Placement in Community College Composition Courses*. Paper presented at Two Year College English Association (TYCA) First Annual National Conference, Pittsburg, Pennsylvania.
- Nazzal, J.S.** (March 2019) *Differences in Analytical Text-Based Writing Across Four Levels of Community College Composition Courses*. Paper presented at the Association for Public Policy and Management (APPAM) Regional Conference. University of California, Irvine.
- Nazzal, J.S.** (July 2018) *Writing Proficiency and Student Placement in Community College Composition Courses*. Paper presented at College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Regional Conference, Denver, Colorado.

**Nazzal, J.S.** (November 2018) *Community College Writers: Differences in Text-Based Analytical Writing Across Four Levels of Composition Course*. Poster accepted for presentation at the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Annual Convention, Houston Texas.

**Nazzal, J.S.** (June 2018) *Writing Proficiency and Student Placement in Community College Composition Courses*. Paper presented at the Community College Studies Conference. University of California, Los Angeles.

**Nazzal, J.S.** (March 2018) *Community College Writers: Differences in Text-Based Analytical Writing Across Four Levels of Composition Courses*. Poster presented at the Association for Public Policy and Management (APPAM) Regional Conference. Claremont Graduate University, California.

### **Service to the Profession**

Two Year College English Association (TYCA) Task Force on Reading, member	2020
Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Executive Board Nominee	2020
2021 Convention Proposal Reviewer (Stage 1)	2020

### **University Service**

Representative to Faculty, Associated Doctoral Students in Education, UC Irvine School of Education	2017-2019
Research Presentation Evaluator: Humanities & Social Sciences UCLA Undergraduate Research Week	2017
Mentor, UCLA Alumni Mentor Program	2014

## **PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES**

---

### **Invited Presentations**

**Nazzal, J.S.** (February 2017) *Supporting Students Through Multiple Revisions* presented at the Inland Area Writing Project Annual Conference. University of California, Riverside.

**Nazzal, J.S.** (January 2017) *Social Justice in the Classroom* presented at the Universal Design for Learning Conference. Mt. San Antonio College, Walnut, California.

**Nazzal, J.S.** (April 2016) *Writing as a Process* presented at the Inland Area Writing Project Annual Conference. University of California, Riverside.

**Nazzal, J.S.** (May 2015) *Writing Powerful Paragraphs* presented at the ESL Career Conference. Mt. San Antonio College, Walnut, California.

**Nazzal, J.S.** (February 2012) *Developing Confident Writers* presented at the Inland Area Writing Project Annual Conference. University of California, Riverside.

**Nazzal, J.S.** (May 2012) *Writing a Great Resume* presented at the ESL Career Conference. Mt. San Antonio College, Walnut, California.

**Nazzal, J.S.** (May 2012) *Stress and Life Balance* presented as a Professional and Organizational Development Workshop. Mt. San Antonio College, Walnut, California.

**Nazzal, J.S.** (July 2011) *The Writing Process, Rubrics & the Five Paragraph Essay* presented at the Inland Area Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute. University of California, Riverside.

**Nazzal, J.S.** (April 2011) *Writing Powerful Paragraphs* presented at the ESL Career Conference. Mt. San Antonio College, Walnut, California.

**Nazzal, J.S.** (August 2005) *Strategies for Student Motivation and Retention* presented as a Faculty Development Workshop. Santa Ana College, Santa Ana, California.

**Nazzal, J.S.** (April 2005) *Activities for Increasing Language Acquisition in the ESL & Family Literacy Classroom* presented at the 12<sup>th</sup> Annual California Literacy Conference. Long Beach, California.

### **Selected Professional Development**

National Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning (CIRTL) Online Learning and Teaching	July 2020
University of California, Davis Wheelhouse Center for Community College Leadership and Research Summer Research Retreat	2018
San Gabriel / Foothill Association of Community Colleges Mentorship Program Mentored by Dean of Library & Distance Education at Pasadena City College	2015 -2016
Extensive Courses, Mt. San Antonio College, Walnut, CA Universal Design for Learning: Social Justice in the Classroom	January 2017
On Course Student Success	February 2014
Accommodating Students with Disabilities in the Classroom	June 19-Aug 11, 2012
Writer's Studio, University of California, Los Angeles	Winter 201 & 2016

### **PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS**

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American Educational Research Association (AERA), Member Divisions C: Learning and Instruction; J: Postsecondary Education; L: Educational Policy and Politics	2017-present
Association for Public Policy Analysis & Management (APPAM), Member	2018-2019
National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), Member	2017-present
Two-Year College English Association (TYCA), Member	2019-present
National Writing Project (NWP), Fellow	2011-present
California Association of Teachers of English (CATE), Member	2018-present
Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA), Member	2019-present

# DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Writing Proficiency and Student Placement into  
Community College Composition Courses

By

Jane S. Nazzal

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Irvine, 2020

Professor Emerita Carol Booth Olson, Chair

Writing is a critical skill that can impact students' academic and economic trajectories, and introductory college writing courses are a gateway to students' academic success. However, recent data shows that community college students who would have been successful in college-level courses have often been placed by standardized tests into long sequences of pre-collegiate courses, and that most of these students do not persist to transfer-level coursework. While nation-wide reform efforts to improve the persistence and success of community college students aim to eliminate placement exams and pre-collegiate course sequences and to place students directly into the transfer-level composition course, concerns persist about the support of students' long-term success resulting in the attainment of their postsecondary degrees. Such concerns motivate the three studies that comprise this dissertation.

A writing assessment was administered to 755 students at an institution in California before and after the implementation of major reform. First, I investigated whether three levels of courses that precede the college level course are warranted and examined the relationship between high

school GPA (HSGPA) and students' level of writing proficiency. I found that student writing was measurably different in the four course levels, but that not all differences were statistically significant. Additionally, I found HSGPA to be weakly correlated with students' level of writing proficiency. Next, I explored students' writing and identified features that I used to examine differences in students' writing across the course levels. Significant differences were found in the frequency of certain features between college-level and precollegiate students. Finally, after structural changes resulted in nearly all students placing into one of two versions of the college-level course, I examined differences in students' HSGPA, writing score, and course grades between the two course types. I found that students' writing did not differ significantly, that students' HSGPA and writing proficiency levels are weakly correlated, and that students of all proficiency levels had high pass rates. Results of this dissertation can help to guide stakeholders in supporting the success of community college students in composition courses and beyond to the achievement of their college degrees.



## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

College writing courses are crucial to overall academic success (Kassner & Wardle; Troia). They are the place where students learn to participate as members of academic discourse communities and are able to develop the advanced literacy skills needed to thrive in other courses across the disciplines (Duff; Hassel & Giordano). Additionally, they are often positioned within institutions as prerequisites for courses in other disciplines. Although community colleges are often open access institutions, welcoming all who choose to attend, unless a student can take and pass the transfer-level English class, forward movement at the college can be impeded. As such, these courses function as gateways to full college participation. Furthermore, they are required for attainment of the associate degree and transfer to a four-year college.

Despite the importance of passing the transfer-level English course, less than half (44%) of students who start out in precollegiate writing courses in community colleges accomplish this goal (Mejia, et al.). At some colleges, the transfer-level course is preceded by up to three precollegiate courses. For students who are placed into the lower-level writing courses, this can translate to at least a year of coursework before entry into the transfer-level class and even longer if enrollment in the subsequent course is unavailable. Furthermore, recent investigations reveal that the lower students place into the pre-collegiate course sequence, the less likely they are to persist to transfer-level courses and go on to attain a degree (Dominick, et al.). This can have steep economic impacts on students since unemployment rates drop and median income earnings rise with each level of increase in education (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics) and because those who do not attain at least an associate degree or a certificate will have difficulty supporting a family above the poverty line (Smith and Wertlieb). This is especially concerning for community college students, who are disproportionately from low income, first-generation

college and historically underrepresented backgrounds in higher education (NCES). For such reasons, these institutions are grounds that are ripe with potential for positive impact in the important work of equity.

Widespread reform is currently underway across the nation with initiatives in several states to improve the persistence and completion rates of community college students. Reform efforts have taken many forms, including: a movement to minimize, or to even eliminate precollegiate course sequences; movement away from high-stakes tests as mechanisms for course placement; movement toward directed self-placement of students into courses using high school GPA; and cut off scores/averages aimed to place students directly into college-level composition courses with co-requisite support courses as needed (Hassel & Giordano).

In California, where community colleges constitute the largest system of higher education in the nation (serving 2.1 million students) (CCCCO), legislation has rapidly and drastically expanded the scope of reform throughout the state's 114 institutions. Assembly Bill 705 (AB705), in effect since the fall of 2019 mandates a shift in the methods for placement of students into courses, eliminating the use of standardized tests and moving to the use of high school records, including courses taken, grades, and GPAs (Rodriguez). Colleges will be required to make placement recommendations to students that ensure "optimized opportunities" for students to complete transfer level coursework within a year and will not be allowed to place students into precollegiate courses unless they are "highly unlikely to succeed without them." (Hope, p. 1)

However, questions persist among stakeholders about how to determine appropriate student placement, the type of support needed for students in the initial college-level composition courses, and whether or not popular reform efforts are improving students' chances

for success. In order to avoid overly broad solutions that can marginalize some students and overwhelm faculty, additional insight is needed into how structural changes affect student progress, what the criteria should be for deciding which students need more support in academic writing, and how students can best be supported to succeed. Through the studies conducted as part of this dissertation, I aim to provide empirical data that can help to guide decisions and policies that support the success of community college students in composition courses and beyond to the achievement of their degrees.

### **The Dissertation**

This dissertation consists of three studies that address the issue of writing proficiency and appropriate placement of students into community college composition courses. The studies took place at one of the largest single-campus community colleges in California, enrolling approximately 50,000 students. The institution is designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), with a student population that is primarily Hispanic (55%) and Asian (19%). Most students attend the college part-time and three quarters receive financial aid. Participants are comprised of 755 students and 14 faculty involved over a two-year time span beginning in the spring of 2017 through the fall of 2019.

The studies are situated in the present context of widespread reform efforts in community colleges across the nation that aim to expedite the accomplishment of students' goals of certificate and degree attainment and/or transfer to four-year institutions. The college was an early adopter of reform among community colleges in California, and these studies take place just before and after the implementation of structural and curricular changes that affected the placement of students into composition courses. This included a major restructuring of

courses and alteration of criteria by which students were placed into courses. The purpose of this research is to provide insight about the impact of reform efforts to educators, administrators, researchers and policymakers that can help to guide decisions affecting the placement of students into community college composition courses in order to best support students in achieving their academic goals.

The first round of data collection occurred in the spring and summer of 2017 while there were plans for major reform affecting the placement of students into courses at the college that had not yet taken place. A faculty-created and holistically-scored writing assessment was used to place students at the college into one of four composition course options: one of three pre-collegiate course levels or the college-level composition course. Studies 1 and 2 (presented in chapters 2 and 3) occurred during this time.

The second round of data collection occurred after reform efforts were implemented, in the spring and fall of 2019. Reform changes include a major restructuring of courses and a shift in the criteria by which students were placed into courses. The precollegiate course sequence was nearly eliminated and the writing placement exam was replaced by an online questionnaire. Based on the results of the questionnaire, students received a recommendation to self-place into one of two versions of the college-level composition course— one either with or without a concurrent support course. This guidance was based primarily on high school records, including high school GPA and courses taken. Study 3, presented in chapter 4, takes place in this post-reform context.

The studies are sequential and related: In the first study, I tested the differences in average writing scores of students across four levels of composition courses; next, I further explored those differences in the second study by examining the frequency of specific writing

features exhibited in student papers and compared them across the four course levels; in the third and final study, I utilized the same writing assessment used in the first two investigations to examine the average writing scores of students in two versions of the college-level composition course after the implementation of placement policy reform, which included significant structural changes to the composition course sequence and shifted the criteria for placement into those courses. I will describe each of the studies in greater detail in the following paragraphs.

In Study 1, the research questions posed were motivated by my knowledge of upcoming reform at the college that would compel the revision of the writing course sequence and the method for placement of students. I also knew that there were plans for high school records to be used as the primary measure for student placement. In order to find whether or not the four levels of composition courses at the college were warranted and to test if HSGPA is a good measure for the placement of students into composition courses, I posed the following research questions:

- 1) How do students placed in four levels of composition courses differ in their academic writing performance? And
- 2) What relationship is there, if any, between students' course level (as determined by the college writing placement exam), their high school GPA, and their academic writing performance (as measured by the writing assessment instrument used in this study)?

The results of the study indicate that the college writing placement exam was effective in identifying students with measurably different levels of writing proficiency, but that significant differences occurred only between student writing in the first level precollegiate course and the college-level course. This implies that four levels of courses were not needed in

order to address varying student needs, but that the widespread movement toward eliminating all precollegiate course levels might further disadvantage students who are already most disadvantaged in terms of writing proficiency by placing them directly into the college-level course. I also found that high school GPA, which institutions are relying heavily upon for placement of students into courses, is weakly correlated with course level and with level of writing proficiency. These results can inform policy decisions that can lead to effective placement of students into writing courses.

For Study 2, I took a closer look into students' writing to find, generally, what writing moves students made to meet the demands of the prompt. I then sought to find with what frequency students in the various course levels employed these features in their writing and if the frequency in which they used the features differed between course levels. While knowing that upcoming reform would result in most students placing into the college-level course, I sought to gain specific information that could be used to support students. To investigate, I asked:

- 1) To what extent does the writing of students who are classified as “underprepared” differ from that of students who are considered “college-level” writers? and
- 2) In which features of writing are there the most pronounced differences between students in the various course levels?

Using the same dataset collected in the first study, I explored qualitative differences in the writing of students placed into the four levels of composition courses. Nine writing features were inductively identified and the frequency of each feature was compared across course levels. Additionally, distinctive features of high-scoring papers were identified. The results of this study led to the identification of specific writing features that can help to inform curriculum

and to develop targeted instruction that can support all students in the college-level composition course after reform efforts take place, but especially students such as those who were considered underprepared under the previous placement policy.

Study 3 occurred after structural changes resulted in the near elimination of precollegiate courses, the elimination of the college writing placement exam (except for students who do not have recent high school records) and two versions of the college-level course for placement. In order to find if students who need the most writing support were, by the new placement method, positioning themselves to receive it and if the implementation of the reform has improved students' chances for achievement of their educational goals, I asked:

- 1) What differences might exist in students' writing proficiency, high school GPAs, and final course grades between students who place themselves in the stand-alone college-level course (CL) and those who place themselves into the same course with a concurrent support course (CL+S)?, and
- 2) What is the relationship between students' HSGPA, their writing proficiency and their final course grade?

To investigate, I examined differences in writing assessment scores, self-reported high school GPA, and final course grades between students who self-placed into the stand-alone college-level course and those who placed into the course version with the concurrent support course. I found that: students in the two groups do not differ significantly in their writing proficiency as measured by the assessment in this study; students are enrolled into the two course types by measurably differing HSGPAs, but HSGPA is unrelated to their measured levels of writing proficiency and; differences in students' final course grades between the two course types are insignificant.



The dissertation is submitted under the three-article dissertation option in UCI's School of Education and will adhere to the following structure: presentation of the full manuscripts for the first study in Chapter 2 and the second study in Chapter 3, which have been published, respectively, in the May 2019 and March 2020 issues of the National Council of Teachers of English journal, *Teaching English in the Two Year College*. The complete manuscripts and reference lists for these two studies are formatted in MLA, as required by the targeted journal. The appendices from both of these manuscripts have been extracted and appear at the end of this document. The third and final study is in preparation for submission to a journal and is presented in Chapter 4. For consistency throughout this document, it is also formatted in MLA.

## **Review of Literature**

In this section, I present an abbreviated review of the literature that pertains to the three studies. The review is centered around topics such as: community colleges as a unique postsecondary educational option, the origins of and controversy that surrounds developmental education, institutional challenges and reform, appropriate student placement and reform challenges, and the theoretical concepts that frame the study about differences between experienced and inexperienced writers. A more in-depth review is provided in the introduction sections of each of chapters 2-4.

### *Community Colleges: A Unique Postsecondary Educational Option*

As open access institutions that admit all who apply, community colleges are an attractive educational option; they provide educational opportunity that is affordable, local, and offered at flexible hours, enabling students to maintain their job schedules. More than half of

the nation's undergraduates enroll in these two-year institutions each year (Bailey). These students come from a wide range of backgrounds and attend for a variety of reasons, including academic goals such as attainment of the associate degree and/or transfer to a university, and career and technical certification. However, this all-encompassing acceptance policy gives rise to one of the most pressing challenges faced by these institutions—the need to uphold college-level academic standards while serving a broadly diverse student body (Hassel and Giordano).

### *Institutional Challenges and Reform*

Recent research shows that most students in community colleges across the nation are considered underprepared and are placed into developmental, or pre-collegiate courses in writing and math (Bailey, et al.) and studies show that most students who enroll in these courses do not persist to transfer-level work. Fewer than 40 percent of these undergraduates will complete a degree within six years, despite the stated aims of most to earn a bachelor's degree or above (Barnett and Reddy; Bailey, et al.; Mejia, et al.; Hern and Snell; Burdman; Bueschel). There is a growing consensus based on empirical research that lengthy pre-collegiate course sequences hinder student progress toward degree completion and that standardized placement tests can seriously misplace students. This has resulted in a widespread movement away from the use of standardized exams for placement and an effort to minimize, or to even altogether eliminate precollegiate course sequences with the aim to place students directly into transfer-level composition courses (Hassel and Giordano). As such changes take place, consideration of the history of precollegiate coursework, or developmental education, is important in understanding the current presence of such courses in the landscape of two-year postsecondary institutions.

## *Developmental Education: Origins and Controversy*

Developmental, or precollegiate courses were designed to prepare students for college-level work, and have historically provided students who may not have had the opportunity to go to college access to postsecondary institutions. However, they have been consistently challenged by some scholars who have contended that developmental courses help to perpetuate an unequal class system, social divisions and institutional insularity (Bahr; Bartholome; Rose; Scott; Troyka). Further, some believe that the courses cost too much, since many students take these courses without passing them (Roueche and Waiwaiole). Proponents of developmental education maintain that such courses are necessary and that placing students into college-level courses for which they are unprepared is not only unhelpful, but also harmful (Lunsford). They argue that basic writing courses benefit students and the academy, ensuring the inclusion of a broader range of students (Collins; Greenberg) and that the cost of such courses is relatively small when compared to other costs in higher education (Saxon and Hu). Despite the ongoing debates, a recent shift in focus from student access to student success and completion has resulted in the generation of data that question the effectiveness of these courses (Boylan; Arendale). Whereas success was previously defined by the number of underprepared students that were served (Carafella), the definition has shifted to include rates of course completion, the attainment of degrees and certificates, and transfer to four-year institutions. The resulting paradigm has placed greater emphasis and importance on initial placement of students into courses.

### *Appropriate Student Placement and Reform Challenges*

The issue of student placement is central to current reform efforts. Placement exams act as gatekeepers to college-level coursework, determining student readiness and the starting point for students within pre-collegiate course sequences if they are considered unready. The determination of college readiness affects not only access, but student persistence and the likelihood of transfer and degree attainment (Dominick, et al.), which can have steep economic impacts on students. Both under-placement and over-placement are problematic and can unnecessarily complicate students' path toward achievement. A growing body of evidence demonstrates the severe limitations of standardized placement exams; widely used tests such as ACCUPLACER and COMPASS seriously misplace students and test scores poorly correlate with students' ultimate success in college (Belfield and Crosta; Barnett and Reddy; Hassel and Giordano; Scott-Clayton). A number of studies show that between one third to one half of students placed by standardized tests into pre-collegiate coursework would have been successful in college-level courses, and that such exams are inadequate for distinguishing various student needs for support (Belfield and Crosta; Barnett and Reddy; Hassel and Giordano; Scott-Clayton).

Instead of exams, several colleges are moving in the direction of using directed self-placement based on high school records, which allows students agency in the placement process and has been found to lead to much higher enrollment rates in introductory college-level courses than standardized placement exams. These changes clearly save students time and money that would be spent while progressing through the precollegiate course sequences, but they also present new challenges. Directed self-placement can also lead to lower course pass rates (Hu, et al.; Hassel, et.al.) and writing scholars argue that students do not have sufficient information

and lack perspective upon which to base their placement decisions (Schendel & O'Neill). Furthermore, students are directed to place themselves primarily based on high school records, which presents concerns among some stakeholders due to the lack of comparability across high schools in qualities such as course rigor, grading standards, and availability of highly qualified teachers and economic resources (Camara & Michaelides; Sackett, et al.). Additionally, writing studies scholars have found that students produce meager amounts of writing in high schools, much of which is low in quality (Applebee and Langer; Kiuahara, et al.). Although previous studies suggest that assessment and placement instruments and policies should match students more precisely with academic interventions that meet their needs (Hughes & Scott-Clayton; Edgecombe), directed self-placement using high school records alone may be an insufficient measure for doing so.

### *Differences between Experienced and Inexperienced writers*

Study 2 is informed by cognitive research in the field of composition studies, particularly derived from research that is focused on differences between the writing and writing processes of minimally experienced writers and their more experienced counterparts. The theoretical models of writing that form the basis for current understanding of differences between experienced and inexperienced writers employ various terms to describe similar dichotomous observations of writer processes: novice vs. expert, writer-based prose vs. reader-based prose, and knowledge-telling vs. knowledge-transformation (Sommers; Flower; Scardamalia & Bereiter). Each of these dichotomies reflects what writers do on both ends of the spectrum of experience. Inexperienced writers are novices; they produce writer-based prose that neglects to consider the reader and they generate text without an overall plan or goal. More

experienced writers become experts; they take the reader into consideration with reader-based prose and transform knowledge by producing their own new ideas. These concepts can help both educators and students anticipate changes that take place as novice writers become more proficient. In these models, the differences between experienced and inexperienced writers lie mainly in their differing views of writing objectives, revision, and sense of audience. These differences are discussed in greater detail in chapter 3.

Further, scholars highlight the need for focused teaching at the postsecondary level since writing continues to present a great challenge for a large number of students after high school (MacArthur & Philippakos; Perin). Exposure to and instruction in rhetorical moves of academic discourse employed by more proficient writers can help to facilitate the success of students who are less proficient as they face challenging college-level coursework.

The three studies presented in the following chapters provide information about how to support students in academic writing through explicit instruction as well as insight about how placement policies can better position students to receive the support they need while promoting progress toward the attainment of their educational goals.

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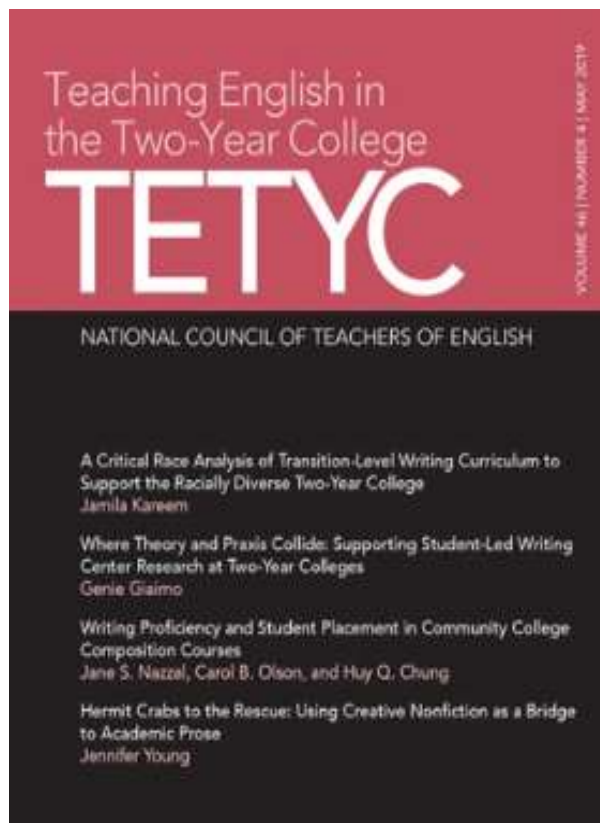
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## CHAPTER 2

### Writing Proficiency and Student Placement in Community College Composition Courses

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## **Abstract**

Despite national efforts to accelerate students through pre-collegiate writing course sequences to transfer-level composition, questions persist regarding appropriate placement and the support needed for students to succeed. An analytical text-based writing assessment was administered to students across four levels of composition courses at a California community college. Differences in student writing scores between course levels and the relationship between writing score, course level, and high school GPA were examined. Key findings include: 1) significant differences in average scores between the first pre-collegiate course and other courses in the sequence and 2) weak relationships between course level and high school GPA and assessment scores and high school GPA.

*Keywords:* Academic Writing, Writing Proficiency, Placement Policy, Community College Reform, Acceleration, Precollegiate / Developmental Courses

## Introduction

Writing has long been defined as a “central academic process” (Emig 127). It is closely tethered to thinking and learning and is intricately intertwined with the aims of research, education and scholarship. For these reasons, writing courses are a gateway to college success in both their content and context. In their content, they are crucial to students’ academic achievement (Kassner and Wardle; Troia; Rose; Emig) since they are the place where students learn to participate as members of academic discourse communities and are able to develop the advanced literacy skills needed to thrive in other courses across the disciplines (Duff; Hassel and Giordano). These courses are also situated contextually in institutions in a way that affects overall academic success and are often prerequisites for courses in other disciplines. Although community colleges are open access institutions, welcoming all who choose to attend, unless a student can take and pass the transfer-level English class, forward movement at the college can be impeded. As such, these courses function as gateways to full college participation. Furthermore, they are required for attainment of the associate degree and transfer to four-year colleges.

Despite the importance of passing the transfer-level English course, less than half (44%) of students who start out in pre-collegiate writing courses in community colleges accomplish this goal (Mejia, et al.). At some institutions, the transfer-level course is preceded by as many as three pre-collegiate courses. For students who are placed into the lower-level writing courses, this can translate to at least a year of coursework before entry into the transfer-level class and even longer if enrollment in the subsequent course is unavailable. Furthermore, investigations

reveal that the lower students place in these pre-collegiate course sequences, the less likely they are to persist to transfer-level courses and go on to attain a degree (Dominick, et al.).

Widespread reform is currently underway across the country with initiatives in several states to improve the persistence and completion rates of community college students. Reform efforts have taken many forms, including: a movement to minimize, or to even eliminate pre-collegiate course sequences; movement away from standardized tests as mechanisms for course placement; movement toward directed self-placement of students into courses using high school records and GPA; and GPA cut offs aimed to place students directly into college-level composition courses with co-requisite support courses as needed (Hassel and Giordano).

In California, where community colleges constitute the largest system of higher education in the nation (serving 2.1 million students) (CCCCO), recently passed legislation will rapidly and drastically expand the scope of reform throughout the state's 114 institutions. Assembly Bill 705, which resulted from a lawsuit over the disproportionate placement of Latino students into pre-collegiate courses (ASCCC), mandates that specific reform be implemented statewide by the fall of 2019. The new law decrees a shift in the methods for placement of students into courses, eliminating the use of standardized tests and moving to the use of high school records, including courses taken, grades, and GPAs (Rodriguez). Colleges will be required to make placement recommendations to students that ensure "optimized opportunities" for students to complete transfer level coursework within a year and will not be allowed to place students into precollegiate courses unless they are "highly unlikely to succeed without them." (Hope 1)

In the face of such changes, questions persist about appropriate student placement and the type of support needed for both students in the initial college-level composition courses and



the faculty that teach them. In order to avoid overly broad solutions that can marginalize some students and overwhelm faculty, additional insight is needed about how structural changes affect student progress and what the criteria should be for deciding which students need more support.

Against the backdrop of extensive reform, the purpose of this study is to gain information about the level of writing proficiency of students who have been placed into various course levels under a specific placement policy. In the interest of knowing if the placement process at the college in this study, which results in students placed into four distinct levels of composition courses is justified, we ask: *How do students placed in four levels of composition courses differ in their academic writing performance on an analytical, text-based essay?* Furthermore, to examine whether high school GPA is a good indicator of student placement level and/or student writing proficiency, the next point of inquiry is: *What relationship is there, if any, between students' course level, their academic writing performance and their high school GPA?* This information can help to clarify the often “blurry” border between college-ready and underprepared students (Hassel and Giordano 58) and to inform appropriate placement under differing placement policies.

### **Community Colleges: A Unique Postsecondary Educational Option**

Community colleges are home to more than half of the nation's undergraduates each year (Bailey). In both their history and mission, these institutions uphold an “open access” policy, welcoming all who seek to further their education and training. In so doing, they are an attractive educational option; they forego the sometimes-stringent admissions requirements of four-year institutions and provide educational opportunity that is affordable, (about a third of

the cost of four-year institutions) local, and offered at flexible hours, enabling students to maintain their job schedules. Thus, they appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds who attend for a variety of reasons, including academic goals such as attainment of the associate degree and/or transfer to a university, and career and technical certification. However, this all-encompassing acceptance policy gives rise to challenges, the most pressing of which is the need to uphold college-level academic standards while serving a broadly diverse student body (Hassel and Giordano).

### **Institutional Challenges and Reform**

Recent research shows that most students in community colleges across the nation are considered underprepared and are placed into developmental, or pre-collegiate courses in writing and math (Bailey, et al.). This is increasingly so, since many four-year institutions are eliminating pre-collegiate coursework and assigning the responsibility exclusively to community colleges (Perin). Moreover, studies show that most students who enroll in precollegiate courses do not persist to transfer-level work, and fewer than 40 percent of these undergraduates will complete a degree within six years, despite the stated aims of most to earn a bachelor's degree or above (Barnett and Reddy; Bailey, et al.; Mejia, et al.; Hern and Snell; Burdman; Bueschel). However, lack of skill or preparation is not the only explanation for the problem; there is a growing consensus based on empirical research that lengthy pre-collegiate course sequences hinder student progress toward degree completion and that standardized placement tests can seriously misplace students. This has resulted in a widespread movement away from the use of standardized exams for placement and an effort to minimize, or to even altogether eliminate precollegiate course sequences with the aim to place students directly into

transfer-level composition courses (Hassel and Giordano). As such changes take place, consideration of the history of precollegiate coursework, or developmental education, is important in understanding the current presence of such courses in the landscape of two-year postsecondary institutions.

### **Developmental Education: Origins and Controversy**

Designed to prepare students for college-level work, developmental education is not a recently established idea. Underprepared students have been served in American higher education institutions since their inception (Cafarella; Brier). It was not until the early 1980s, however, that the field was recognized as its own discipline; it began to be included in national research, established a professional journal, and even initiated doctoral programs (Carafella). Students served by developmental education are a diverse population that includes first-generation college students, people of color, speakers of more than one language, refugees and immigrants, older learners, former members of the military, those who experienced interrupted high school educations for various reasons, and people with learning or other disabilities (Duttagupta and Miller). Although developmental education has historically provided an avenue that allowed students who may not have had the opportunity to go to college access to postsecondary institutions, its concept has been controversial and consistently challenged by some scholars (Bahr; Bartholome; Scott; Rose; Troyka).

Those who argue against developmental education have been motivated by various interests. Some, concerned with student equity, have contended that developmental courses help to perpetuate an unequal class system, social divisions and institutional insularity (Bartholome; Rose). Others express concern about the quality of education students receive and assert that

developmental education contributes to fragmented education, the marginalization of students' literacies and to a limiting of students' abilities to grow toward intellectual autonomy (Rose; Troyka; Scott). Much of the argument is focused on the cost of the courses, reported to be between 1.9 and 2.4 billion dollars annually (Roueche and Waiwaiole). The large number of students that place into developmental courses and do not pass them results in the need for students to repeat the courses and for an increase in course offerings (Carafella). Some have argued that taxpayers are paying repeatedly for students to learn the same material since the content of developmental courses in math, reading and English are previously covered in K-12 education (Bahr).

Proponents of developmental education have fought hard against these criticisms. Many scholars maintain that such courses are necessary and that placing students into college-level courses for which they are unprepared is not only unhelpful, but also harmful (Lunsford). Others argue the issue of social justice—that basic writing courses benefit students and the academy, ensuring the inclusion of a broader range of students (Collins; Greenberg). They believe that if these courses are eliminated, the nation's institutions of higher education will return to the propagation of elitism (Greenberg). Still others highlight the need for improved funding for basic writing classes rather than a marginalization of basic writing faculty, students, and courses. They argue that the instruction of basic skills should be defined as educational enrichment rather than as remedial and advocate for students in developmental education courses to be seen as authentic members of their academic communities (Bernstein). They believe the cost of such courses is relatively small (less than 10%, and in many states, less than 2%) when compared to other costs in higher education (Saxon and Boylan).

Despite the ongoing debates, a recent shift in focus from student access to student success and completion has resulted in the generation of data that question the effectiveness of developmental, or pre-collegiate courses (Boylan; Arendale). Whereas success was previously defined by the number of underprepared students that were served (Carafella), the definition has shifted to include rates of course completion, the attainment of degrees and certificates, and transfer to four-year institutions. The resulting paradigm has placed greater emphasis and importance on initial placement of students into courses.

### **Appropriate Student Placement**

Central to current reform efforts is the issue of student placement. Community college students are required to take and pass transfer-level courses in order to attain the associate degree and also for admission to four-year institutions conferring bachelor's degrees. However, the ways institutions determine college readiness and the placement of students into various course levels are some of the most "complex and crucial issues affecting access to higher education" (Hassel and Giordano 62). The determination of college readiness affects not only access, but student persistence and the likelihood of transfer and degree attainment (Dominick, et al.), which can have steep economic impacts on students since unemployment rates drop and median income earnings rise with each level of increase in education (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics).<sup>1</sup> Students who do not attain at least an associate degree or a certificate will have difficulty supporting a family above the poverty line (Smith and Wertlieb).

Placement exams act as gatekeepers to college-level coursework, determining student readiness and the starting point for students within pre-collegiate course sequences if they are

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<sup>1</sup> Compared to high school graduates, those with an associate degree earn 12% greater income and those with a bachelor's degree earn 39% more.

considered unready. Initial placement is a critical factor; the overplacement of students into courses for which they are not ready can lead to discouragement, failure, and the belief that college is not for them. Conversely, underplacement into courses that are not needed can result in frustration and delay in reaching educational goals. In addition, students incur the cost of the courses, which are not applicable toward degree-attainment and are often non-credit bearing, and can exhaust their limited financial aid while doing so. Both forms of misplacement are problematic and can unnecessarily complicate students' path toward achievement.

Some scholars assert that students are often defined as basic writers because of the work they do on problematic assessment measures (Hilgers). These mandated high-stakes tests “essentially lock them out of a serious education” (Duttagupta and Miller, 16). A growing body of evidence demonstrates the severe limitations of standardized placement exams; widely used tests such as ACCUPLACER and COMPASS seriously misplace students and test scores poorly correlate with students' ultimate success in college (Scott-Clayton; Belfield and Crosta; Hassel and Giordano; Barnett and Reddy). A number of studies show that between one third to one half of students placed by standardized tests into pre-collegiate coursework would have been successful in college-level courses, and that such exams, by virtue of the information they do *not* provide, are found to be “too blunt an instrument” (Hassel and Giordano 65) to accurately identify students who need pre-collegiate coursework and are inadequate for distinguishing various student needs for support (Scott-Clayton; Belfield and Crosta; Barnett and Reddy). Instead of exams, several colleges are moving in the direction of using high school GPA as a placement tool, which has been shown to be strongly associated with college GPAs and useful for predicting several facets of students' college performance (Belfield and Crosta).

However, this means of placement also has limitations. Because of the difficulty of many state systems to obtain high school records in a timely manner, institutions are utilizing student self-report of high school GPA in combination with specified criteria such as the last course taken in English or math and a student's grade in that course to direct students into appropriate courses. Directed self-placement, which allows students agency in the placement process, has been found to lead to much higher enrollment rates in introductory college-level courses than standardized placement exams, but can also lead to lower course pass rates (Hu, et al.; Hassel, et.al.).

Furthermore, although high school GPA is itself a multiple measure of student performance in their high school classes, sole reliance on high school GPA for placement in composition courses may be insufficient for matching students to courses of appropriate level of writing preparation. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, only 27% of students in their senior year of high school performed at or above a proficient level in writing (NAEP). This statistic is not surprising given that despite an increase in time devoted to extended writing in high school classrooms over the years (from 3.8% in 1980 to 7.7% in 2011), the overall amount of writing undertaken in high schools is still meager (Applebee and Langer). Additionally, results of a national survey have raised concerns about the quality of high school writing instruction (Kiuvara, et al.). The survey, administered to 361 high school teachers across disciplines, revealed that the writing activities assigned most frequently by teachers involved little analysis and interpretation, and almost half of the participating teachers did not assign at least one multi-paragraph writing assignment monthly. Evidence-based practices and adaptations were used infrequently, and most teachers did not believe their college teacher education program adequately prepared them to teach writing. For these reasons, a closer look

into student writing proficiency than the more general information provided by high school records alone is needed for appropriate student placement.

At some institutions, faculty-created and scored writing assessments are used for placement into composition courses in place of (and sometimes in addition to) standardized placement exams. Although it can be viewed by some as a high stakes testing situation, this type of exam has been found to provide more complete and nuanced information on which to base placement decisions (Barnet and Reddy; Rodriguez, et al.). One study revealed a substantial increase in the proportion of at-risk students who remained in good standing after a faculty-scored writing sample was used in addition to a standardized test in placing students, from 59 percent before using the writing sample to 73 percent afterwards (Duffy, et al.). This type of assessment is also used by the University of California System for placement of incoming students within composition course sequences, yet, in the broad sweep of reform in community colleges, assessments such as these are being eliminated along with standardized tests.

As previously stated, in this study we set forth to find how students placed in four levels of composition courses at one college differ in their academic writing performance. We also wanted to know whether high school GPA is related to student placement level and/or level of student writing proficiency.

## **Method**

The present research was conducted at a large, urban community college in California, enrolling approximately 50,000 students. The two largest ethnic populations at the college are Hispanic (55%) and Asian (19%). Most students (71%) are under thirty years old. Over half of the students attend the college part time, and three-quarters receive financial aid.



### *Participants*

Eight consenting faculty administered the assessment involved in this study in thirteen sections of courses over two semesters. Students in the course sections taught by participating faculty were involved in the study, with the option to opt out. The study involved students in three levels of pre-collegiate composition courses as well as students from the transfer-level composition course. Unlike many institutions, where pre-collegiate coursework is non-credit bearing, all of the pre-collegiate courses at this institution were offered for credit. However, that credit was not applicable toward degree attainment. The courses were: PCL1, the first level precollegiate course; PCL2, the second level precollegiate course; PCL3, the precollegiate course just below the transfer-level course; and CL, the transfer, college-level course. The PCL1 course was taught in the Learning Assistance department, while the other three courses were taught in the English department (see Table 2.1 for course titles and content description by level).

Student participants were mostly bilingual (80%), speaking one or more languages in addition to English. The other languages spoken were mainly Spanish (70%) and Chinese (15%). Over half (60%) of the bilingual students were English learners who indicated having taken either English as a Second Language (ESL) or English Language Development (ELD) classes throughout their educational experiences. These students made up 40% of the total sample. The mean age of student participants was 22 years. They reported working 24 hours per week, on average, while attending the college.

**Table 2.1** Course Title and Content by Level

Level	Course Title	Course Content
CL	Freshman Composition	Development of expository writing skills. Investigates the principles and methods of composition as applied to the research process and writing of essays. Critical reading of academic material.
PCL3	Preparation for College Writing	Development of the academic essay based on critical reading of texts.
PCL2	Writing Fundamentals	Emphasis of summary, paragraph and beginning essay skills. Reading and writing critically.
PCL1	Improving Writing Skills	Improvement of writing process and product through prewriting, writing, editing, and revising.

*College Placement Exam*

Almost all of the students in this study indicated having taken the college placement exam (95%). The process for placing students into the initial composition courses (PCL1, PCL2, PCL3, or CL) at this college included a holistic, faculty-scored exam in which students provided a writing sample as they responded to their choice of one of two writing prompts. The prompts elicited an opinion statement that students were asked to make and support in their writing. Examples of the prompts included questions such as: *Why do you think people lie, and what problems can lies create?* and *Explain what you think is the most important thing people should spend their money on. Why is this important?* Students were given 45 minutes to address the on-demand writing prompt in the testing center, where students had the option of completing the exam either by hand or on a computer.

The college placement exam was scored by trained writing faculty using a rubric with the following categories: organization, development, reasoning and ideas, and use of language (see Appendix I for scoring guidelines). After norming procedures in which sample papers are scored and discussed to ensure scoring reliability, each paper was read and scored by two

faculty. A third, more experienced faculty reader was involved if agreement about a score was not reached by the first two readers. Students were referred to a particular course in the composition sequence based on their score. For papers that scored close to cut-off scores between levels, multiple measures were used to determine student placement. These measures were based on a student survey including information about high school GPA and non-cognitive factors such as reading and study habits.

### *Data Collection and Analytic Measures*

*Instrument.* The instrument used in this study to determine writing competency and to detect academic writing strengths and weaknesses was a text-based academic writing assessment (AWA) that called for the synthesis of two texts and the creation of an interpretive argument in a well-structured essay (Olson and Land). It was selected because whereas the college placement examination is a stand-alone assessment focused on students' opinions and personal experience, the AWA prompts required students to read, interpret, and synthesize two complex texts and to construct an argument drawing upon both sources—skills emphasized in both the Common Core State Standards and the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing. The writing assessment was administered in the composition classes in two 45-minute segments, following AWA procedures which provide students with time to read the texts closely prior to the timed writing. In the first segment, faculty read the two texts aloud to students. Students followed along with their own copy of the texts and were encouraged to annotate. Students were then guided by faculty through the completion of a conceptual planning packet that included three steps using graphic organizers that led to the formation of a distinct claim, establishing their main argument for the paper. In the second 45-minute segment, students referred to the two annotated passages and the completed conceptual planning packet

to write the essay. Administration was completed by the second week of classes in all of the course sections to minimize the amount of instruction students received before testing. To prevent biased advantage based on the prompt, two different but structurally comparable prompts and sets of texts were used. Half of the students at each course level were given a test with one prompt and set of texts and the other half, the other (see Appendix II for prompts used).

Each paper was scored by two trained readers. Readers of the exam were Fellows of a National Writing Project site who were involved voluntarily and selected based on the following criteria: possession of a Master's degree, experience teaching English, and participation in training for scoring papers. Norming procedures included reading through and scoring a set of anchor papers selected by experienced scoring leaders who followed the University of California System placement essay scoring procedures, with slight modifications. Readers and leaders discussed paper scores and leaders retrained any scorers that had a problematic response set.

The assessment rubric was aligned with established measures of writing competency as outlined in the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the California Common Core State Standards, and The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, measuring skills that students should have when ready for college. Scores were determined holistically on a 6-point scale, based upon the following features: quality and depth of interpretation, the clarity of the claim, the organization of ideas, the appropriateness and adequacy of textual evidence, use of sentence variety, and the correct use of English conventions (see Appendix III for scoring guide).

Reader scores (1-6) were combined to establish an official score, ranging from 2-12. In cases when there was a discrepancy in the two scores by two or more points, the papers were scored by a third, more experienced reader. When the third score was the same as either of the first two scores, the two matching scores were combined to determine the official score. If the third score differed from the first two, it was added to the average of the initial scores. A score of seven or greater was considered a passing score. Mean scores on the writing assessment were calculated for each level and compared across levels. Two-way t-tests were run between each course level to determine statistical significance of the differences in mean scores.

*Survey Data.* In addition to the writing assessment, student data was collected using a survey to gather information about students' educational background and goals as well as their perceived level of preparedness for college (see Appendix IV for survey). Student reported high school GPA was obtained from the surveys.

*Analyses* To investigate differences in student writing performance by course level, mean scores on the writing assessment were calculated for each level and compared across levels. To detect if there were statistically significant differences in mean scores across course-level groups, two-way t-tests were run between each course level. Effect sizes were calculated to determine the strength of the differences (see Table 2.5 for effect size of differences between groups). In order to control for other variables, regression analysis was used to determine the effect of other factors on student test score by level (see Table 2.6 for regression results).

Drawing upon data obtained from the assessment results and the student survey, a final set of analyses was performed to investigate potential relationships between course level, student academic writing performance and high school GPA. Student self-reported high school GPA was obtained from the aforementioned student surveys. A high school GPA was reported

by 70% of students in the overall sample. Some students reported a range, such as 3.0-3.5 rather than a single average. In such cases, the high end of the range (3.5) was recorded. Of the 30% that did not report a GPA, slightly over half did not report an answer at all, leaving the line on the survey blank. A third reported that they were unsure or did not remember, and the rest reported that the question was not applicable. To examine the possibility of a relationship between course level, mean score on the AWA, and GPA, two correlational analyses were conducted (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2 for correlation analyses results).

## **Findings and Discussion**

### *Student Writing Performance Across Course Levels*

To investigate general differences between student writing at the various course levels, mean scores on the AWA were calculated at each level and compared. A combined score of 7 (a 3 and a 4 from two readers) or more was considered an adequate response to the prompt, or a passing score. Nearly half of the students assessed (46%) received a passing score (See Table 2.2 for pass rate by course level). These students were more concentrated in the upper two course levels. Score distributions follow a normal curve and vary most widely at the college, transfer level course (CL) (see Table 2.3 for distribution of scores by course level). The CL course was the only course level in which students scored nearly every possible score (with the exception of the highest score, a six from each reader for a combined score of 12). This wide range of scores highlights the need for differentiated instruction at this level even before the effect of reform efforts, which will result in more students with varying levels of proficiency placing into the college-level course.

**Table 2.2** Passing Students by Course Level

Level	<i>n</i>	# Pass	Percent
CL	46	24	52%
PCL3	69	36	52%
PCL2	68	28	41%
PCL1	27	8	30%
Total	210	96	46%

*n* = number of student participants

**Table 2.3** Score Distribution by Level

Level/Score	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Total
CL	2	1	5	4	10	9	5	4	3	3	46
PCL3	2	1	3	11	16	17	15	3	1	0	69
PCL2	0	3	4	11	22	20	5	3	0	0	68
PCL1	2	2	4	6	5	6	1	1	0	0	27
Total	6	7	16	32	53	52	26	11	4	3	210

*Score distributions follow a normal curve and vary most widely in the college-level course.*

Results show that the mean scores at each level increased with each rise in course level (see Table 2.4 for mean scores by level). This suggests that the college writing assessment process used to place students in the various course levels at this college has been effective in identifying groups of students with measurably different levels of writing proficiency. Initially, this result can be understood as a confirmation of the need for four distinct course levels, contradicting the current policy decisions underway that aim to combine or eliminate pre-collegiate courses and place students directly into college-level composition courses. However, upon further investigation, statistically significant differences in means are found between only one course level and the other three levels.

**Table 2.4** Mean Scores by Level

Level	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
CL	46	6.72	2.26
PCL3	69	6.46	1.58
PCL2	68	6.16	1.33
PCL1	27	5.37	1.76

Statistically significant differences lie between the PCL1 course and all other courses (PCL1-PCL2,  $p=.02$ ; PCL1-PCL3,  $p=.004$ ; PCL1-CL,  $p=.009$ ). A marginally significant difference was found between PCL2-CL ( $p=.09$ ).

This difference lies between the lowest-level composition course (PCL1) and each of the higher-level courses (PCL2,  $p=0.0194$ ) (PCL3,  $p=0.004$ ) and (CL,  $p=0.0092$ ). This finding suggests that differences in mean scores between the other courses may be due only to chance, while real differences that affect mean score exist between students in the PCL1 course and all other course levels. In other words, although they had differing mean scores, students in the two courses preceding the college-level course (PCL2 and PCL3) are not substantially different in writing proficiency level than students who placed into the college-level course (CL), while students who placed into the first-level pre-collegiate course (PCL1) differed from those in the college-level course (CL) in considerable ways and may be further disadvantaged by being placed directly into the college-level course. It is also worth noting that there was a marginally significant difference between the next-to-lowest level precollegiate course (PCL2) and the college-level course (CL) ( $p=0.09$ ). This means that students who place into PCL2 may need additional support in order to succeed if placed directly in the college-level course. Further investigation is necessary to determine the type and extent of support that is needed.

In order to ensure that the found differences are substantial for making generalizations from the data despite limited sample sizes, further analyses were performed calculating the strength, or effect size of the differences between groups (see Table 2.5 for results and



explanation of effect sizes). For groups with statistically significant differences in mean scores between them (PCL1 and PCL2, PCL1 and PCL3 and PCL1 and CL), the effect size was between 0.50 and 0.80, what Cohen refers to as “medium” to “large.” Equally interesting, the effect sizes for differences between groups that were not statistically significant were “small” or less, with the exception of the group that had marginal statistically significant differences (PCL2 and CL), which had an effect size higher than what would be considered small, but not medium. These results match the earlier p-value results and confirm the strength of the findings of significant and non-significant differences between the groups.

**Table 2.5** Effect Size of Differences Between Groups

Between Groups	Effect Size		p value
	Cohen’s d	Hedge’s g	
PCL1 and PCL2	0.506	0.540	0.019*
PCL1 and PCL3	0.652	0.668	0.004**
PCL1 and CL	0.667	0.646	0.009**
PCL2 and PCL3	0.205	.205	0.232
PCL2 and CL	0.302	0.318	0.090†
PCL3 and CL	0.133	0.138	0.469

\*=statistically significant with 95% confidence \*\* = statistically significant with 99% confidence †=marginally statistically significant

Note: Cohen’s d was determined by calculating the mean difference between groups and then dividing the result by the pooled standard deviation [ $d = M_1 - M_2 / SD_{pooled}$ , where  $SD_{pooled} = \sqrt{((SD_1^2 + SD_2^2) / 2)}$ ]. As an additional check, effect size that is weighted according to the relative size of each sample (the corrected effect size) was calculated using Hedge’s g. This calculation was made using the above formula for Cohen’s d, but with a weighted standard deviation. The effect size results using Cohen’s d and Hedge’s g were similar.

Additionally, to control for other variables, regression analysis was used with three varying models to detect the effect of other factors on student test score which again, confirmed the strength of the earlier results (see Table 2.6 for regression results).

**Table 2.6** Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Student Assessment Scores

Variable	1	Model 2	3
Course Level			
PCL1	-1.347021*** (.4130651)	-1.136741** (.4912157)	-1.25669** (.4909197)
PCL2	-.5556266* (.3252647)	-.4647276 (.4075992)	-.681981* (.4059558)
PCL3	-.2536232 (.3243122)	-.0669602 (.3876547)	-.170505 (.3908362)
Demographics			
HSGPA		.0437662 (.1469852)	.1717478 (.1875217)
Sex		-.2987434 (.1815668)	-.3218188* (.1804439)
Age		-.0106498 (.0256003)	-.0278023 (.0267927)
Parent education (combined, mother and father)		.0623966 (.0752267)	.0321534 (.0769619)
Survey Questions			
Motivation to do well in school			.7444347*** (.2370844)
Sense of being supported to succeed in college			-.1091962 (.1713719)
Self-perception as a hard worker			.1288329 (.2461171)
Self-perception as a good student			-.3522157 (.2330579)
Sense of self-efficacy			-.1156391 (.2687766)
Persistence (when not knowing how to do something)			.0174054 (.1868223)
Observations	210	159	158
df	F(3, 206)	F(7, 151)	F(13, 144)
F-test	3.95	1.94	2.24
R <sup>2</sup>	0.0544	0.0826	0.1680

Note: \*\*\*p<.01    \*\*p<.05    \*p<.1

Each of the three models included the first three course levels (PCL1, PCL2, and PCL3) compared with the college-level course (CL). The outcome variable was students' writing assessment scores. The data for other variables were obtained through the student survey previously described. The first regression model has sufficient explanatory power with

Prob> F = .0091. The coefficient for the variable PCL1 indicates that, on average, students in the lowest-level precollegiate course scored 1.35 points lower (on a six-point scale) than students in the college-level course. Confirming the earlier t-test analysis, this model shows that the difference in score bears statistical significance at the 99% confidence level ( $p=.001$ ).

Students in PCL2, the next course level, scored a little over half a point less than students in CL, and this difference is moderately significant ( $p=.089$ ), again, confirming the earlier t-test results.

In model 2, while controlling for the demographic variables of high school GPA, sex, age, and level of parent education, the difference between PCL1 and CL is still statistically significant ( $p=.025$ ). In the third regression model, certain non-cognitive factors attained from the student survey were included in order to control for their effect on student achievement.

Non-cognitive factors are those not measured by achievement or intelligence tests such as skills, behaviors, strategies or beliefs that can affect students' academic performance (Nagaoka, et al.).

Factors from the student survey such as level of student motivation for academic success, students' sense of support, self-perception as a hard worker, self-perception as a good student, sense of self-efficacy, and academic persistence were added to the model. Results indicate that the statistically significant difference between PCL1 and CL remains while controlling for these variables. Again, as in the first model, marginal statistically significant difference is found between PCL2 and CL. An unexpected (but perhaps not surprising) finding in this third model is that students' level of motivation is revealed as a statistically significant predictor of score ( $p=.004$ ).

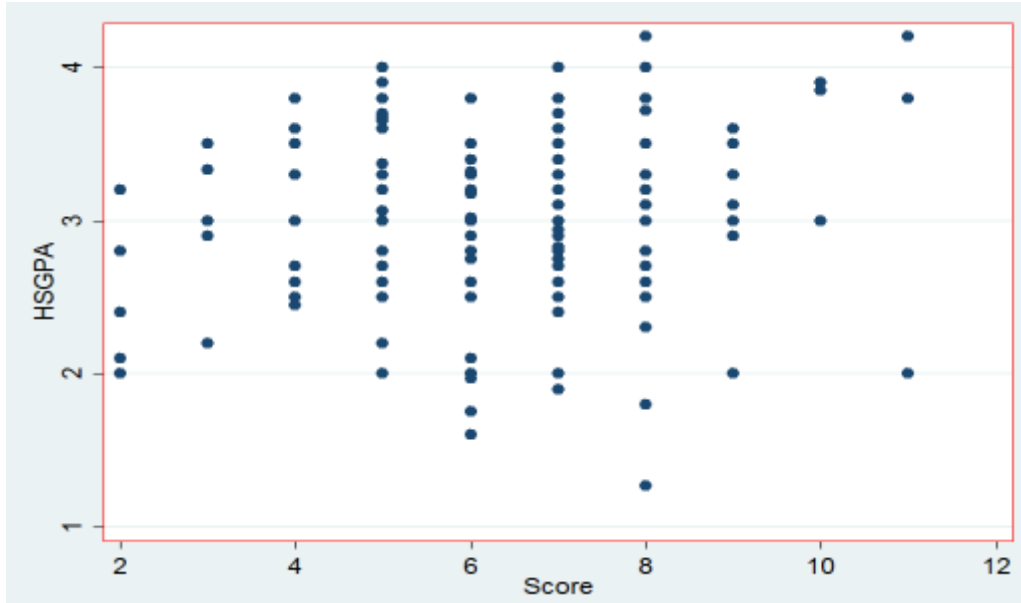
These results can inform our thinking about current policy based on previous research that shows there are too many courses that precede the college-level course, which can hinder student progress to degree completion or transfer to a four-year university (Mejia, et.al.). The

results seem to indicate that more students can experience success if placed directly into the college-level (CL) composition course, which can save up to a year of required coursework and increase the students' overall chances of college success. However, another implication of these results is that this policy, overextended to include students in the lowest level (PCL1) course (and possibly, to an extent, the next level PCL2 course) may be disadvantageous for some students. This finding suggests that students at this level need more comprehensive instruction and assistance that can support their writing development before attempting the college-level course. These results confirm the findings of previous studies which show that some students may benefit from acceleration while others may not (Bailey and Jaggars; Hassel and Giordano).

#### *Relationship Between Course Level, Writing Performance, and High School GPA*

To investigate a possible relationship between course level and high school GPA and between writing performance and high school GPA, two correlational analyses were performed. Results of the Pearson correlation analysis indicated that there was a weakly positive association between course level and GPA ( $r=.1397$ ,  $n=178$ ); a scatterplot reveals a lack of linear relationship, or interdependence, between the two variables (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2). These results suggest that students' self-reported high school GPAs and their course level, as determined by the college placement exam, are weakly related.

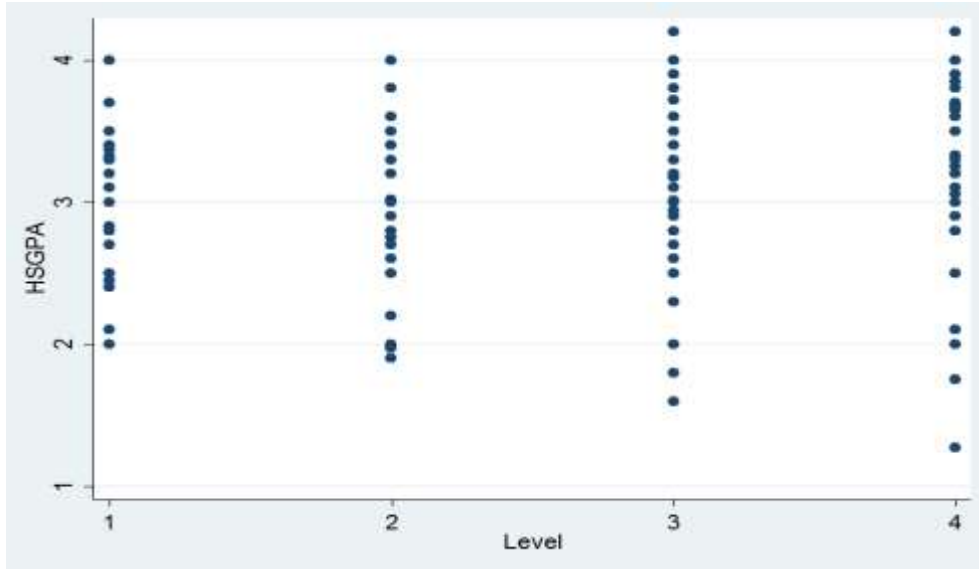
**Figure 2.1** Relationship between GPA and Score



*The association between GPA and score is weakly positive ( $r=.1397$ ). A lack of linear relationship, or interdependence, can be seen between the two variables.*

The second correlational analysis performed examined the relationship between students' high school GPA and their writing assessment score on the AWA used in this study. This association was very weakly positive ( $r=0.0986$ ,  $n=168$ ). The scatterplot of the association also shows no linear relationship between the two variables. Together, the results of these two correlational analyses imply that students' high school GPAs may be an insufficient indicator of their level of writing proficiency.

**Figure 2.2** Relationship between GPA and Course Level



*The association between GPA and course level is very weakly positive ( $r=0.0986$ ). There is no linear relationship between the two variables.*

These data suggest that although high school GPA has been shown to be strongly associated with college GPAs and useful for predicting certain facets of students' college performance (Belfield and Crosta), it is very weakly associated with students' level of writing proficiency. An implication of this result is that measures which provide more specific information about students' preparedness in writing are needed for accurate student placement into composition courses.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The central aim of this study was to find what differences might exist in the writing of community college students who are placed into various levels of composition courses in order to understand if multiple course levels that lead to the college-level course are justified. The generalizability of the findings presented here may be limited due to the collection of data at a single institution. Further limitations include the possibility that an on-demand, timed writing

assessment may have offered an advantage to students who are more experienced writers. Nonetheless, results presented in this study can have important implications for policy and practice.

This study reveals that average scores on the writing assessment increase with each rise in course level, confirming that the college placement process (in this case, a writing exam holistically scored by faculty readers in a similar way that the assessment administered in this study was scored) is effective in identifying groups of students with varying levels of writing proficiency. While some may think this result is expected since the two exams were similar in their scoring processes, it is their differences that cause this outcome to be interesting. The college placement exam included a stand-alone prompt while the assessment for this study employed an analytical text-based prompt in which students were asked to interpret and integrate two texts into their writing. Although the two exams differed in these ways, the course levels that students were placed into by the college placement exam generally matched their level of academic writing proficiency as measured by the assessment in this study. An implication of this result is that this type of exam and scoring process, similar to the one currently used by the University of California system to place incoming freshman into composition courses, is an effective means for determining writing proficiency level. This confirms findings of previous studies that indicate that this type of exam has been found to provide more complete and nuanced information on which to base placement decisions (Barnet and Reddy; Rodriguez, et al.). It also implies that this type of assessment, instead of being eliminated along with standardized placement tests which have been found to seriously misplace students (Scott-Clayton; Belfield and Crosta; Hassel and Giordano; Barnett and Reddy), should be pursued by institutions for more accurate placement of students. In assessing

student readiness for first-year writing, scholars in the field of writing studies have determined the need for writing assessment measures that are context-specific and locally directed in order to better meet the needs of their student populations (Hassel and Giordano; Huot; White). This type of writing assessment, developed locally and holistically scored by faculty who teach composition, can meet this need.

The results of this study also indicate that although students who are placed in four levels of courses by the college placement exam had increasing average scores on the writing assessment by course level, this does not warrant the need for all four course levels. The differences in mean scores between students in the college-level course (CL) and the pre-collegiate course that precedes it (PCL3) were not statistically significant and are likely due only to chance. Some chance-related factors might include environmental conditions of the classroom, a student's level of fatigue, and potential distractions. The differences detected also show a small effect size, confirming their lack of significance. Additionally, the differences in mean scores between the college-level course and the pre-collegiate course two levels below it (PCL2) bore only marginal statistical significance with an effect size that is greater than what is largely considered small. These results suggest that students in the PCL2 and PCL3 courses, although (on average) had lower means in their writing assessment scores, may have a good chance at succeeding if placed directly into the college-level course with appropriate levels of support. For these students, reform efforts that allow them this opportunity can help to expedite the accomplishment of their educational and career goals.

This does not, however, equally apply to students in the lowest pre-collegiate course (PCL1). In this study, the mean scores on the writing assessment for students who placed into this course differed with statistical significance and with medium to almost large effect sizes



from each of the other three course levels. This indicates that average student scores at this level were not likely due to chance, and that students that place into this course level require additional support *before* attempting the college-level course. These results confirm the findings of previous studies which show that some students may benefit from acceleration while others may not (Bailey and Jaggars; Hassel and Giordano). Reform efforts that seek to eliminate all pre-collegiate course levels may further disadvantage students who are already the most disadvantaged in terms of level of writing proficiency, since these changes “will not magically make such students prepared for college work” (Hassel and Giordano, 77). Since the use of placement measures by institutions are quickly shifting primarily to the use of students’ high school GPA, which has been found in this study to be weakly correlated with both level of writing proficiency and course level, it may students who need a greater measure of support.

These findings confirm the potentially positive impact of certain reform efforts on numerous students’ chances for college success, while cautioning about overly broad implementation of those efforts that may place some students at a disadvantage. From these analyses it seems evident that many students previously placed into precollegiate courses by a writing assessment at this college may find success when being placed directly into the college-level course. Further investigation is needed to determine the type of curricular and instructional support that is needed to ensure their success. The findings also show that some students need a greater measure of support and instruction before attempting the college-level course. Attempts to identify these students will become increasingly more challenging as reform efforts that effect placement processes are underway. In view of these findings, the current movement toward completely eliminating pre-collegiate courses without further investigation of the impact of this policy on students who are the most low-performing should be reassessed.

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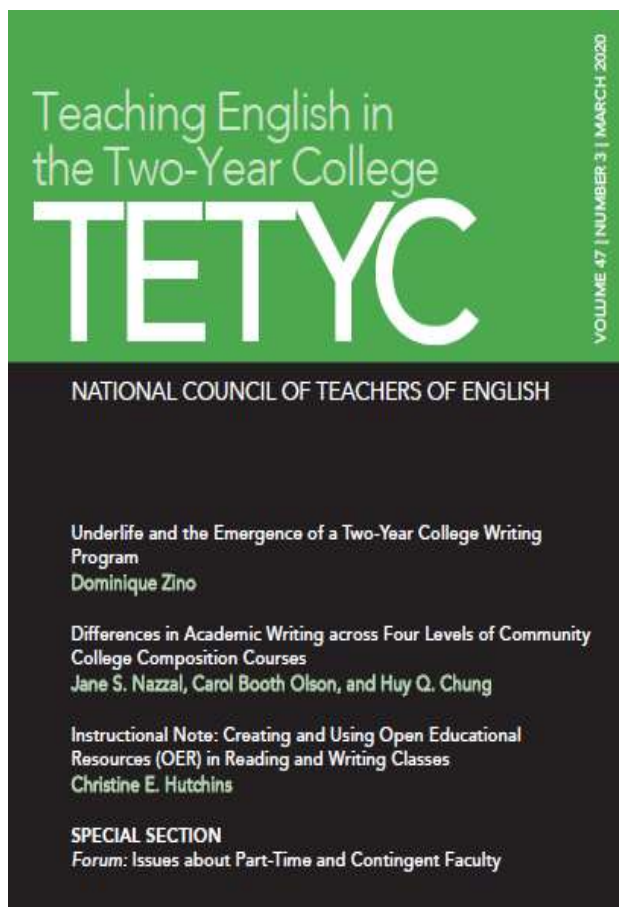
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## CHAPTER 3

### Differences in Academic Writing Across Four Levels of Composition Courses

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## **Abstract**

Writing is a critical skill that can impact students' academic and economic trajectories, particularly for community college students, most of whom are considered underprepared by various placement measures. While nation-wide efforts are made to shorten or eliminate pre-collegiate writing course sequences and to place students directly into the transfer-level composition course, questions persist regarding the type of instruction and support students need to succeed. To determine differences in students' writing in various course levels at a particular institution just prior to the implementation of reform, an analytical text-based writing assessment was administered to college students across four levels of composition courses, three pre-collegiate and one transfer-level course. Two types of analyses were performed on a subset of papers representative of all scores and levels that examined the following: 1) the frequency of specific writing features, comparing them across course levels and 2) writing features that are characteristic of high-scoring papers. Key findings include: 1) statistically significant differences in the presence of certain writing features between college-level and precollegiate students and 2) the identification of four writing features that are characteristic of high scoring papers. With policy that aims to place most students directly into college-level courses and with faculty that are met with the challenge of addressing the needs of more less prepared students, results presented in this study can be used to inform the development of targeted curriculum for supporting student success.

### *Keywords:*

Academic Writing, College Composition, Community Colleges, Underprepared Students

## Introduction

Each year, almost half of the nation's undergraduates enroll in community colleges (Bailey and Jaggars). In both their history and mission, these institutions uphold an "open access" policy, welcoming all who seek to further their education and training. This makes these establishments an appealing educational option; they attract students from a wide range of backgrounds who attend for a variety of reasons. This broad acceptance policy, however, results in the pressing institutional challenge to uphold college-level academic standards while serving a broadly diverse student body (Hassel & Giordano). In order to help achieve this goal, pre-collegiate course sequences addressing basic skills were developed with the aim of preparing students for college-level work. Historically, these course sequences have allowed access to college for students who may not have otherwise enrolled in a postsecondary institution (Boylan and Bonham; Arendale). More recently, however, a shift in policy from emphasis on student access to a focus on student persistence and success that leads to completion of a degree, certificate or transfer to university has resulted in data that bring the effectiveness of such courses into question. Mounting evidence that lengthy pre-collegiate course sequences hinder student progress toward degree completion has shown that most students who enroll in these courses do not persist to transfer-level work (Barnett & Reddy; Mejia, et al.; Bueschel).

An area of noteworthy concern is the transfer level English composition courses. These courses function as a gateway to college success in both their content and context (Nazzal, et.al.). They are the place where students become versed as participants in academic discourse and where students develop the advanced literacy skills needed to succeed in courses in other disciplines (Duff; Hassel & Giordano). Moreover, these courses are often situated within the

institution as pre-requisites for other courses and are required for degree attainment and transfer to four-year colleges. Thus, they are crucial to overall academic success (Kassner & Wardle; Troia; Rose; Emig). Despite the importance of passing the transfer-level composition course, most students never even reach the point of enrolling in it (Mejia, et.al.). Less than half of students who start out in pre-collegiate writing courses take and pass the transfer-level composition course. These students are essentially blocked from forward movement at the college.

Extensive reform is underway across the nation with initiatives in several states to improve the persistence and completion rates of students placed into precollegiate courses. In California, a new law (Assembly Bill 705) mandates that reform be implemented statewide by the fall of 2019 that optimizes opportunities for students to complete transfer level coursework within a year and that prevents colleges from placing students into precollegiate courses unless they are “highly unlikely to succeed without them.” (Hope 1). As a means of accelerating student progress, many institutions are eliminating the use of standardized placement exams which have been shown to misplace between a third to one half of students (Scott-Clayton; Belfield and Crosta; Hassel and Giordano; Barnett and Reddy) and are moving increasingly toward the use of directed self-placement, which is designed to allow students agency in determining the appropriate course for themselves. Unfortunately, in the broad sweep of reform in community colleges, faculty-created and scored writing assessments, which have been found to provide more complete and nuanced information on which to base placement decisions (Barnet and Reddy; Rodriguez, et al.; Duffy, et al; Nazzal, et.al.) are also being eliminated. Such changes are being implemented with the goal of placing nearly all students directly into

one of two versions of the transfer level composition course—one that includes a concurrent support course and one that does not.

### *Reform Challenges*

Although these changes clearly save students time and money that would be spent while progressing through the precollegiate course sequences, they also present new challenges. Directed self-placement can save the cost of large-scale essay assessment while providing students with autonomy. However, some writing scholars argue that students do not have sufficient information and lack perspective upon which to base their placement decisions (Schendel & O’Neill). Since community college students generally have pressed schedules that include employment and caretaking and are often from low income backgrounds, students may be more likely to choose course options with less time and cost commitment. This can result in fewer students who need the additional support provided in the concurrent course selecting it as an option.

Another challenge is that students are directed to place themselves primarily based on high school records, which have been found to reflect meager amounts of writing, much of which is low in quality (Applebee and Langer; Kiuahara, et.al.). This assessment includes high school GPA, which is a multiple measure itself and has been shown to be strongly associated with college GPAs and useful for predicting students’ college performance (Belfield and Crosta), but has been found to be weakly correlated with students’ levels of writing proficiency (Nazzal, et.al.). Although previous studies suggest that assessment and placement instruments and policies should match students more precisely with academic interventions that meet their

needs (Hughes & Scott-Clayton; Edgecombe), directed self-placement using high school records alone may be an insufficient measure for doing so (Nazzal, et al.).

Difficulties also stem from the fact that some students enter college without the ability to successfully complete credit bearing coursework in their first semester (Hassel and Giordano). These students, who generally place into precollegiate courses have been shown to have significant differences in demographics and academic background than students that are considered college ready (Barnett and Reddy). Compared to students who enroll in the college-level composition course, they are more likely to have low incomes (71% vs. 46%) and attend the college part time (73% vs 66%). Students who start three or four levels lower than the college-level course are more likely to have completed high school equivalency as opposed to a high school diploma than students who started one level below. A recent study showed significant differences in student writing proficiency between students in the college-level course and those who placed into precollegiate courses two and three levels below the college-level course (Nazzal, et al.). Placement of such students directly into the college-level composition course with the expectation that they will quickly adapt to college-level work and be able to understand difficult texts and engage with complex ideas may cause them further disadvantage.

Directed self-placement has been found to lead to higher enrollment rates into college-level courses, but lower pass rates for these courses (Barnett and Reddy). In other words, a greater number of students will be passing than previously, due to the increased volume of students who will now place into the college-level course. However, for those who don't pass, the instance of failure by being placed into a course for which their academic and writing experiences have not prepared them (Hassel and Giordano) can send a strong message about

whether or not they belong—not just in the class but also in college. They likely will not attribute their lack of success to misplacement, but will understand it as a message about themselves. It becomes urgent, then, to know how these students can be supported.

### *The Need for Explicit Teaching*

Writing continues to present a great challenge for large numbers of students through the postsecondary level and researchers have highlighted the need for the explicit teaching of writing (MacArthur & Philippakos; Perin). Instructional improvement is a critical part of efforts to positively impact educational outcomes for students in community colleges; however, more research is needed on the literacy skills of underprepared writers in these institutions (Lesgold & Welch-Ross; Perin). A meta-analysis of studies describing the literacy skills of underprepared postsecondary students revealed that the number of studies conducted on the effectiveness of instruction for students who are underprepared is scant and that the small body of studies that is available is undercut by methodological weaknesses (Perin). Additionally, the extant studies have focused broadly on skills and techniques without much evidence in any one area and have completely overlooked the ability of underprepared students to integrate reading comprehension and writing skills, a holistic literacy practice that signifies college readiness. The investigator concluded that more information is needed specifically about the reading and writing skills of higher versus lower achievers and that this area is “clearly ripe for an agenda of rigorous research” (p.125).

While widespread reform efforts are underway in community colleges across the nation, the purpose of this study is to examine specific differences that might exist in the writing of students who have been placed into various course levels under a specific placement policy.

This information can help to provide direction for the development of targeted instruction to support the success of students who, under a previous policy would have been considered underprepared and placed into precollegiate course sequences but are now being placed directly into college-level composition courses. Additionally, low graduation rates even among community college students who are considered college-ready suggest that all students can benefit from well-conceived targeted assistance (Karp).

We investigate the qualitative features of student writing in order to explore differences that might exist between the writing of students placed into one of three levels in a precollegiate composition course sequence and those placed in the first transfer-level composition courses just before the implementation of institutional reform. In order to achieve this, we ask: *To what extent does the writing of students who are classified as “underprepared” differ from that of students who are considered “college-level” writers?, In which features of writing are there the most pronounced differences between students in the various course levels? and What writing features characterize high scoring papers and distinguish them from lower scoring ones?*

Results of this study can be used to help educators, administrators, and policymakers understand how to best support students and faculty in the face of extensive reform in community college composition courses.

### **Theoretical Models of Differences Between Experienced and Inexperienced Writers**

The current study is informed by cognitive research in the field of composition studies that focuses on differences between the writing and writing processes of minimally experienced writers and their more experienced counterparts. The theoretical models of writing that form the basis for current understanding of differences between experienced and inexperienced writers



employ various terms to describe similar dichotomous observations of writer processes: novice vs. expert, writer-based prose vs. reader-based prose, and knowledge-telling vs. knowledge-transformation (Sommers; Flower; Scardamalia & Bereiter). Each of these dichotomies reflects what writers do on both ends of the spectrum of experience. Inexperienced writers are novices; they produce writer-based prose that neglects to consider the reader and generate text without an overall plan or goal. More experienced writers become experts; they take the reader into consideration with reader-based prose and transform knowledge by producing their own new ideas (see Table 3.1 for a summary of foundational research findings on inexperienced and experienced writers).

**Table 3.1:** Foundational Research Findings on Inexperienced and Experienced Writers

<b>Student Writers (Novice)</b>	<b>Experienced Writers (Expert)</b>
High concern with vocabulary Bring essay into congruence with pre- defined meaning Apply rules rigidly Use functional terms used to describe revision  <i>Sommers (1980)</i>	Primary objective is to find the form or shape of the argument Write to discover meaning and do not limit themselves too early to lexical concerns Recognize and resolve dissonance Exhibit a concern for readership Describe revision as revising or rewriting View revision as a recursive process
<b>Writer-Based Prose</b>	<b>Reader-Based Prose</b>
Thought expressed The writer talking to himself Narrative/ survey structure Egocentric  <i>Flower (1981)</i>	Thought Transformed The reader taken into account Issue-centered organization of ideas based on the reader's needs
<b>Knowledge-telling</b>	<b>Knowledge-transformation</b>
Generation of text without an overall plan or goal Produces knowledge, drawing from memory to write what is known about a topic  <i>Scardamalia &amp; Bereiter, (1987)</i>	Builds on the process of knowledge telling Demonstrates complex problem-solving procedures Transforms knowledge, producing new ideas

Although these investigations do not focus on community college writers in particular, they are important in understanding some of the distinctions that exist between experienced and less experienced writers and can help both educators and students anticipate changes that take place as novice writers become more proficient. In these models, the differences between experienced and inexperienced writers lie mainly in their differing views of writing objectives, revision, and sense of audience. These differences will be discussed with greater detail in the following section (see Table 3.2 for differences between inexperienced and experienced writers).

**Table 3.2:** Differences Between Inexperienced and Experienced Writers

<b>Differences Between Inexperienced and Experienced Writers</b>	
<b>Writing Objectives</b>	
<b>Inexperienced</b>	<b>Experienced</b>
Produce knowledge without an overall plan or goal Restrict development of the ideas by bringing the essay into congruence with predefined meaning	Issue-centered organization of writing Find the form or shape of an argument
<b>Revision</b>	
<b>Inexperienced</b>	<b>Experienced</b>
Functional terms used to describe revision (redoing, marking out) Conceptualize idea generation as linear, like a “line”	Revision described as rewriting or revising Revision viewed as recursive process Conceptualize idea generation as evolving or growing, like a “seed”
<b>Sense of Audience</b>	
<b>Inexperienced</b>	<b>Experienced</b>
Self-centric, narrative structure Lack of strategy for handling the whole essay Lack of procedure for reordering reasoning or questioning purpose	Reader-centric Engages the reader

### *Writing Objectives*

Researchers in the field of composition studies have outlined the varying objectives that experienced and inexperienced writers have when writing. In these studies, inexperienced writers exhibited particular approaches to writing that differed from their more experienced counterparts: they aimed to produce knowledge and generate text without an overall plan or goal that guided their writing (Scardamalia & Bereiter); they sought and struggled to bring their essays into congruence with a predefined meaning and often wrote introductions and thesis statements first, restricting the development of ideas and their ability to shift the direction of their ideas; they exhibited a high concern with vocabulary and rigidly applied rules such as “never begin a sentence with a conjunction,” or “never end a sentence with a preposition” as they sought to “comply with abstract rules about the product that often do not apply to the specific problems in the text (Sommers, p. 383). The objectives adopted by these writers limited the development of their work.

Conversely, the primary objective of experienced writers was to find the form or shape of an argument. They exhibited issue-centered organization of their writing and wrote to discover meaning; thus, they did not limit themselves to lexical concerns (Flower; Sommers). They, like inexperienced writers, produced knowledge as they wrote, but went further to build upon that knowledge and transform it, generating new ideas and demonstrating complex problem-solving procedures (Scardamalia & Bereiter).

### *View of Revision*

Another difference between seasoned and less seasoned writers in these studies was their understanding of and approach to revision. One distinction was that students and experts referred to their revising processes with different language. Student writers did not use the word

“revision” to refer to the changes they made. Instead, they developed functional terms to describe their changes such as *redoing*, *marking out*, *slashing* and *throwing out*. Their diction provides insight into their understanding of what it means to revise and is indicative of a more local rather than global perception of revision that involves changes at the sentence or word level.

The experienced writers, on the other hand, described revision as *rewriting* and *revising*. They viewed revision as a more global, recursive process, the whole writing proceeding and growing out of examination of the parts. They observed general patterns of development and decided what to include and exclude. Sommers described their process as “more like a seed, not a line” in that it evolved and grew into being rather than made linear progress toward the final product (p. 386).

### *Sense of Audience*

The final difference between experienced and inexperienced writers discussed here is their differing awareness of audience as they write. The inexperienced writer exhibits what one scholar calls *writer-based prose* (Flower). This self-centric way of writing is said to be the source of the most common and pervasive problems in academic and professional writing. It is the “writer essentially talking to himself,” (p. 63) while displaying narrative and survey structure, lacking a consideration of the reader and the reader’s needs. Additionally, inexperienced writers did not exhibit strategies for handling the whole essay and lacked procedures to help reorder their reasoning or to ask questions about their purposes.

Alternatively, more experienced writers recognized and resolved dissonance in their writing and exhibited concern for readership (Sommers). They used *reader-based prose*—writing that takes the reader into account, imagining the reader’s response to a given part of the

writing and revising accordingly (Flower). This way of writing is defined as a complex, high-level critical skill. While using reader-based prose, the writer works toward the transformation of ideas and engagement of the reader.

These studies are part of the early research in composition that has guided the understanding of writers as seen from a cognitive framework. They are complementary to the work of composition scholars who adopt a sociocultural lens, such as Mina Shaughnessy, whose work formed the basis of the basic writing movement, founded by and brought forth by the impact of open college admissions. Accounting for the social context of the writing situation, Shaughnessy also discussed the difference between “experienced academic writers” and “beginning adult” writers, stating that their differences lie in knowing or not knowing “the rituals and ways of winning arguments in academia” and that “too many students, especially at the remedial level continue to write only or mainly in expressive and narrative modes or to work with worn and inaccurate formulations of the academic mode” (101).

Taken collectively, and with the understanding that although these descriptions seem dichotomous, they can also be viewed as part of a continuum of writing processes, these studies are important in understanding how the processes of minimally experienced writers can evolve as they become more experienced and progress from one end of the continuum to the other. Knowledge of these processes can also serve to identify practices that can help community college writing faculty and administrators to effectively facilitate this movement among students, even while the assessment and placement processes used to make sure that students receive appropriate supports undergo extensive changes.

## Method

The present research was conducted at a large urban community college in California, enrolling approximately 50,000 students. The two largest ethnic populations at the college are Hispanic (55%) and Asian (19%). Most students (71%) are under thirty years old. Over half of the students attend part time, and three quarters receive financial aid. At the time this study was conducted, the placement policy at the college was such that students took a faculty developed and scored writing placement exam and placed into one of three precollegiate courses or the college-level composition course. About 15% of students placed into the transfer level composition course and 77% placed into one of three precollegiate courses. After changes in placement occurred one year later with students using directed self-placement through the use of high school records, 73% were placed into the college-level course (w a HSGPA of >2.6) and 12% (HSGPA 2.4-2.59) into the college-level course with a concurrent support course taught by the same faculty member. The remaining 15% of students combined placed into one of three precollegiate courses. With such a large shift in the number of students placing directly into the college-level course (from 15% to 85%) within one year, the information about students' writing differences gleaned through this study can be helpful in providing much needed direction for instruction and student support.

### *Participants*

Eight consenting writing faculty administered the writing assessment involved in this study in thirteen sections of courses over two semesters. Students in the course sections taught by participating faculty were involved in the study, with the option to opt out. The study involved students in three levels of pre-collegiate composition courses as well as students from

the transfer-level composition course. All of the pre-collegiate courses were credit-bearing, but that credit was not degree-applicable and could not be used toward degree attainment. The courses were: PCL1, the first level precollegiate course; PCL2, the second level precollegiate course; PCL3, the precollegiate course just below the transfer-level course; and CL, the transfer, college-level course. The PCL1 course was taught in the Learning Assistance department, while the other three courses were taught in the English department (see Table 3.3 for course titles and content description by level).

**Table 3.3** Course Title and Content by Level

Level	N	Course Title	Course Content
CL	46	Freshman Composition	Development of expository writing skills. Investigates the principles and methods of composition as applied to the research process and writing of essays. Critical reading of academic material.
PCL3	69	Preparation for College Writing	Development of the academic essay based on critical reading of texts.
PCL2	68	Writing Fundamentals	Emphasis of summary, paragraph and beginning essay skills. Reading and writing critically.
PCL1	27	Improving Writing Skills	Improvement of writing process and product through prewriting, writing, editing, and revising.

Student participants were mostly bilingual (80%), speaking one or more languages in addition to English. The other languages spoken were mainly Spanish (70%) and Chinese (15%). Over half (60%) of the bilingual students were English learners who indicated having taken either English as a Second Language (ESL) or English Language Development (ELD) classes throughout their educational experiences. These students made up 40% of the total sample. The mean age of student participants was 22 years. They reported working 24 hours per week, on average, while attending the college.

### *College Placement Exam*

Nearly all of the student participants in this study (95%) indicated having taken the college placement exam. The process for placing students into the initial composition courses (PCL1, PCL2, PCL3, or CL) at this college included a holistically-scored exam in which students provided a writing sample as they responded to their choice of one of two writing prompts. The prompts for the college placement exam differed from those of the writing assessment used in this study. They were stand-alone tasks that did not require the reading, comprehension, or integration of texts. The college placement exam prompts elicited an opinion statement that students were asked to make and support in their writing. The college placement exam took place in the testing center, where students had the option of completing the exam either by hand or on a computer.

The exam was scored holistically by trained writing faculty using a rubric with the following categories: organization, development, reasoning and ideas, and use of language (see Appendix I for scoring guidelines). After norming procedures in which sample papers are scored and discussed to ensure scoring reliability, each paper was read and scored by two faculty. A third, more experienced faculty reader was involved if agreement about a score was not reached by the first two readers. Students were referred to a particular course in the composition sequence based on their score. For papers that scored close to cut-off scores between levels, multiple measures were used to determine student placement. These measures were based on a student survey including information about high school GPA and non-cognitive factors such as reading and study habits. In a previous study, the placement process at this college was found to be “effective in identifying groups of students with varying levels of writing proficiency” (Nazzal, et al.).



### *Data Collection & Analytic Measures*

*Instrument.* The instrument used in this study to determine writing competency and to detect academic writing strengths and weaknesses is a text-based analytical assessment that calls for the synthesis of multiple texts and the creation of an interpretive argument in a well-structured essay (Olson & Land). The assessment was selected because its prompts required students to read, interpret, and synthesize two complex texts and to construct an argument drawing upon both sources—skills that are emphasized in both the Common Core State Standards and the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing.

*Texts.* The texts included a biographical literary non-fiction excerpt on a historical, heroic figure and a shorter, non-fiction article outlining particular character qualities or traits. Each student received either a biographical excerpt on Harriet Tubman (abolitionist and political activist) and an article on leadership or a biographical excerpt on Louie Zamperini (war hero and plane crash survivor) and an article on resilience.

*Prompts.* Students were asked to respond to the writing prompt which called for the interpretation and integration of the two texts while making and supporting a claim about what they identified as the characteristic that was most essential to the character's success and/or survival. Sub-directions in the prompt asked students to compare and contrast the main character with others in the passage and to describe a lesson that can be learned from the narrative. Writing directions included a reminder to address all parts of the writing task, to support the main idea with evidence from both reading selections, to use precise and descriptive language, and to proofread the paper (see Appendix II for the prompts used).

*Administration.* The writing assessment was administered to 225 students across four levels of composition courses. Administration was completed by the second week of classes in

all of the course sections to minimize the amount of instruction students received before testing. To prevent biased advantage based on the prompt, two different but structurally comparable prompts and sets of texts were used. Half of the students at each course level were given a test with one prompt and set of texts and the other half, the other.

The writing assessment was administered in two 45-minute segments. In the first segment, faculty read the two texts aloud to students. Students followed along with their own copy of the texts and were encouraged to annotate. Students were then guided by faculty through the completion of a conceptual planning packet that included three steps using graphic organizers that led to the formation of a distinct claim, establishing their main argument for the paper. These three steps were to: 1) list qualities of leadership or resilience presented in the nonfiction article and to identify the characteristic they believed was most essential in enabling the character to meet their goals or to survive; 2a) define the previously selected essential characteristic and to provide at least two instances of evidence from the literary nonfiction passage including examples and direct quotes that illustrate how the character demonstrates that characteristic; 2b) explain why the selected characteristic was essential to the character's success and/or survival, and 3) compare and contrast the character's response to the life-threatening situation with the responses of others in the passage and to identify how the differences contributed to the character's success and/or survival. In the second 45-minute segment, students referred to the two annotated passages and the completed conceptual planning packet to write the essay.

*Rubric and Scoring.* The assessment rubric was aligned with established measures of high school writing competency, measuring skills that students should have when ready for college based on the California High School Exit Exam (required for graduation in California

up to 2015), the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2011) requirements, the California Common Core State Standards (2010), and The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing (2011). Assessment scores were determined holistically on a 6-point scale, based upon the following features: quality and depth of interpretation, the clarity of the claim, the organization of ideas, the appropriateness and adequacy of textual evidence, use of sentence variety, and the correct use of English conventions (see Appendix III for scoring guidelines).

Readers of the exam were Fellows of a National Writing Project site who were involved voluntarily and selected based on the following criteria: possession of a Master's degree, experience teaching English, and participation in training for scoring papers. Norming procedures included reading through and scoring a set of anchor papers selected by experienced scoring leaders who followed the University of California System placement essay scoring procedures, with slight modifications. Readers and leaders discussed paper scores and leaders retrained any scorers that had a problematic response set. Leaders also served as third scorers, resolving discrepancies of a one-point or greater difference.

After norming procedures, each paper was scored on a scale of 1-6 by two trained readers. Reader scores were then combined to establish an official score, ranging from 2-12. In cases when there was a discrepancy in the two scores by two or more points, the papers were scored by a third, more experienced reader. When the third score was the same as either of the first two scores, the two matching scores were combined to determine the official score. If the third score differed from the first two, it was added to the average of the initial scores. A score of seven or greater was considered a passing score.

*Scoring Reliability.* An alpha score was calculated to determine inter-rater reliability. There was inter-rater agreement on scores 87% of the time ( $\alpha=0.87$ ). Exact agreement occurred almost 60% of the time ( $\alpha=0.58$ ), and there was almost total agreement on scores within one point ( $\alpha=0.98$ ).

### *Analyses*

To investigate the extent that the writing of students who are classified as “underprepared” differs from that of students who are considered “college-level” writers and which features of writing are there the most pronounced differences between students in the various course levels, a subsample of papers ( $n=76$ ) was purposively selected to represent all scores from each course level and was further analyzed for qualitative features that strengthened the writing. This subsample consisted of 36% of the overall sample of student papers (exceeding the 20% threshold of subsample/sample ratio recommended by John Creswell, 2017). Two analyses were performed. In the first analysis, writing features were identified, counted, and compared in frequency across levels. The second analysis focused on high scoring papers and examined distinctive features that included, but also went beyond, the features exhibited in average or lower-scoring papers.

*Writing Features.* The specific writing features were identified inductively and emerged through multiple, iterative observation cycles during several passes through the data. This observation, conducted by the lead researcher, was informed by existing literature in composition studies as presented in the conceptual framework of this paper in addition to the lead researcher’s twelve years of experience as an instructor of developmental writing in the community college setting. Each of the features was listed upon identification. New features were added to the list as they emerged through repeated observation in the student essays. On an

initial pass through the data, more common features such as a clear beginning and a distinct ending were identified. Other features became apparent through subsequent readings of the essays. The lead researcher was blind to the scoring guide at the time.

Once the writing features were identified and no other features emerged, student papers were analyzed and coded for presence or non-presence of each of the writing features (presence = 1, non-presence = 0). The presence of each feature was then counted for frequency in each course level and the frequency of each feature was calculated and compared across levels. Two-way t-tests were run to detect statistically significant differences in the frequency of each feature between course levels.

*High Scoring Papers.* Another qualitative analysis was performed on a subsample of papers (n=18) investigating distinguishing elements of high-scoring papers that were not present in lower-scoring papers. Papers selected for this analysis included all essays in the full sample that exceeded the passing score of 7 by two or more points (papers that had an official score ranging from 9-12). The distinctiveness of high scoring features became apparent during the previous inductive analysis of writing features when some papers were found to exhibit features that extended beyond the identified features previously discussed.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### *Identified Writing Features*

Nine features of writing were identified, counted and compared across the four course levels. These features are: 1) a beginning that provides context; 2) a hook, or attempt to get the reader's attention 3) a TAG, or reference to title-author-genre; 4) a clear claim; 5) relevant evidence supporting the claim; 6) a response to the prompt by presenting a claim about a single

characteristic that enabled the character to survive; 7) reference to one text; 8) or both texts; and 9) and a clear ending, or conclusion. These features are not entirely exclusive and can sometimes overlap, as in the case of a beginning and a hook; a hook is often part of a beginning that provides the reader with context, but can also stand alone as an appeal to the reader without the orientation provided to the reader by a beginning. The list is also not an exhaustive representation of important writing features, but is based upon the lead researcher’s analysis of student responses to the given writing assignment at the time.

The following examples from select student essays are presented to illustrate the presence and non-presence of the identified writing features, with the exception of features 7 and 8, which only provide an example of presence when students referred to the texts. The chart includes commentary (in italics below the examples) that highlights the differences between examples of presence and non-presence of each writing feature. Student responses are based on one of the two prompts and sets of readings administered on either Harriet Tubman or Louie Zamperini as described previously in the methods section.

*Note: All student writing is presented as written.*

Writing Feature	Examples from Student Writing
1) a beginning that provides context to the reader	<p><b>Presence:</b> In a extreme situation one will react in two different way, fight or flight. This reaction is a mental response in order to survive hard conditions. One’s response could either make or break them. In the story, Unbroken by Laura Hillenbrand, Louie finds himself in an airplane crash in the middle of the ocean; that could lead to his death. Louie soon understand his critical situation, and becomes aware he must use the little he has in order to survive.</p> <p><b>Non-presence:</b> The most enabling characteristic what Louie had for his survival was strong problem-solving skills. Without Louie’s strong problem-solving skills, the others probably might have died without Louie. Louie had to make the hard strong decisions, cause he was the least badly injured. At that time, Louie was very resilience, of the event which had happened.</p>

	<p><i>In the first example, the writer is priming the reader for the topic by providing a broad introduction before narrowing in on the story. The writer also names the text and author, supplying the reader with the source of information. These moves are evidence of a more experienced writer that takes the reader into consideration and are absent in the second example, which begins directly by making a claim.</i></p>
<p>2) a hook, or attempt to appeal to the reader</p>	<p><b>Presence:</b> When it comes to resilience it can mean many things to different people. I have to strongly say that resilience is mainly being able to solve problems. It's ok to have awarnes, being calm or even having a positive attitude. All of that is pointless unless you can solve your problems.</p> <p><b>Non-presence:</b> One important key quality of leadership is confidence in the story Underground Railroad by Ann Petry. Harriet had to take the slaves to Canada without get caught. The scared Harriet went in the middle of the night to the house were the slaves were out and called out to them knowing someone could hear her.</p> <p><i>The writer of the first example attempts to engage the reader before making a claim, providing a discussion of resilience that prepares the reader for the claim that follows. The second writer begins without a hook by commencing with a direct response to the prompt question.</i></p>
<p>3) a TAG, or reference to title-author-genre</p>	<p><b>Presence:</b> In the short article "Seven Qualities of a Good Leader", author Barbara White describes in detail seven different qualities that make a good leader.</p> <p><b>Non-presence:</b> Louie was a great problem solver, he would never let obstacles get in his way. This was a great skill he obtained because in this journey it lead him a long way. Even though he was put in a life threatening situation his great resilient skill helped him find solutions and alternatives to his problems.</p> <p><i>In the first example, the writer provides the title and author of the text used, while the writer of the second example does not.</i></p>
<p>4) a clear claim</p>	<p><b>Presence:</b> Harriet Tubman was a leader. A former slave who escaped slavery, she became a "conductor" for the Underground Railroad, where she helped other slaves escape and led them to the North where they could be free. It took guts and determination to lead an endeavor like this back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Harriet had lots of it. Her most powerful tool as a leader of the Railroad was her dedication to its cause; without it, she may have failed to successfully lead many slaves to freedom.</p> <p><b>Non-presence:</b> What would you do if one day you are in war? Imagine yourself in world war II and you're plane just crashed, no land just water. Instantly what would you're reaction be. If you ask me I'd probably think I am a gamer and will die very soon. That is not what Louie Zamperini did. Louie was in the 1936 olympic games. This young man was born in Torrance to Italian immigrants during world war II. He was the bombardier on a B-29 Liberator.</p> <p><i>The first example includes a clear claim: that dedication is Harriet's strongest quality as a leader. In the second example, although the writer has a solid hook and beginning, it does not lead to a claim about the character's strongest quality. The writer continues in the next (not shown here) paragraph with a summary of the story. Lack of a guiding claim and overreliance on summary are characteristic of less experienced writers.</i></p>

<p>5) relevant evidence supporting the claim</p>	<p><b>Presence:</b> Harriet had all seven qualities of a leader but dedication played the biggest role in her success. She never gave up and would not stop until her death. At one point there was one slave who wanted to turn back and she told him “go on with us or die.” She carried the gun as a threat but if she had to use it she would. She would feel guilty but she knew what was best for the group.  <b>Non-presence:</b> Harriet Tubman in my eyes was a really great leader. In the text she shows great leadership when the authors says, “somehow she would have to instill courage into these eleven people” (Petry, 11).</p> <p><i>The writer in the first example claims that dedication played the biggest role in Harriet’s success. The claim is supported with a reason (not giving up and not stopping until death), an instance from the text and a quote that illustrate the claim, and commentary connecting the textual evidence to the claim. In the second example, the writer makes a claim and attempts to support it through textual evidence while quoting the author. However, although the quote provided is set up to illustrate how Harriet shows great leadership, it does not deliver because of its incidental relation to the claim that the character exhibits great leadership.</i></p>
<p>6) response to the prompt by claiming a single characteristic that enabled the character to survive</p>	<p><b>Presence:</b> Out of the seven qualities found within a good leader I believe dedication was the most essential in Harriet Tubman leading the slaves up North. Harriet took great pride in what she was doing. She knew the risk she was taking each and every time she would return for more slaves but she did not care. Her goal was to help as many slaves as possible. 3XX1291315  <b>Non-presence:</b> In the article “Unbroken”, Laura Hillenbrand describes how Louis, Phil, and Mac are keeping struggle to alive on the ocean and illustrate the difficulties for the humans stay on the sea.</p> <p><i>The writer of the first example answers the prompt by providing a single characteristic that was most essential for the character’s survival. In the second example, the writer does not name a single characteristic here or go on to name one later.</i></p>
<p>7) reference to one text</p>	<p><b>Presence:</b> In the story, “The Railroad Runs to Canada,” Harriet Tubman shows several leadership skills that aided her through her journey.</p> <p><i>The writer of this example makes reference to the literary non-fiction text.</i></p>
<p>8) reference to both texts</p>	<p><b>Presence:</b> In the excerpt from Harriet Tubman: conductor on the Underground Railroad by Ann Petry, we learn of an African American woman who saves 11 runaways and leads them to Canada thanks to properly executed leadership skills. Her dedication, which we learn is her enthusiasm in her role from “Seven qualities of a Good Leader” by Barbara White, is what helps the group reach their goal to freedom.</p> <p><i>This writer makes reference to the literary non-fiction text as well as the non-fiction article.</i></p>



9) a conclusion, or a clear ending	<p><b>Presence:</b> What we can learn from Harriet Tubman is that you can never give up. The moment you do, your plans all fail and you lose. If you feel like your plan won't work, you have to just find other ways to make it work like Tubman did. Once you do that and have hope and a promise, it will be done and you will be a happy person at the end of it all. 3XX1291310</p> <p><b>Non-presence:</b> Another problem that presented concern was how to stay sane in a nerve wrecked situation they were in. Three men in the middle of the Pacific Ocean on one raft can cause alot of uncomfortable stress. Therefore, Louie decided to keep everyone communicating effectively in paragraph 24 by, "peppering the other two with questions on every conceivable subject." This shows Louie's ability to cope and utilize the skills he has. (last paragraph)</p> <p><i>In the first example, the writer concludes by presenting what can be learned from the character. In the second example, which presents the last paragraph of the writer's work, there is no distinct conclusion.</i></p>
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### *Frequency of Writing Features Compared Across Course Levels*

These features differed in the frequency of their appearance between course levels. Those differences were tested for statistical significance in order to determine the degree and importance of the difference. For three of the writing features, statistically significant differences were found between students in pre-collegiate courses (PCL1, PCL2 and PCL3) and students in the transfer-level course (CL) (see Table 3.2 for frequency of writing features by course level). These features are: 1) making a clear claim ( $p < .00$ ), 2) following prompt directions to discuss a single characteristic that helped the character to survive ( $p = 0.03$ ) and 3) making reference to the text ( $p = 0.05$ ). Results revealing significant differences between specific skills at various course levels can help guide curriculum decisions, providing direction for faculty about elements of instruction on which to focus that can help strengthen student writing.

Two of these differences, making a claim and following prompt directions, occurred between the writing of students in the college-level course (CL) and the lowest level precollegiate course (PCL1). In a previous study, students in the PCL1 course have been shown to differ significantly in their average writing scores on this assessment as compared with

students in the college-level course (Nazzal, et al.). (It is also noteworthy that students in PCL2 were marginally significantly different in their average writing proficiency score than the college-level students). These students, under the new placement policy will be placed into college-level composition. Since their previous experiences may not have prepared them to take on the challenges of college-level work in composition, targeted instruction in making a claim (which is essential to academic writing) and following the prompt directions in order to ensure that the writing they produce is on topic, may give them a better chance at success in the course. As described earlier in this paper, experienced writers exhibit issue-centered organization and work to find the form or shape of an argument in their writing. Students in the college-level course seemed to exhibit this understanding by making a clear claim in their papers while students in PCL1 generally did not.

**Table 3.4** Frequency of Writing Features by Course Level

Level Feature	PCL 1	PCL 2	PCL 3	CL	stat sig
Beginning	.57*	.72	.87*	.74	p=.04
Hook	.29	.22	.57	.42	
Tag	.29	.22	.3	.47	
Claim	.79*	.94	.91	.95*	p=<.00
Evidence	.71	.88	.91	.95	
Singlechar	.57*	.83	.78	.89*	p=.03
Text 1	.21	.22	.43*	.74*	p=.05
Text 2	.07	.11	.22	.26	
Conclusion	.64	.72	.65	.68	

*Statistical significance between the two starred course levels in each row is noted in the far right column.*

Another difference between the two groups was how well they followed prompt directions in focusing on a single characteristic that distinguished the main character from others in the excerpt. Students who did not do this in their papers either lacked a clear claim or

included one that was overly broad and did not follow the prompt directions of making a claim about a single characteristic that allowed the character to succeed or to survive. These students would benefit from instruction that teaches them to break down the prompt requirements and address them specifically.

The third feature in which there were significant differences in frequency between the college-level and precollegiate course levels is making reference to the text. This difference occurred between the college-level course and each of the three precollegiate levels, suggesting that students in all three precollegiate levels can benefit from instruction in this feature. Additionally, only three quarters of the college-level papers made reference to the text, so many students in the college-level course can also benefit from instruction in making reference to the text, which is used to credit a source and/or to provide context to the reader and to build author credibility and is especially important in academic writing.

Additionally, a statistically significant difference was found between the highest (PCL3) and lowest (PCL1) precollegiate courses in how often students had a beginning in their essays that provided context to the reader ( $p=0.04$ ). This difference was not significant between PCL1 and the CL course. In this comparison, students in the PCL3 course made this writing move with a higher frequency than students in the higher level CL course. This result may be due to the larger distribution of scores in the college-level course. Students who began their papers in a way that provided context for the reader show evidence of the writer taking the reader into consideration, a move that is characteristic of experienced writers as discussed in the conceptual framework (Sommers; Flower). Explicit instruction and practice in writing a clear beginning can be beneficial to students who place in levels PCL 1 and PCL 2, especially if the new placement policy results in these students being placed directly into a transfer-level course.

In general, all students can benefit from the explicit teaching of these features since only about half of students at the college-level received passing scores, and less than half of the overall sample (n=210) were considered to have provided a sufficient response to the writing prompt. Students in the college-level course showed strength in making a claim, providing evidence to support that claim, and responding to the prompt. Writing moves they made less frequently are writing a beginning that provides context to the reader, making reference to the text, and writing a clear conclusion. The features in which they demonstrated a clear need for instruction were in writing a hook, making reference to title, author and genre, and integrating a second text into their work.

### *High-Scoring Papers*

Because there were few papers that scored high (9% of the overall sample) and it became clear through the above inductive analysis of writing features that some papers went above and beyond the features that were listed, an additional (and initially unintended) analysis of high scoring papers was conducted. For example, although in the first analysis, presence or non-presence of a claim was determined, high-scoring essays exhibited not only a claim, but one that was threaded throughout the paper and reiterated in the conclusion. Papers that had an official score of 9-12 (at least a 4 and a 5 from two readers and up to a 6 from both readers) were considered high-scoring (n=18). Over half (55%) of the high scoring papers were written by students in the college-level course, representing a fifth of students tested at that level.

Four distinctive features of high scoring papers were identified: 1) a clear claim that is threaded throughout the paper; 2) a claim that is supported by relevant evidence and substantiated with commentary that discusses the significance of the evidence; 3) a conclusion that ties back to the introduction; and 4) a response to all elements of the prompt. These writers

exhibit writing moves made by experienced writers as discussed previously. They have issue-centered organization that reflects an overall plan or goal for the writing and demonstrate a strategy for handling the whole essay (as evidenced by the advancement of the claim throughout the paper and a reiteration of that claim in the conclusion). They support the claim without losing sight of the overall goal of the paper. Additionally, they engage in knowledge transformation by including commentary that reflects original ideas as they present interpretations and discuss the significance of the evidence offered in support of their claim. The following chart includes examples of student writing that demonstrate the features which distinguished high-scoring papers from lower-scoring ones.

*Note: All student writing is presented as written.*

High-Scoring Writing Features	Examples from Student Writing
<p>1) A clear claim that is threaded throughout the paper</p> <p><i>The threading of the claim throughout the paper is highlighted.</i></p>	<p>In this excerpt “Unbroken” by Laura Hillenbrand, Hillenbrand describes the difficulties three men had to go through after surviving a plane crash. Phil, Mac, and Louie were deserted in the Pacific Ocean with minimum supplies and no goods. The three men had to share a six feet long raft and fish their own food. They all had to face exceptional difficulties and changes. However, Louie Zamperini conveyed a strong characteristic of resilience. <b>Louie’s most essential characteristic was his strong problem-solving skills</b> because he was able to analyze and find a solution out of a problem that could essentially expand or save his life.</p> <p><b>Louie displays strong problem-solving skills when</b> he calmly took action about a dilemma. After the crash, Louie had to assist Phil on his bleeding but also had to get a raft that was drifting away. In this dilemma, Louie had to decide whether he should help a comrade that is in danger or to save their last hope of survival. In Cherry’s article “What is Resilience”, the author explains that resilience individuals “are able to calmly and rationally look at the problem and envision a successful solution.” Louie did not panic, rather he knew what had to be done for survival and quickly took action. Eventually, Louie did grab the raft and also helped his friend. Without the raft, Louie and his comrades would not have survived as far as they did.</p> <p>Additionally, Louie also helped his comrades with a creative idea on how to save water. With dehydration, the three men had to find a way to save the water from the rain for future use. Louie created two techniques so they could conserve the water and utilize it when they have no more. Louie created essential methods to prevent from dieing from dehydration. He knew that rain</p>

	<p>would not always be there so he had to find a way to save water for his comrades and himself.</p> <p>Louie also demonstrates his knowledge when he captures a bird for bait. Although, they were not able to eat it, the three men used the bird as a way to attract fish. Louie finally captures a fish and they were able to eat. Additionally, Louie also comes up with the idea of tying three hooks to his finger, and “orienting them as if they were claws.” With this, they were able to eat another fish and survive from starvation. Louie demonstrates that he is a resilient individual with the skills to stay stable and come up with creative ideas to expand their survival.</p> <p>Louie displays strong problem-solving skills in his challenge of survival. With this, Louie was able to get out of difficult situations and find a way out. From Louie’s story of survival, one can also learn to develop as strong character and knowledge. Louie has conveyed that in order to succeed, an individual must stay stable and find a solution, even if it is not clear. It is essential to analyze the problem and create a solution to success.</p>
<p>2) A claim that is supported by relevant evidence and substantiated with commentary about the significance of the evidence</p> <p>The commentary on the significance of the evidence is highlighted</p>	<p>Louie also demonstrates his knowledge when he captures a bird for bait. Although they were not able to eat it, the three men used the bird as a way to attract fish. Louie finally captures a fish and they were able to eat. Additionally, Louie also comes up with the idea of tying three hooks to his finger and “orienting them as if they were claws.” With this, they were able to eat another fish, and survive from starvation. Louie demonstrates that he is a resilient individual with the skills to stay stable and come up with creative ideas to expand their survival.</p>
<p>3) A conclusion that ties back to the introduction</p> <p><i>The ideas connecting the introduction and conclusion are highlighted</i></p>	<p><b>Introduction:</b> A common misconception in today’s society is that people assume leadership skills come with power. Those who believe that are mistaken. In fact, there is no guaranteed correlation between power and the ability to lead. While it is possible to have both, it is not necessary. So in that case, who would be considered a good leader but not powerful? The answer to that question would simply be Harriet Tubman. Harriet Tubman was a free slave who stayed committed to freeing others.</p> <p><b>Conclusion:</b> In conclusion, it is evident that through these examples, Harriet Tubman proves to be a leader. She does so by staying committed even when she faces hardships. Despite many struggles, which include the likelihood of capture and punishment, thoughts of doubt and even the lack of morale to move forward, she still achieved her goal of attaining freedom for her followers. Her leadership skills make her stand out and differ from the other slaves, but her weaknesses prove that just like her slaves, she is still human. All in all, Tubman proves that wealth, social status, or any other type of power is not necessary to be a strong leader.</p>
<p>4) Address of all elements of the prompt:</p> <p><i>Discusses a key quality important to the character’s survival</i></p>	<p>Harriet Tubman was a leader. A former slave who escaped slavery, she became a “conductor” for the Underground Railroad, where she helped other slaves escape and led them to the North where they could be free. It took guts and determination to lead an endeavor like this back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Harriet had lots of it. Her most powerful tool as a leader for the Railroad was her dedication to its cause; without it, she may have failed to successfully lead many slaves to freedom.</p>

<p><i>Provides a comparison of the main characters with others in the text</i></p> <p><i>Discusses a lesson that can be learned from the story</i></p>	<p>In 1831, Harriet led eleven escaped slaves from Maryland all the way to Canada. The journey, as one may expect, was long and challenging for both the slaves and Harriet herself. But even as Harriet struggled with her own human limitations, she pressed on, encouraging the others to go with her repeated statement, “We got to go free or die.” She took that statement to heart; during the journey, one of the slaves threatened to give up and go home. Harriet pulled her gun on him and said she would kill him, as him returning to the South would jeopardize him as well as Harriet and the many confidants of the Railroad. It worked; he continued traveling north with the group. This shows that Harriet, despite being as tired and hungry as her group is still dedicated to this journey northward and will help and inspire others to continue along with her. Her method of inspiring may be a bit unconventional, but nonetheless, it is what a leader would do.</p> <p>Harriet and her group of eleven may share the same past as escaped slaves, but that is where the similarities end. <b>The slaves, tired and hungry, needed someone to motivate them to keep going forward; Harriet was her own motivation and could give enough to everyone.</b> And she did; she motivated the group with stories of Canada and its beauty, or with the promise of great food and warm shelter. Her inspiring details gave the group the dedication they so sorely needed, and soon enough, they came to trust Harriet completely with their lives.</p> <p><b>What one may learn from Harriet’s heroism can be that dedication to a cause can be the best way one improves themselves as well as others.</b> One does not even have to be the leader to do so; as long as they have great spirits and motivation, they can do just about anything they put their minds to.</p>
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These writing features can be emphasized by faculty to provide targeted and explicit instruction that is particularly needed in community colleges where the rhetorical strategies expected in college writing are largely unfamiliar to students (Hassel & Giordano). Focused instruction and practice in the identified features of high-scoring papers can lead to gains in student writing at all levels since these papers exhibit writing moves that establish communicative clarity in an academic context. Students can be taught how to make a claim and to advance an argument by threading the claim throughout the paper, thereby continually reminding readers of the aim of the work. They can learn how to support their argument well, providing examples of relevant evidence from the text. They can find voice in academic writing by learning to provide original thinking through commentary that presents interpretations and explains the significance of the evidence they present. Additionally, they can learn to manage

the entire essay as a whole, without losing sight of the goal of the paper and while fulfilling all requirements provided in a prompt. These findings align with those in previous studies that show it is possible to understand the processes used by proficient writers and to teach those processes to writers who are less proficient (MacArthur & Philippakos). While students gain experience as writers, they move along a continuum of writing processes as discussed earlier in the conceptual framework, progressing from one end of the continuum as novices to the other end as experts.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The purpose of this study is to contribute to our existing knowledge about the writing of community college students in order to help guide reform efforts and to effectively meet the learning needs of students in college-level composition courses. Additionally, an aim of this work is to inform the development of targeted curriculum and instruction that can be used by faculty in the college-level courses who are charged with the responsibility of addressing a greater number of students in their courses that are less prepared for college-level work.

Although the results of this study highlight features of writing that can be taught, *how* to best teach those features is beyond the scope of this work. Also, as mentioned previously, these features are not an exhaustive list of important writing features. Further, this study does not address the issue of reading proficiency, which is critical to the production of academic writing that calls for thoughtful integration of complex texts. As part of this study, the texts were read by faculty to students as they followed along to help control for students' reading proficiency levels. When students are faced with college-level coursework that involves reading that is often unsupported or scaffolded, it is expected that more may struggle. Without the ability to access



complex course texts, students will likely employ the survival skill of writing from personal experience and narrative even when assignments ask to focus primarily on course readings (Hassel and Giordano).

In this study, we identify specific writing features that can be taught explicitly in order to help students succeed in the college-level composition course. Understanding the moves of more experienced writers can be especially helpful for students who previously placed in pre-collegiate courses but by new placement measures will place into the college-level course. Exposure to and instruction in specific writing features employed by college-level writers can help to facilitate student success through the emphasis of the rhetorical moves of academic discourse as they face challenging college-level coursework. The writing features presented here: a beginning that provides the reader with context; a hook, or attempt to appeal to the reader; a TAG, or reference to title-author-genre; a clear claim; relevant evidence supporting the claim; accurate response to the prompt; making reference to the text(s); and a conclusion, or a clear ending, can be taught to students, clarifying elements of strong academic writing and assisting students' success in college-level coursework. The identified features of high-scoring papers, which are: a clear claim that is threaded throughout the paper; support of the claim with relevant evidence, substantiated with commentary expressing original ideas that discuss the significance of the evidence; a conclusion that ties back to the introduction; and a response to all elements of the prompt, are valuable for students at all levels of writing proficiency and can be used by faculty to provide students with achievable goals to pursue in their academic writing.

With reform efforts that aim to place almost all students directly into the college-level course, instruction in the features of academic writing highlighted in this study is a small step forward in providing students with the support they need to succeed.

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## CHAPTER 4

### **Post-Reform Placement and Writing Proficiency in Community College Transfer-Level Composition Courses**

Under Review

## **Abstract**

Extensive reform is taking place in community colleges across the nation to help expedite the attainment of students' academic goals of degree completion and transfer to four-year institutions. This study examines whether a particular reform effort improves students' chances for success. The college writing placement test and precollegiate course sequence is replaced with directed self-placement of students into one of two versions of the college-level composition course—either with or without a concurrent support course. Compared are students' scores on an analytic, text-based writing assessment, their self-reported high-school GPA (HSGPA), and their final course grades. Results indicate 1) no significant differences between students in the two course types based on their level of academic writing proficiency or final course grades and 2) generally high course pass rates.



## Introduction

For many, community colleges are an appealing postsecondary educational option. They uphold an open access policy and welcome all who seek to advance their education, foregoing the stringent admissions requirements of some four-year institutions. Further, they provide local and flexible educational opportunities at about a third of the cost of four-year institutions (AACC). It is no wonder, then, that these institutions attract nearly half of the nation's undergraduates each year—students from a wide range of backgrounds who attend for a variety of reasons, including the attainment of career and technical certification and academic goals such as an associate degree and/or transfer to a university. Students who enroll in community colleges come from some of the most marginalized student populations in higher education; they are often first in their families to attend college, from racial groups historically underrepresented in higher education, and from low-income backgrounds (AACC). Although the broad acceptance policy of these institutions grants postsecondary access to students who may not otherwise attend college, it also gives rise to one of the most pressing challenges faced by two-year colleges—the need to uphold college-level academic standards while serving a broadly diverse student body (Hassel & Giordano).

This challenge has historically been addressed through pre college-level courses, (hereafter referred to as precollegiate, and also known as basic skills, remedial, or developmental). These courses have been described by some scholars as a “catapult,” (Goudas & Boylan) allowing access to postsecondary education to students who are considered underprepared for college-level curriculum while preparing them for college-level coursework (Arendale; Boylan and Bonham). Often, multi-level sequences of courses are offered in math, reading, and English, and standardized tests are used to determine preparedness and to place

students into either the college-level course (also referred to as transfer-level) or into a course within a sequence of precollegiate courses. Recently, however, standardized placement tests such as ACCUPLACER and Compass used widely to determine student preparedness for college-level work have come under scrutiny and have been shown to misplace about a third to one half of students, mostly under-placing them (Scott-Clayton; Belfield and Crosta; Hassel and Giordano; Barnett and Reddy). In other words, students that would have been successful in college-level courses have often been placed by standardized tests into pre-collegiate courses. Further, placement policies such as this have been shown to be inequitable, having a disparate impact on students from minority racial backgrounds who were found to be excluded disproportionately from college-level courses based on criteria that do not accurately reflect their ability to succeed (Henson and Hern). It has also been found that most students who are placed by such tests and enroll into precollegiate courses do not persist to transfer-level coursework.

Such data has brought the effectiveness of pre-collegiate courses into question (Boylan; Arendale) and has led to the rising belief that student placement into lengthy precollegiate course sequences hinders students' progress toward degree completion (Barnett and Reddy; Bueschel; Mejia, et al.). The result is a shift in the focus of policy—from merely providing college access to a greater number of students to supporting the accomplishment of students' educational goals, resulting in the attainment of certificates, degrees, and/or transfer to four-year institutions. This change has placed a greater emphasis and importance on initial placement of students into courses.

Of notable concern is the transfer-level English composition courses. It is in these courses that students become versed participants in academic discourse. They are the place

where students develop the advanced literacy skills needed to succeed in courses in other disciplines (Duff; Hassel and Giordano). Further, these courses are often situated within the institution as pre-requisites for other courses and are required for degree attainment and transfer to four-year colleges. In this way, they function as a gateway to college success in both their content and context (Nazzal, et al.) and are crucial to overall academic success (Emig; Kassner and Wardle; Rose; Troia ). However, despite the importance of taking and passing the transfer-level composition course, recent state-wide data in California reveals that most students in community colleges never even reach the point of enrolling in it, and less than half of students who start out in pre-collegiate writing courses take and pass the transfer-level composition course (Mejia, et al.). These students are essentially blocked from forward movement at the college that would lead to the attainment of their educational goals.

Widespread reform is underway across the nation with initiatives in several states to improve the persistence and completion rates of community college students. In California, where community colleges constitute the largest system of higher education in the nation, serving 2.1 million students (CCCCO), recently passed legislation has rapidly and drastically expanded the scope of reform throughout the state's 114 institutions. Assembly Bill 705 mandates a shift in the methods for placement of students into courses, eliminating the use of standardized tests and moving to the use of high school records, including courses taken, grades, and GPAs (Rodriguez). As a result of this directive, in effect since the fall of 2019, colleges are now required to make placement recommendations to students that ensure "optimized opportunities" for them to complete transfer level coursework within a year and are not allowed to place students into precollegiate courses unless they are "highly unlikely to succeed without them" (Hope 1).

The bill has been applied statewide with the goal of placing nearly all students directly into the transfer-level composition course. Many institutions are implementing the change by providing students the option of a concurrent support course. Rather than mandatory placement by the college, directed-self placement (DSP) is used to guide students in the selection of a fitting course option—either one that includes a support course or not. Information is provided by the college about the course options and a recommendation is made for a good fit based on students' self-report of high school GPA (HSGPA) and courses taken from their high school records. These changes have led to concerns about the adequate support of students and about the strain placed on faculty to address the needs of a greater number of students who were previously considered underprepared.

While extensive reform is taking place in community colleges across the nation, the purpose of this study is to gain insight about the impact of a particular reform effort on the placement of students into composition courses at a single institution. We seek to find if students who need the most writing support were, by the new placement method, positioning themselves to receive it and if the implementation of the reform has improved students' chances for achievement of their educational goals. To determine this, we ask: *What differences might exist in students' writing proficiency, high school GPAs, and final course grades between students who place themselves in the stand-alone college-level course (CL) and those who place themselves into the same course with a concurrent support course (CL+S)?* and *What is the relationship between students' HSGPA, their writing proficiency and their final course grade?* In order to answer these questions, a writing assessment and a survey were administered to 530 student participants enrolled in the transfer-level composition course at a community college. These instruments and the methods employed will be explained further in the next section.

## Method

### Institutional Context

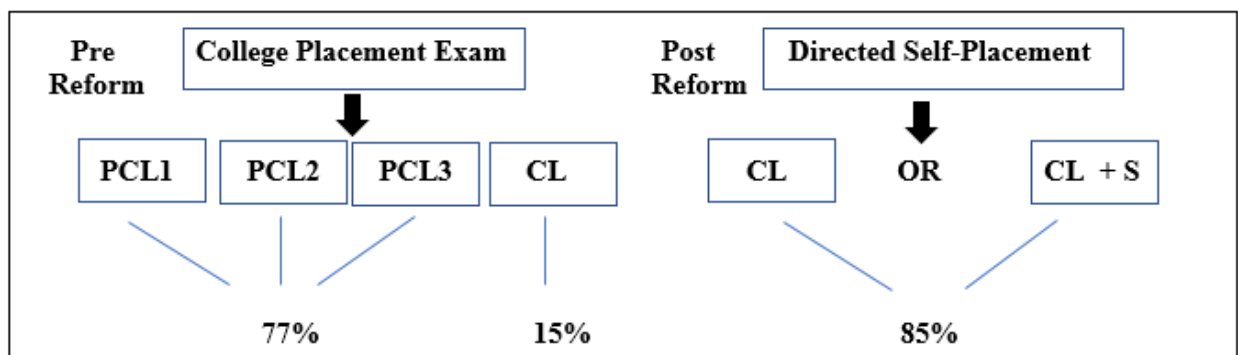
The present research was conducted at a community college in southern California enrolling approximately 50,000 students. The institution is one of the largest single-campus community colleges in the state and is designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Enrolled students are primarily Hispanic (55%) and Asian (19%). Most attend the college part time and three-quarters receive financial aid. The study is situated in the present context of widespread reform in community colleges across the nation that aims to expedite the accomplishment of students' goals of certificate and degree attainment and/or transfer to four-year institutions. The college was an early adopter of reform among community colleges in California, and this investigation takes place in the spring and fall semesters of 2019, shortly after the implementation of structural and curricular changes that affected the placement of students into composition courses. This included a major restructuring of courses and alteration of criteria by which students were placed into courses, as described in the next section.

### *Pre and Post Reform Placement*

Prior to the implementation of reform, a faculty-created and holistically-scored writing assessment was used to place students into one of four composition course options: one of three pre-collegiate course levels or the college-level composition course (see Figure 4.1). The placement exam consisted of an option between two freestanding (non text-based) prompts. Students were given 45 minutes to answer the prompt in writing, either by hand or on a computer. Based on the results of this assessment, about 15% of students were placed into the college-level, or transfer-level composition course (CL) and 77% placed into one of three

precollegiate courses (PCL1, PCL2, PCL3). The remaining percentage of students placed into the college’s English as a Second Language (ESL) or American Language courses.

**Figure 4.1** Student Enrollment Pre and Post Placement Reform



The implementation of reform resulted in the near elimination of the precollegiate course sequence and replacement of the writing placement exam by an online questionnaire, which provided students with a course recommendation to self-place into one of two versions of the college-level composition course— either one with or without a concurrent support course (see Table 4.1 for course descriptions). The acceptance of this guidance was not mandated— students could choose whether or not to follow the recommendation. The guidance, based primarily on high school records (including students’ self-report of HSGPA and courses taken), resulted in 85% of students enrolling into the college-level course (73% into CL, the stand-alone college-level course and 12% into CL+S, the version with a concurrent support course). The remaining percentage of students enrolled in either the ESL or American Language courses, or into one of the few remaining sections of precollegiate courses offered. The cut off of HSGPA for recommendation for enrollment in the CL course was  $\geq 2.6$ . Students with a lower GPA were directed toward enrollment into the CL+S course version. The reform led to a large

shift in the number of students placing directly into the CL course, from 15% to 85% over the time span of one year, from the fall of 2018 to fall of 2019.

**Table 4.1** Course Type and Content

Type	Title	Course Content
CL	Freshman Composition	Development of expository writing skills. Investigates the principles and methods of composition as applied to the research process and writing of essays. Critical reading of academic material.
CL + S	CL + Preparation for College Writing	CL content + Development of the academic essay based on critical reading of texts.

*The CL+S Course Option*

At this institution, the CL+S course option is identical in content (according to the course outline and outcomes) to the CL course, but offers supplementary supports, including an additional class session and access to a tutor. The additional class session is scheduled as a stand-alone, one-unit section linked to the CL course that meets for one hour a week. Individual faculty decide how the time is used. The section is conducted before or after the CL session, and sometimes on a different day of the week. Tutors in the Classroom (TCs) are assigned to all CL+S course sections. The TC Program is managed through the college’s writing center and is described as a combination of tutoring and supplemental instruction. TCs are non-students, employed through the writing center that attend class with students for both CL and S class times to become familiar with the class work and assignments. They meet regularly with the instructor outside of class time to clarify questions or to discuss concerns and to provide support to students as arranged with the instructor during class time. Additionally, TCs hold optional tutoring sessions and one-on-one meetings with students outside of regular class time to help

facilitate students’ understanding of class assignments and course content. They do not participate in grading.

*Participants*

A writing assessment was administered to 530 student participants in 25 course sections of the college-level composition course over the spring and fall semesters of 2019. Of these participants, 255 students were enrolled in eleven sections of the stand-alone version of the course and 275 students in 14 sections of the version with the additional, concurrent support course. Students in the course sections taught by six participating faculty were involved in the study, with the option to opt out. (see Table 4.2).

**Table 4.2** Study Participants and Course Sections

		Spring	Fall	Total
<b>Students</b>	CL	199	56	255
	CL+S	103	172	275
<b>Total</b>		<b>302</b>	<b>228</b>	<b>530</b>
<b>Faculty</b>		5	3	<b>6*</b>
<b>Course Sections</b>		16	9	<b>25</b>

*\*Two faculty members participated in both spring and fall*

*Student demographics*

Participants were mostly (73%) between the ages of 17 and 21. Male and female participants were almost equally represented in the sample, male (48%) and female (52%). Student participants were 60% Hispanic, 22% Asian, 15% White, 1.5% African American and 1.5% other races. Most students were bilingual (73%), speaking at least one language in addition to English. The other languages spoken were primarily Spanish (70%) and Chinese (11%), including Mandarin and Cantonese. The remaining languages indicated (12%) are, in



order of highest frequency, Vietnamese, Japanese, Korean, American Sign Language, Tagalog and Arabic. Nearly half (47%) of the bilingual students are English learners who indicated having taken either English as a Second Language (ESL) or English Language Development (ELD) classes throughout their educational experiences. These students consist of 36% of the total sample.

A high school diploma was reported to be the highest level of education attained by either one or both parents for 60% of participants. For 21% of participants, the highest level of education of either parent was reported to be less than a high school diploma. Only 7% of the sample had at least one parent with a professional degree. Half of participating students reported working. Those who did work reported working an average of 25 hours per week while attending the college.

Almost all students (93%) who reported taking the college questionnaire (n=252) indicated that they followed the college's course recommendation for enrollment into their selection of the composition course. 87% of student respondents (n=334) indicated that they thought the composition course they enrolled in is a good fit for them. Nearly all (84%) participants (n=507) indicated having the goal of attainment of the associate's degree and/or transfer.

### **Data Collection and Analytic Measures**

To investigate possible differences between students who self-placed into the CL and CL+S courses, we draw upon data obtained from an academic writing assessment (AWA) and a student survey to compare the following variables between students in the two course types: writing proficiency level, student reported high school grade point average (HSGPA), and final

grade in the course. These instruments were used in our earlier work conducted at the same institution (Nazzal, et al., 2019 & 2020).

The survey was used to gather information about students' educational background and goals as well as their perceived level of preparedness for college and their reasons for selecting the course type chosen. Information obtained from the surveys included: student-reported HSGPA, the placement recommendation received from the college questionnaire and whether or not they followed the college's recommendation for enrollment. For this study, another section of additional questions was added to the survey (see Appendix IV).

#### *Writing Assessment Instrument*

The instrument used to assess writing competency and to detect academic writing strengths and weaknesses was a text-based analytical writing assessment (AWA) which called for the interpretation and integration of two texts and the creation of an interpretive argument in a well-structured essay (Olson & Land). The assessment was selected because its prompts required students to read, interpret, and synthesize two texts and to construct an argument drawing upon both sources—skills that are emphasized in both the Common Core State Standards and the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing and that are known to scholars as a holistic literacy practice that signifies college readiness (Perin). The assessment rubric measured skills that students should have when ready for college and was aligned with established measures of high school writing competency such as the California High School Exit Exam (required for graduation in California up to 2015), requirements of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2011), the California Common Core State Standards (2010) and the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing (2011). The assessment was administered to 90% of students (n=479) in both versions of the course. This number differs

from the full sample of 530 because some students completed the survey, but did not provide a writing sample. Those who did provide a writing sample were 89% of students enrolled in the CL course (n=227) and 92% of those enrolled in the CL+S course (n=252).

### *Administration*

Administration of the AWA occurred in two 45-minute segments and was completed by the third week of classes in all of the course sections to minimize the amount of instruction students received before testing. In the first segment, faculty read two texts aloud while students followed along with their own copy of the texts. This helped to mitigate the varying levels of reading ability that might cause differences in how well students could access the readings. Students were encouraged to annotate the text as they were read. Faculty then guided students through the completion of a conceptual planning packet using graphic organizers that led to the formation of a distinct claim, establishing the main argument for the paper. In the second 45-minute segment, students wrote the essay while referring to the two annotated passages and the completed conceptual planning packet.

### *Prompts and Texts*

Students responded to the prompts while making and supporting a claim about what they identified as the characteristic that was most essential to the character's success or survival. One of the texts is a biographical literary non-fiction excerpt on a historical, heroic figure and the other, a shorter, non-fiction article outlining particular character qualities or traits. Two different but structurally comparable prompts and sets of texts were used to minimize individual advantage based on the prompt. Students received either a biographical excerpt on abolitionist and political activist, Harriet Tubman and an article on leadership, or a biographical excerpt on

war hero and plane crash survivor, Louie Zamperini and an article on resilience. Half of the students in each course type were given a test with one prompt and set of texts and the other half, the other in order to control for differences that may arise between groups based on the prompt (see Appendix II for prompts used).

### *Scoring*

After norming procedures, assessments were scored holistically on a 6-point scale. Papers that scored four or greater were considered proficient (see Appendix III for scoring guidelines). Readers were doctoral students in the School of Education at the University of California, Irvine (UCI). They had various backgrounds in literacy including possession of a master's degree, previous experience teaching English and fellowship through the UCI site of the National Writing Project. All readers participated in training and norming for scoring papers.

### *Robustness Check*

To check for robustness in scoring, a subsample of papers consisting of 22% (n=103) of the overall sample was read and scored a second time. The subsample was selected purposively through stratified randomization to represent all scores in each course type in proportion to the score frequency. This sample exceeds the 20% threshold of subsample/sample ratio recommended by methods scholar, John Creswell. Papers in the subsample were read and scored a second time. Those that had matching first and second scores were considered in agreement. Agreement was found within one point of difference for most of the subsample (87%). Exact agreement of scores occurred with 51% of the papers.

## **Analyses**

Students' level of writing proficiency was measured by the assessment administered, described previously in the method section (n=479). Students' self-reported HSGPA was obtained from the aforementioned student surveys. A HSGPA was reported by 88% of students in the overall sample (n=468). Some students reported a range, such as 3.0-3.6 rather than a single average. In such cases, the median (3.3) was recorded. The 12% of students who did not report a GPA either left the line on the survey blank, indicated that they were unsure or did not remember, or reported that the question was not applicable. Final course grade data were obtained from the institution for consenting students (n=346).

Averages for each variable in the two course types were calculated and tested for statistically significant differences between them using two-way t tests. Correlational analyses using the Pearson's r coefficient were used to detect and test the strength of a linear relationship between the variables.

## **Results**

### *Student Writing Performance Between Course Types*

To investigate differences in student writing between the two course types, CL and CL+S, mean scores on the AWA were calculated and compared. Score distributions follow a normal curve and vary more widely in the CL course. Students in the CL course scored every possible score, 1-6. The range of scores was smaller in the CL+S course, with scores ranging from 1-5 (see Table 4.3).

**Table 4.3** Score Distribution by Course Type

Course/Score	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
CL	2	33	80	99	11	2	227
CL+S	7	34	113	72	20	0	246
Total	9	67	193	171	31	2	473

473

*Score distributions follow a normal curve. A score of 4 or above is considered an adequate response to the prompt.*

A score of 4 or more was considered an adequate response to the prompt, demonstrating proficiency. Close to half of all students assessed (43%) received a score of 4 or above (see Table 4.4 for proficiency rates). In the CL course, about half of the students (49%) received a score that is considered proficient. For students in the CL+S course, the percentage was lower (37%). High scoring papers with a score of 5 or 6 constituted 7% of the overall sample, and were more highly represented in the CL+S course type (8% compared to 6% in the CL course).

More than half of the papers in the overall sample (57%) received a non-proficient score. Of these papers, 41% scored a 3, just below the proficient mark. This percentage was lower for the CL course (35%) and higher for the CL+S course (46%). Papers that scored a 1 or a 2 were considered far below proficient. These papers were 16% of the overall sample, 15% of the CL papers, and 17% of the CL+S papers.

**Table 4.4** AWA Scores and Proficiency Rates by Course Type

Score	Full Sample	CL	CL+S
Sample (n)	473	227	246
Average (m)	3.33	3.40	3.26
Standard Dev. (sd)	0.880	0.858	0.898
Proficient (4+)	43%	49%	37%
High-scoring (5-6)	7%	6%	8%
Non-Proficient (<4)	57%	51%	63%
Just below (3)	41%	35%	46%
Far below (1-2)	16%	15%	17%

*The difference in mean scores between the two course types is marginally statistically significant (p= 0.09).*

The average score for the overall sample was 3.33 (see Table 4.4 for mean scores). The CL course average score of 3.4 was slightly higher (by 0.07) than the overall average. The CL+S average score of 3.26 was slightly lower than the overall average (also by 0.07) and 0.14 lower than the CL group. This difference in mean scores between the two courses is small and only marginally significant ( $p=.09$ ).

### *High School GPA*

The average HSGPA for all participants was nearly a 3.0 (see Table 4.5). Students in the CL course had a higher average (3.13) than the overall sample and the average for students in the CL+S was lower (2.87). The difference between the two groups (0.14) is statistically significant ( $p<.001$ ).

**Table 4.5** Averages by Course Type

	Full Sample	CL	CL+S	diff CL/CL+S	p-value
AWA Score	3.33 n=473	3.40 n=227	3.26 n=246	0.14*	0.09
HSGPA	2.99 n=467	3.13 n=232	2.87 n=235	0.26***	0.00
Course grade	3.30 n=346	3.39 n=143	3.24 n=203	0.15	0.32
Pass rate (C or better)	75%	80%	71%		

\*  $p<0.10$ , \*\*\* $p<.001$

### *Final Course Grades and Pass Rates*

Most students in both course types passed the course with a grade of C or better (see Table 4.5 for course pass rates). Students whose writing was scored as both proficient and non-proficient in the third week of the semester had a course pass rate of 76% (see Table 4.6 for pass rates by proficiency level).

**Table 4.6** Course Grade: Percent Passing by Writing Proficiency Level

Score	Full Sample (n=346)	CL	CL+S
<b>Proficient (4+)</b>	<b>76%</b>	<b>76%</b>	<b>73%</b>
High-scoring (5-6)	69%	65%	71%
<b>Non-Proficient (&lt;4)</b>	<b>76%</b>	<b>84%</b>	<b>71%</b>
Just below (3)	76%	85%	71%
Far below (1-2)	71%	79%	68%

High scoring papers with a score of 5 or 6 constituted 7% of the overall sample, and were more highly represented in the CL+S course type (8% compared to 6% in the CL course).

### *Relationship Between Writing Performance, High School GPA and Final Course Grades*

To investigate possible relationships between HSGPA, writing performance, and final course grades, three correlation analyses were performed. Results of the Pearson correlation indicated that there was a weakly positive association between students' writing scores and their self-reported high HSGPA ( $r=0.1642$ ,  $n=416$ ); a scatterplot reveals a lack of linear relationship, or interdependence, between the two variables. The second analysis, examining the relationship between students' writing scores on the AWA and final course grades also showed a weakly positive association ( $r=0.1134$ ,  $n=323$ ). The final correlation analysis conducted was between HSGPA and final course grades. The result reveals a weakly positive correlation between the two variables ( $r=0.2725$ ,  $n=311$ ), indicating that only 7% of the variation between the two variables is related ( $R^2=0.07$ ).

In our analysis of students who are in their first year and are new to the college (70% of study participants), we find that there are not significant differences between them and students who have been at the college longer and taken precollegiate level courses in their HSGPAs ( $p=.73$ ), AWA scores ( $p=.23$ ) or final course grades ( $p=.58$ ).



## Discussion

We conduct this work with the awareness of some limitations. First, we recognize that the type of writing we ask of students for the assessment used in this study is a single academic task that does not allow for revision and does not assess students' information literacy. In our assessment of what we term "proficiency," we acknowledge that the writing sample is a mere snapshot of what students are able to produce, one generated at a given moment of time, but also one that can help us to gain an understanding of students' familiarity with the academic genre. We utilize holistic scoring to evaluate the writing produced, which, despite its limitations, is regarded by assessment scholars as a "successful method of scoring writing" and a "major advance in the assessment of writing ability" (White, p.26). Additionally, we know that an on-demand, timed writing situation may allow advantage to writers who are more proficient and are also aware that our findings are specific to a single institution and a particular student demographic. Despite these less-than-ideal conditions, we conduct this work with the goal of gaining insight that can be shared and with the hope that it will not be overly generalized. It is with full acknowledgement of these limitations that we offer a discussion of our findings.

### *Differences Between Course Types*

In investigating the question *What differences might exist in students' writing proficiency, HSGPAs, and final course grades between students who place themselves in the stand-alone college-level course (CL) and those who place themselves into the same course with a concurrent support course (CL+S)?* we find that: 1) students in the two groups do not differ significantly in their writing proficiency as measured by the assessment in this study; 2)

students are enrolled into the two course types by measurably differing HSGPAs, but HSGPA is unrelated to their measured levels of writing proficiency; and 3) differences in students' final course grades between the two course types are insignificant.

### *Writing Proficiency*

Results of this study show that under the current placement policy, students of nearly all levels of writing proficiency enroll in both course types (with the exception of those who scored a 6—see Table 4.3). This wide range of scores in both course types demonstrates a need for differentiated instruction for students enrolled in *both* the CL and CL+S course. Although there was a difference in students' mean scores on the AWA between the two groups, we found that the difference is only marginally significant ( $p=.09$ ). This suggests that even though the percent of proficient students in the CL course (49%) is higher than that in the CL+S course (37%) by 12 percentage points, the two groups do not differ enough in terms of students' writing ability to warrant the need for two course types in order to address students' writing needs.

*Just below proficient.* More than half of the papers in the overall sample (57%) received a non-proficient score. A large portion of these papers (41%) scored a 3, just below the proficient mark. This percentage was lower for the CL course (35%) and higher for the CL+S course (46%). These results revealing low proficiency rates are consistent with previous research that shows that writing continues to present a great challenge for large numbers of students through the postsecondary level (MacArthur and Philippakos; Perin). For the considerable number of students whose writing is just on the threshold of what would be considered proficient, targeted instruction in the strategies used by proficient writers can help them to effectively communicate in the academic register. Researchers have highlighted the need for the explicit teaching of writing, and previous studies show it is possible to understand

the processes used by proficient writers and to teach those processes to writers who are less proficient (MacArthur and Philippakos). In a previous study in which the same assessment was administered to students across four levels of composition courses, we identify specific writing features that can be taught explicitly and discuss differences in how students in the various course levels employed the features in their writing (Nazzal, et al., 2020). Knowledge of such features can be valuable for students at all levels of writing proficiency and can be used by faculty to provide students with achievable goals to pursue in their academic writing.

*Far Below Proficient.* Papers that scored a 1 or a 2 comprised 16% of the overall sample and were 15% of the CL papers and 17% of the CL+S papers. These papers were considered far below proficient. We have reason to believe that these students might have placed, under the previous policy, into the lowest-level precollegiate course. In our previous studies, which took place before the implementation of reform at the same institution as in this study, we found that students who placed into the lowest-level precollegiate course were found to differ significantly in their average writing scores on the AWA as compared with students in the college-level course (Nazzal, et al., 2019). There were also significant differences between these students and students in the college-level course in how often they employed certain writing features, such as making a claim and following prompt directions (Nazzal, et al., 2020). For students whose previous experiences may not have prepared them to take on the challenges of college-level work in composition, but who, under the new placement policy are placed into the college-level composition course, targeted instruction in specific writing features that are essential to academic writing can help them to better participate in academic discourse and possibly increase their chances for success.

### *High School GPA*

We also found that students enrolled in the two course types have measurably different average HSGPAs. This difference of 0.14 grade points between the two groups is statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ), meaning the difference is not merely a matter of chance. This result is expected, given that HSGPA is the primary measure used for the course recommendations made to students by the college and that almost all participants (93%) who took the college questionnaire indicated on the survey that they followed the college's recommendation in selecting the course version in which they enrolled. Results of the Pearson correlation indicated that there was a weakly positive association between students' writing scores and their self-reported HSGPA ( $r = 0.1642$ ,  $n = 416$ ) and a scatterplot reveals a lack of linear relationship, or interdependence, between the two variables.

This result confirms our earlier findings at the same institution using the AWA that show a lack of association between HSGPA and students' writing scores (Nazzal, et. al, 2019). Our previous work suggests that although HSGPA has been thought to reflect readiness for college coursework that is not captured by standardized exam scores (Hodara & Lewis), we found it to be weakly associated with students' levels of writing proficiency. The reliability of HSGPA as a placement measure has been questioned by researchers due to the lack of comparability across high schools, which can vary in many ways including course rigor, grading standards, and availability of highly qualified teachers and economic resources (Camara & Michaelides; Sackett, et al.). It has also been shown by writing studies scholars to reflect only a meager amount of writing assigned in high school that is often low in quality (Applebee and Langer; Kiuvara, et al.). Based upon the results in this study, HSGPA appears again to be an

insufficient measure for matching students more precisely with academic interventions that meet their needs in writing.

### *Final Course Grades*

In analyzing the data on students' final course grades, we find that the overall average grade was in the range of a C. Although the point values differ within the range of the letter grade, a C was also the average grade for students in the CL and the CL+S course. We found no statistical significance in the difference in grades between the course types ( $p=.32$ ) (see Table 4.5). The overall pass rate for students who received a grade of C or higher is 76% for the full sample, higher for the CL group (80%) and lower for the CL+S group (71%). Our analysis of the relationship between students writing scores on the AWA and their final course grades shows no linear relationship between the two variables ( $r=.2725$ ), signifying that writing proficiency score alone, like HSGPA, is a weak predictor of students' final grades in the course.

Another assessment at the end of the semester would have allowed us to gauge changes in proficiency, but we do not have this data. If students that passed with a C do not demonstrate proficiency at the end of the semester, this can be indicative of grade inflation, a type of problematic grading. Scholars assert that "the final writing of passing students ought to be solid, competent writing" because "passing is about writing at a certain level" (Royer & Gilles). However, they acknowledge that success in the college classroom can be attributed to more factors than writing ability alone; also considered in final grades are factors such as students' attendance, motivation, balance of course taking and jobs, unexpected illnesses or problems, as well as varied instruction and the inconsistency of grading itself.

Although previous studies have shown that directed self-placement, which allows students agency in the placement process, can lead to lower course pass rates (Hu, et al.; Hassel,

et.al.), we do not find that to be the case here. In fact, the high pass rates we see show a substantial increase from pass rates at the institution in the two course types just one year earlier (from 65% to 80% in the CL course and from 52 % to 71% in the CL+S course). This increase may be indicative of what some scholars refer to as “grade norming” (Saxon and Morante, 24), a reason for skepticism about the effectiveness of open enrollment into college-level courses. They believe that with this type of enrollment, faculty may be compelled to adjust course content and instructional methods to address a wide range of student skills, which can lead to the softening of academic standards, reduced rigor, and eventually, grading based on relative student performance instead of set standards. The overall pass rate for students who scored far below proficient was 71% and even higher for those in the CL course (79%). Without undermining the learning that likely took place throughout the semester, we believe that further investigation is needed to better understand the reasons for overall high pass rates in this study.

*Are students who need the most writing support positioning themselves to receive it?*

In answer to our question, *Are students who need the most writing support positioning themselves to receive it?*, we find that given the particular placement method used in this case—automated directed self-placement, guided by high school records—students are not sorted into the two course types based on their writing ability. While the aim of reform efforts is to place almost all students into the college-level composition course, the course type with a concurrent support section is offered to ensure that students who need more writing support can receive it. This support is in the form of an hour of additional instruction per week, an embedded classroom tutor, and optional tutoring sessions. However, there is concern that students who need the additional support, for various and founded reasons, including time constraints,

financial limitations and even convenience, would choose not to enroll in the course section with additional support. We find in this study that students generally choose to follow the college's course recommendation, based on their HSGPA, which we find is weakly correlated with their level of writing proficiency. Therefore, only some students who need more writing support than is feasible in the stand-alone college-level course are positioned to receive it. We also find that students who do not demonstrate a need for extensive support are enrolled in the CL+S course, which places additional and unnecessary demands on their time and finances and may prevent them from moving forward at the college in other ways.

Scholars suggest that assessment and placement instruments and policies should match students more precisely with academic interventions that meet their needs and that student writing be used, among other pieces of evidence, to assess students' needs and abilities (Edgecombe; Hughes and Scott-Clayton; Royer and Gilles). The sorting of students into stratified groups based on their demonstrated proficiency also helps to ease the labor of teaching (Toth). Efforts to do so early in the term are important in providing students who need support with the instruction they need to become more proficient writers. However, under the current placement policy, which does not include a student writing sample, the work of identifying which students need additional support in writing and what their writing needs are is left to individual faculty.

### **Conclusion**

The reform at this college, as discussed previously, included the near elimination of the precollegiate course sequence and the college writing placement exam and the substitution of mandatory placement with directed self-placement. Students reported their HSGPA and courses

taken through an online questionnaire and were furnished with a recommendation by the college for enrollment into one of two college-level composition course versions—either one with or without a concurrent support course. Most students followed the college’s recommendation for course enrollment.

The determination of students’ readiness for college-level coursework affects not only access to the course, but also student persistence and the likelihood of transfer and degree attainment (Dominick, et al.). This can have steep economic impacts on students, given that unemployment rates drop and median income earnings rise with each level of increase in education (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics), and students who do not attain at least an associate degree or a certificate will have difficulty supporting a family above the poverty line (Smith and Wertlieb). This is particularly so for students enrolled in community colleges since they are disproportionately: first in their families to attend college, from low-income backgrounds, and from racial backgrounds that are historically underrepresented in higher education.

The reform implemented at this institution has allowed far more students direct access into the college-level composition course than the previous placement policy. With the high course pass rates we see in this study (76% for the overall sample and even higher in the CL course), it appears that that the changes made through reform have helped many more students to complete the college-level composition class in a shorter time period than they would have been able to under the previous policy. However, we also find that whether or not students completed the course successfully, with a grade of C or higher, was independent of their HSGPA and also independent of their levels of writing proficiency at the beginning of the semester as measured by the assessment in this study.



For students who did not pass the course, the reasons for not doing so are unclear and are likely varied. It is also uncertain whether enrollment into a precollegiate course to prepare for the college-level course would have been more beneficial for these students. Repeating the college-level class while exposed again to college-level curricula may be more beneficial than risking the same in a class for which they do not receive transferable units. However, 44% of these students who did not pass the class scored a 4 or above (what we would consider proficient) on the AWA at the start of the semester. This suggests that the reasons for their not passing may have been unrelated to their proficiency in writing. Further investigation is needed that integrates student and faculty perspectives with these findings.

Investigation of the impact and value of the support courses is beyond the scope of this study. It is unclear to what extent, if any at all, students' pass rates in the support course can be attributed to the additional hour of instruction or the in-classroom tutor's presence and/or supplemental tutoring sessions. It is possible that students' pass rates could have been lower in the CL+S course without these additional resources, but we cannot make conclusive claims about this. Based on our findings, that there are students in both course types that need writing support, we imagine that resources might be better allocated if aimed at providing specific types of instruction that target the needs of less proficient writers.

In answer to our overall question about whether the particular reform implemented has improved students' chances for successful achievement of their educational goals, we see that most student participants (84%, n=507) in this study declared having an educational goal of either attaining the AA degree, transferring to a university, or both. Upon completion of this required course, these students may be more likely to persist and go on to the attainment of their degree and/or transfer, especially those who would have placed into the lower-level

precollegiate courses under the previous policy, since by passing this class, they save up to three semesters of coursework. Completion of this course will also open doors for enrollment into courses in other disciplines, for which this course is often positioned as a prerequisite. It is less clear, however, whether passing this course leads to an advancement in what we term as ‘writing proficiency,’ and whether by so doing, students are prepared to address the literacy demands of coursework in other disciplines. This is especially concerning for students who will transfer to four-year institutions, where they will be faced with the need to comprehend complex texts and to communicate effectively through writing in an academic context. A long-range look at students’ persistence and success in attaining their academic goals is needed to determine the degree of positive impact of the reform beyond the completion of this course.

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## **CHAPTER 5**

## **CONCLUSION**

In order to help expedite the achievement of community college students' educational goals, institutions across the nation are moving toward the elimination of precollegiate courses and standardized tests for placement of students into composition courses, with the aim of placing students directly into the college-level course. Concerns about appropriate placement that would position students to receive the support they need to succeed is widespread, and has been the principal motivation of this dissertation. Against the backdrop of extensive reform in two-year institutions, the purpose of the three studies that comprise this work is to generate data that can help to guide decision-making and policy, illuminating ways to best support students in composition toward achieving their academic goals of degree attainment and transfer, while also identifying approaches to reform that would unnecessarily frustrate students and overwhelm faculty. In this final chapter, I will briefly summarize the main findings of the three studies and discuss the central implications of this work.

### **Summary of Studies**

#### **Study 1: Writing Proficiency & Student Placement in Community College Composition Courses**

In the first study presented in chapter two, I sought to find differences that might exist in the writing of community college students who were placed into the various levels of composition courses at the institution in order to understand if three precollegiate course levels (PCL1, PCL2, & PCL3) leading to the college-level course (CL) were justified. I also wanted to know if students' high school GPA (HSGPA), increasingly used as a placement measure by institutions, was related to students' levels of writing proficiency. This study yielded three main

findings: 1) the writing assessment at the college was effective in identifying measurable differences in students' writing proficiency levels; 2) three levels of precollegiate courses were unwarranted, but elimination of the entire course sequence might disadvantage some students; and 3) student's high school GPA was very weakly correlated with their level of writing and weakly related to the level of course they placed into by the college.

The first finding was that average scores on the academic writing assessment (AWA) administered as part of this study increase with each rise in course level, confirming that the college placement process is effective in identifying groups of students with measurably different levels of writing proficiency. Despite the differences between the two exams (the AWA employed an analytical text-based prompt in which students were asked to interpret and integrate two texts into their writing, while the college placement exam included a stand-alone prompt), the course levels that students were placed into by the college placement exam generally matched their level of academic writing proficiency as measured by the assessment in this study. This result suggests that this type of exam and scoring process is an effective means for providing a view of student writing produced in an on-demand writing situation that can be reflective of various levels of academic writing proficiency.

The second major finding suggests that four levels of composition courses were unwarranted. Although students placed into four levels of courses by the college placement exam had increasing average scores on the writing assessment by course level, differences in mean scores between students in the college-level course (CL) and the two pre-collegiate courses that precede it (PCL3 and PCL2) were not statistically significant and are likely due only to chance. These results suggest that although students in the PCL2 and PCL3 courses had lower means, on average, of their writing assessment scores, these students may have a good

chance at succeeding if placed directly into the college-level course. For these students, reform efforts that allow them this opportunity can help to expedite the accomplishment of their educational goals. For students in the lowest pre-collegiate course (PCL1), however, the results are different. The mean scores on the writing assessment for students who placed into this course differed with statistical significance and with medium to almost large effect sizes from each of the other three course levels. This indicates that average student scores at this level were not likely due to chance, and that students that place into this course level may require more extended instruction and/or support in order to manage college-level coursework.

The final finding of Study 1 resulted from the investigation of a possible relationship between students' course level at the college and their high school GPA and between their writing performance on the AWA and their high school GPA. Two correlational analyses were performed. Results showed a weak correlation between course level and GPA, suggesting that students' self-reported high school GPAs and their course level, as determined by the college placement exam, are weakly related. The second analysis performed examined the relationship between students' high school GPA and their writing assessment score on the AWA used in this study. This association was also weak. Together, the results of these two analyses imply that students' high school GPAs may be an insufficient indicator of their level of writing proficiency.

## **Study 2: Differences in Academic Writing Across Four Levels of Community College Composition Courses**

Chapter 3 presents the second study, which occurred just before the implementation of institutional reform. In this study I investigated the qualitative features of student writing in order to explore differences that might exist between the writing of students placed into one of

three precollegiate course levels and those placed in the transfer-level composition course. I wanted to know to what extent the writing of students who are classified as “underprepared” differed from that of students who are considered “college-level” writers and in which features of writing are there the most pronounced differences between students in the various course levels. I also analyzed high scoring papers to identify features that distinguish them from lower scoring ones. The main findings showed that there were statistically significant differences in the frequency of some of the identified writing features between the writing of students placed into the college-level and precollegiate level courses. These features were: 1) making a clear claim ( $p < .00$ ), 2) following prompt directions to discuss a single characteristic that helped the character to survive ( $p = 0.03$ ) and 3) making reference to the text ( $p = 0.05$ ).

Drawing from the same dataset as in Study 1, a subsample of papers ( $n = 76$ ) was purposively selected to represent all scores from each course level and was further analyzed for qualitative features that strengthened the writing. Two analyses were performed. In the first analysis, writing features were identified, counted, and compared in frequency across levels. The second analysis focused on high scoring papers and examined distinctive features that included, but also went beyond, the features exhibited in average or lower-scoring papers. This resulted in the identification of nine writing features and four characteristics of high-scoring papers. The specific writing features were identified inductively and emerged through multiple, iterative observation cycles during several passes through the data. Each of the features was listed upon identification, and new features were added to the list as they emerged through repeated observation in the student essays. Nine features of writing were identified, counted and compared across the four course levels. These features are: 1) a beginning that provides context; 2) a hook, or attempt to get the reader’s attention 3) a TAG, or reference to title-author-genre; 4)

a clear claim; 5) relevant evidence supporting the claim; 6) a response to the prompt by presenting a claim about a single characteristic that enabled the character to survive; 7) reference to one text; 8) or both texts; and 9) and a clear ending, or conclusion. These features differed in the frequency of their appearance between course levels. Those differences were tested for statistical significance in order to determine the degree and importance of the difference.

For three of the writing features, statistically significant differences were found in the frequency of the features between students in pre-collegiate courses (PCL1, PCL2 and PCL3) and students in the transfer-level course (CL) These features are 1) making a clear claim ( $p < .00$ ), 2) following prompt directions to discuss a single characteristic that helped the character to survive ( $p = 0.03$ ) and 3) making reference to the text ( $p = 0.05$ ). Two of these differences, making a claim and following prompt directions, occurred between the writing of students in the college-level course (CL) and the lowest level precollegiate course (PCL1). This result was aligned with the finding in Study 1 that students in the PCL1 course differed significantly in their average writing scores on this assessment as compared with students in the college-level course.

Because there were few papers that scored high (9% of the overall sample) and it became clear through the above inductive analysis of writing features that some papers went above and beyond the features that were listed, an additional analysis of high scoring papers was conducted.

Four distinctive features of high scoring papers were identified: 1) a clear claim that is threaded throughout the paper; 2) a claim that is supported by relevant evidence and substantiated with

commentary that discusses the significance of the evidence; 3) a conclusion that ties back to the introduction; and 4) a response to all elements of the prompt.

### **Study 3: Post-Reform Placement and Writing Proficiency in Community College Transfer-Level Composition Courses**

The third study, presented in Chapter 4, took place after reform was implemented at the college that resulted in almost all students placing into one of two versions of the college-level composition course—either with or without a concurrent support course. An online questionnaire that yielded a placement recommendation was used in place of the campus writing assessment, this time for placement of students into the two course types. The placement recommendation was determined primarily based upon students' self-report of high school GPA and high school courses taken. I wanted to know if students who needed the most writing support were positioning themselves to receive it by enrolling into the course version with a concurrent support course. Ultimately, I sought to find if the new placement policy improved students' chances for success in the course and helped to expedite the accomplishment of their academic goals of degree attainment and/or transfer. To answer these questions, I sought to find what differences might exist in students' writing proficiency, HSGPAs, and final course grades between students who place themselves in the stand-alone college-level course (CL) and those who place themselves into the same course with a concurrent support course (CL+S). The main findings of this study are: 1) students in the two groups do not differ significantly in their writing proficiency; 2) students are enrolled into the two course types by measurably differing HSGPAs, but HSGPA is unrelated to their measured levels of writing proficiency; and 3) differences in students' final course grades between the two course types are insignificant, and pass rates are high for students of all proficiency levels.

### *Writing Proficiency*

The first result shows that under the current placement policy, students of nearly all levels of writing proficiency enroll in both course types. Although there was a difference in students' mean scores on the AWA between the two groups, I found that the difference is only marginally significant ( $p=.09$ ). This suggests that the two groups do not differ enough in terms of students' writing ability to warrant the need for two course types in order to address students' writing needs. In investigating whether students who need the most writing support are positioning themselves to receive it, I found that given the particular placement method used in this case—automated directed self-placement, guided by high school records—students are not sorted into the two course types based on their writing ability. Therefore, only some students who need more writing support than is feasible in the stand-alone college-level course are positioned to receive it. I also found that students who do not demonstrate a need for extensive support are enrolled in the CL+S course, which may place unnecessary additional demands on their time and finances.

### *High School GPA*

The second finding of this study is that students enrolled in the two course types differ in HSGPAs, but HSGPA is weakly related to their measured levels of writing proficiency. It is expected that students enrolled in the two course types have measurably different average HSGPAs, given that HSGPA is the primary measure used for the course recommendations made to students by the college and that almost all participants (93%) who took the college questionnaire indicated on the survey that they followed the college's recommendation in selecting the course version in which they enrolled. However, results also indicated a weak association between students' writing scores and their HSGPA ( $r=0.1642$ ,  $n=416$ ). This result



aligns with the finding in Study 1 that shows a lack of association between HSGPA and student's writing scores.

### *Final Course Grades*

The final major finding of this study is that differences in students' final course grades between the two course types are insignificant. The average grade was a C and the overall pass rate for students who received a grade of C or higher is 76% for the full sample, higher for the CL group (80%) and lower for the CL+S group (71%). Analysis of the relationship between students' writing scores on the AWA and their final course grades shows no linear relationship between the two variables ( $r=.2725$ ), signifying that writing proficiency score on the AWA at the start of the semester is a weak predictor of students' final grades in the course.

Although previous studies have shown that directed self-placement, which allows students agency in the placement process, can lead to lower course pass rates (Hu, et al.; Hassel, et.al.), that is not the case in Study 3. The high course pass rates in this study show a substantial increase from pass rates at the institution in the two course types just one year earlier (from 65% to 80% in the CL course and from 52 % to 71% in the CL+S course). This increase may be indicative of grade inflation—the reason for skepticism by some scholars about open enrollment into college-level courses. They believe that faculty may be compelled to adjust course content and instructional methods to address a wide range of student skills, which can lead to the softening of academic standards, reduced rigor, and eventually, grading based on relative student performance instead of set standards (Saxon and Morante). Further investigation is needed to determine if “the final writing of passing students” demonstrates “solid, competent writing” (Royer & Gilles).

## Limitations

The generalizability of the findings produced by these three studies are bound by various limitations. First, the type of writing assessment used in these studies is a single, timed academic task that does not allow for revision, which may allow advantage to writers who are more proficient. The writing sample is a mere snapshot of what students are able to produce, one generated at a given moment of time that can be influenced by certain factors, but for the purposes of this work, it is also one that can help us to gain a glimpse of students' command of conventional English and their familiarity with the academic genre. Holistic scoring is used to evaluate the writing produced, which, despite its limitations, is regarded by assessment scholars as a "successful method of scoring writing" and a "major advance in the assessment of writing ability" (White, p.26).

Further, this study does not address the issue of reading proficiency, which is critical to the production of academic writing that calls for thoughtful integration of complex texts. As part of this study, the texts were read by faculty to students as they followed along to help mitigate variation in students' reading proficiency levels. When students are faced with college-level coursework that involves reading that is often unsupported or scaffolded, it is expected that more may struggle. Without the ability to access complex course texts, students will likely employ the survival skill of writing from personal experience and narrative even when assignments ask to focus primarily on course readings (Hassel and Giordano). Another limitation is that in Study 2, the identified features of writing are presented as ones that can be taught, although they are not an exhaustive list of important writing features and *how* to best teach those features is beyond the scope of this work. Finally, the generalizability of the findings presented here are limited due to the collection of data at a single institution with a

particular student demographic. It is with consideration of these limitations that I offer a discussion of the study's central implications.

## **Discussion**

The central implications of the findings of this dissertation are: 1) many more students can succeed in the college-level course if given the opportunity, but some students may be further disadvantaged by being placed directly into the college-level course and need extended support 2) additional support can be provided through explicit instruction in writing features employed by more proficient writers and 4) high school GPA appears to be an insufficient measure for determining which students need more writing support.

### **Implication 1: Many more students can succeed in the college-level course but some may be disadvantaged**

Findings from Study 1 confirm the potentially positive impact of reform efforts that accelerate students' access to the college-level course on numerous students' chances for college success, while cautioning about overly broad implementation of those efforts that may place some students at a disadvantage. Students who are allowed access into the college-level course rather than starting in precollegiate courses one or two levels below it can save up to two semesters of coursework. Further, their success in the course would result in access to other courses for which the college-level course is positioned as a prerequisite. For students like these, such reform efforts can expedite the accomplishment of their academic goals of degree attainment and/or transfer. On the other hand, students such as those who placed into the precollegiate course three levels below the college-level course in Study 1 were shown to differ

in their writing proficiency level from those who placed into the higher course levels. For such students whose previous experiences may not have prepared them to take on the challenges of college-level work in composition and who, under the new placement policy, are being placed directly into college-level composition, the revised policy may cause them further disadvantage. With the shift in placement measures resulting from reform at this institution, the work of identifying which students need additional support in writing is left to individual faculty.

**Implication 2: Additional support can be provided through explicit instruction in writing features employed by more proficient writers.**

In both Study 1 and Study 3, less than half of students assessed were considered to have provided a sufficient response to the writing prompt (46% in Study 1 and 43% in Study 3). These results revealing low proficiency rates are consistent with previous research that shows that writing continues to present a great challenge for large numbers of students through the postsecondary level (MacArthur and Philippakos; Perin). In Study 3, 41% of students who had non-proficient scores scored a 3—just below the proficient mark. For the considerable number of students whose writing is just on the threshold of what would be considered proficient, targeted instruction in the strategies used by proficient writers can help them to effectively communicate in the academic register.

Researchers have highlighted the need for the explicit teaching of writing, and previous studies show it is possible to understand the processes used by proficient writers and to teach those processes to writers who are less proficient (MacArthur and Philippakos). Exposure to and instruction in specific writing moves employed by more proficient writers can help to facilitate student success through the emphasis of the rhetorical moves of academic discourse as they face challenging college-level coursework. Knowledge of the writing features such as those

identified in Study 2 can be valuable for students at all levels of writing proficiency and can be used by faculty to provide targeted and explicit instruction that is particularly needed in community colleges, where the rhetorical strategies expected in college writing are largely unfamiliar to students (Hassel & Giordano). Further, focused instruction and practice in the identified features of high-scoring papers can provide students with concrete and achievable goals to pursue in their academic writing.

**Implication 3: High School GPA is weakly related to writing proficiency and seems to be an insufficient measure for placement into writing courses**

Although HSGPA has been thought to reflect readiness for college coursework that is not captured by standardized exam scores (Hodara & Lewis), the results of this work in Study 1 and Study 3 show that HSGPA appears to be an insufficient measure for matching students more precisely with academic interventions that meet their needs in writing. Still, the use of placement measures by institutions are quickly shifting primarily to the use of students' HSGPA. In the current reform environment at the college in this study, the course type with a concurrent support section (CL+S) is offered in order to address the needs of students who need more support with their writing. The course demands a greater commitment from students—requiring more of their already pressed resources of time and money and also comes at a greater cost to the college than the stand-alone course. Additionally, almost all (93%) student participants in this study who reported taking the college's questionnaire (n=252) indicated that they followed the resulting recommendation for course placement, demonstrating students' reliance on the institution to guide them in what is best for them. However, since the positioning of students to receive support is based on HSGPA, which is weakly reflective of their

proficiency in writing, the placement misses the mark, leaving students who need more writing support in the CL course without it, while placing a burden on students enrolled in the CL+S course who do not need it.

These results confirm the skepticism of some researchers about the use of HSGPA as a placement measure due to the lack of comparability across high schools, which can vary in many ways including course rigor, grading standards, and availability of highly qualified teachers and economic resources (Camara & Michaelides; Sackett, et al.; Borneman, & Connelly). Additionally, there is reason to believe that HSGPA is not reflective of students' writing ability since writing studies scholars have found that a meager amount of writing is assigned in high school, and that the writing that is done is often low in quality (Applebee and Langer; Kiuahara, et al.). Based on the findings of this work, measures that provide more specific information about students' preparedness in writing are needed for placement of students into composition courses and for determining which students need more support. This will allow for limited resources for support to be focused on students that need it.

### **Future Directions**

The determination of students' readiness for college-level coursework affects not only access to the course, but student persistence and the likelihood of transfer and degree attainment (Dominick, et al.). These can have steep economic impacts on students, given that unemployment rates drop and median income earnings rise with each level of increase in education (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics) and particularly for those enrolled in community colleges, since they are disproportionately from low-income and first-generation-college

backgrounds. Students who do not attain at least an associate degree or a certificate will have difficulty supporting a family above the poverty line (Smith and Wertlieb).

The reform implemented at this institution has allowed far more students direct access into the college-level composition course than the previous placement policy. With the high course pass rates we see in Study 3 (76% for the overall sample and even higher in the CL course), the changes made through reform have helped many more students to complete the college-level composition class in a shorter time period than they would have been able to under the previous policy. In this way, the direct placement of students into the college-level composition course at this institution has helped to expedite the achievement of many students' goals of degree attainment and/or transfer to four-year institutions. However, the study also reveals that whether or not students completed the course successfully with a grade of C or higher was independent of their HSGPA and also independent of their levels of writing proficiency at the beginning of the semester as measured by the assessment in this study. It is unclear if the high pass rates are reflective of improvement in student's writing proficiency.

It is important to know if students are prepared for continued success after passing this course in terms of the writing demands they will face in future courses and when transferring to a university, where they will be presented with the expectation and challenge of engaging in academic discourse. Future studies should aim to assess students' writing growth and level of proficiency at the end of the semester and to examine the extent to which the criteria for grading reflects students' ability to employ academic writing. Additionally, a long-range view of students' persistence and success along their paths to degree attainment and/or transfer is needed to determine the extent of positive impact of the reform beyond the completion of this course.

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## **APPENDIX**

## Appendix I: College Placement Exam Scoring Guidelines

### Organization:

1. Generally well organized
2. Main idea clear and effective

### Development:

1. Coherent
2. Details are provided and are effective
3. Generally sustained development
4. Appropriate sense of audience

### Reasoning and Ideas:

1. Critical thinking is evident
2. Logic is clear
3. Effectively addresses the prompt

### Language:

1. May have infrequent sentence boundary issues
2. Syntax/sentence structure is clear and may be sophisticated
3. Purposeful word use

## Sample Prompts

Students are provided with a set of two prompts and are asked to provide an example of their best writing.

1. *“All human actions have one or more of these seven causes: chance, nature, compulsions, habit, reason, passion, desire.” -Aristotle*

Of these seven causes that lead to human actions, which do you find to be most true? Give an example that focuses on one of Aristotle’s seven actions. Explain what kinds of behavior it leads to.

2. What was the worst kind of work you ever did? This might have been anything: a paying job, household or school-related chores, or volunteer work. Describe the work. Explain why you found it unpleasant, and discuss ways that would have made it more satisfying.

## Appendix II: Writing Assessment Prompts

### The Railroad Runs to Canada

#### **Background**

In her article “Seven Qualities of a Good Leader,” Barbara White, author and expert in educational leadership, identifies seven key qualities that enable good leaders to guide, influence or direct others.

#### **Writing Directions**

You have just read an excerpt from Ann Petry’s biography Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad, describing how Harriet, an escaped slave, returned to southern plantations to rescue other slaves and guide them to freedom.

#### **PROMPT**

Review White’s article, “Seven Qualities of a Good Leader.” **Write an essay in which you make a claim about ONE quality of leadership that was MOST ESSENTIAL in enabling Harriet to guide the slaves to the North.**

#### **In the body of your essay:**

- Discuss how Harriet’s key quality of leadership helped her to overcome several obstacles and why it was so important to her and the other slaves’ survival.
- Compare and contrast Harriet’s response to this life-threatening situation with that of the slaves. What does Harriet share in common with her followers and what differences allowed her to emerge as a leader?

**In your conclusion, describe a lesson we can learn from Harriet’s story and her acts of courage.**

**REMEMBER** to clearly address all parts of the writing task, Support your main ideas with evidence from **both** reading selections, use precise and descriptive language, and proofread your paper to correct errors in the conventions of written English.

## Unbroken

### **Background**

In her article “What is Resilience?” psychologist Kendra Cherry defines resilience as the ability to cope with problems and setbacks. Cherry identifies seven key characteristics of resilience that give people “the strength to tackle problems head on” and to overcome adversity.

### **Writing Directions**

You have just read an excerpt from Laura Hillenbrand’s book *Unbroken*, the biography of World War II hero Louie Zamperini, describing the events that occurred after Zamperini’s plane crashed in the Pacific Ocean and he and two crewmates were adrift at sea.

#### **PROMPT**

Review Cherry’s article “What is Resilience?” **Write an essay in which you make a claim about ONE characteristic of resilience that was MOST ESSENTIAL in enabling Louie to survive.**

#### **In the body of your essay:**

- Discuss how Louie’s key characteristic of resilience helped him to overcome several obstacles and why it was so important to his survival.
- Compare and contrast Louie’s response to this life-threatening situation with that of Phil and Mac. Explain how these differences contributed to Louie’s survival.

**In your conclusion, describe a lesson we can learn from Louie’s story of survival.**

**REMEMBER** to clearly address all parts of the writing task, support your main ideas with evidence from **both** reading selections, use precise and descriptive language, and proofread your paper to correct errors in the conventions of written English.

## Appendix III: Writing Assessment Scoring Guide

### Scoring Guide for "The Railroad Runs to Canada" and "Unbroken"

Note: Papers at all levels of achievement described below will contain some or all of the characteristics listed as criteria for each particular score.

#### **6 Exceptional Achievement**

- Writer introduces the subject, giving enough background for the reader to follow the interpretation he/she offers in response to the prompt.
- Writer presents a thoughtful/insightful claim about the ONE quality of leadership that was most essential in enabling Harriet to inspire the slaves or the ONE characteristic of resilience that was most essential in enabling Louie to survive.
- Writer gives specific examples of several obstacles Harriet and the slaves faced and perceptively discusses how a key leadership quality helped Harriet overcome these obstacles or gives specific examples of several obstacles Louie and the men faced, and how Louie's key trait of resilience helped him to overcome these obstacles.
- Writer thoughtfully compares Harriet's response to this life threatening situation with that of the slaves (how she is like and different from them) or Louie's response to that of Phil and Mac (who is more like him and less like him)
- Writer thoughtfully analyzes a lesson readers can learn from Harriet's acts of courage or Louie's story of survival.
- Writer skillfully weaves numerous references from both sources (the nonfiction biography and the source materials on leadership or resilience) into the essay to support his/her claim.
- Writer uses especially precise and descriptive language as well as transition words.
- Writer interprets authoritatively using a formal tone and advances to a logical conclusion that clearly follows from and supports the argument presented.
- Paper has few errors in the conventions of written English

#### **5 Commendable Achievement**

- Writer introduces the subject, giving enough background for the reader to follow the interpretation he/she offers in response to the prompt.
- Writer presents a reasonably thoughtful claim about the quality of leadership that was most essential in enabling Harriet to inspire the slaves or the characteristic of resilience that was most essential in enabling Louie to survive.
- Writer gives examples of obstacles Harriet and the slaves faced and thoughtfully discusses how a key leadership quality helped Harriet overcome these obstacles or gives examples of several obstacles Louie and the men faced, and how Louie's key trait of resilience helped him to overcome these obstacles.
- Writer thoughtfully compares Harriet's response to this life threatening situation with that of the slaves (how she is like and different from them) or Louie's response to that of Phil and Mac (who is more like him and less like him)
- Writer thoughtfully analyzes a lesson readers can learn from Harriet's acts of courage or Louie's story of survival.

- Writer weaves some references from both sources (the nonfiction biography and the source materials on leadership or resilience) into the essay to support his/her claim.
- Writer uses some precise and descriptive language as well as transition words.
- Writer interprets authoritatively using a formal tone and advances to a logical conclusion that clearly follows from and supports the argument presented but the conclusion is less compelling than a 6 paper.
- Paper has relatively few errors in the conventions of written English

#### **4 Adequate Achievement**

- Writer orients the reader adequately by giving at least some introductory context.
- Writer may begin unsteadily but reaches a focus or point as the essay progresses.
- Writer presents an adequate claim about the quality of leadership or characteristic of resilience that was most essential in enabling Harriet/Louie to overcome obstacles/survive.
- Writer gives examples of obstacles Harriet and the slaves faced and discusses how a key leadership quality helped Harriet overcome these obstacles or gives examples of obstacles Louie and the men faced, and how Louie's key trait of resilience helped him to overcome these obstacles.
- Writer compares Harriet's response to this life threatening situation with that of the slaves (how she is like and different from them) or Louie's response to that of Phil and Mac (who is more like him and less like him).
- Writer adequately analyzes a lesson readers can learn from Harriet's acts of courage or Louie's story of survival.
- Writer weaves a few references from both sources (the nonfiction biography and the source materials on leadership or resilience) into the essay to support his/her claim.
- Writer uses less precise and descriptive language as well as transition words.
- Writer interprets less authoritatively using a less formal tone and advances to a conclusion that supports the argument presented but the conclusion is less compelling than a 5 or 6 paper.

#### **3 Some Evidence of Achievement**

- Writer introduces the topic perfunctorily or simply dives in - answering the questions without developing a clear introduction.
- Overall, writer's discussion of "The Railroad Runs to Canada" or "Unbroken" may be superficial or rely on the retelling of events and provide little in the way of analysis or commentary.
- Writer may fail to make a claim about what quality of leadership or characteristic of resilience enabled Harriet to inspire the slaves or Louie to survive.
- Writer may fail to give specific examples of the obstacles Harriet and the slaves or the men faced or give examples but fail to discuss or superficially discuss how the key trait of leadership or resilience helped Harriet/Louie to overcome obstacles
- Writer may fail to compare and contrast Harriet to the slaves or Louie to Phil and Mac.
- Writer's conclusion may not connect the characters' traits of leadership or resilience to his/her values and beliefs.

- Writer may provide a superficial lesson learned or neglect to discuss what lesson can be learned.
- Writer uses little to no precise and descriptive language or transition words
- Writer uses few, if any, references to the texts (the biography or non-fiction materials on leadership or resilience).
- Paper has many errors in the conventions of written English, some of which may interfere with the writer's message.

## **2 Little Evidence of Achievement**

- Writer provides no introduction or it is brief and unfocused.
- Writer may simply retell the story without seeming to really understand everything that takes place.
- Writer may fail to discuss characteristics of leadership and resilience and how they are demonstrated by Harriet or Louie.
- Writer may fail to give examples of how Harriet or Louie use leadership or resilience to overcome obstacles.
- Writer may not understand or fails to discuss the lesson learned in "The Railroad Runs to Canada" or "Unbroken."
- Writer talks in generalities and fails to provide references to the two source texts. Conclusion may be abrupt or missing.
- Language is imprecise.
- Paper has errors in the conventions of written English, many of which interfere with the author's message.

## **1 Minimal Evidence of Achievement**

- Context/introduction is missing, abrupt or confusing.
- Writer does not discuss or appear to understand what characteristics of leadership or resilience are displayed by Harriet or Louie.
- Writer merely retells the story and does not describe what obstacles the characters faced or how they use leadership/resilience to overcome them.
- Writer makes no attempt to consider what lesson can be learned from the biographies.
- Writer fails to provide references to either the fictional text or nonfiction source material.
- Writer has very poor command of how to construct an essay.
- Paper has so many errors in the conventions of written English that the writer's meaning is obscured.



**Appendix IV: Student Survey**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Sex (circle) M F Birthdate \_\_\_\_\_

**Part 1**

- 1. What language(s) other than English do you *speak* (if any)? \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. What language(s) other than English do you *read* or *write* (if any)? Read \_\_\_\_\_ Write \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. If you speak another language, were you in ESL or ELD classes in elementary, middle or high school? (circle)  
Yes No

If yes, please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

- 4. What is the highest level of education of your mother/guardian? (circle)  
less than high school high school diploma college degree AA/AS 4 year college degree BS/BA  
professional degree

Your father/guardian? (circle)

- less than high school high school diploma college degree AA/AS 4 year college degree BS/BA  
professional degree

- 5. How long have you been a student at Mt.SAC? \_\_\_\_\_

- 6. Did you take the college writing placement exam? (circle) Yes No

If yes, what course did you place in? \_\_\_\_\_

- 7. Why are you taking this class? \_\_\_\_\_

What do you hope to get out of it? \_\_\_\_\_

- 8. What other classes are you currently enrolled in? \_\_\_\_\_

- 9. How do you get to campus? \_\_\_\_\_

How long does it take you? \_\_\_\_\_

- 10. What activities are you involved in on campus, if any?  
\_\_\_\_\_

- 11. Are you responsible for the care of others? (children/elderly, etc.) (circle) Yes No

If yes, describe: etc.) \_\_\_\_\_

- 12. Do you have a job? (circle) Yes No If yes, how many hours per week do you work? \_\_\_\_\_

- 13. What are your educational goals at Mt.SAC? \_\_\_\_\_

- 14. What are your career goals? \_\_\_\_\_

- 15. Have you met with an academic counselor at Mt.SAC? (circle) Yes No

If yes, how long ago? \_\_\_\_\_

- 16. What do you think makes a student successful? \_\_\_\_\_

- 17. What do you do to help yourself succeed in your classes? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Please answer the following questions by circling a number:

18. How motivated are you to do well in school? *neutral*  
low 1-----2-----3-----4-----5  
high
19. I feel supported by my family/friends to succeed in college.  
disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5  
high
20. I am a hard worker. disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5 high
21. I am a good student. disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5 high
22. I am able to accomplish the things I decide to do.  
disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5  
high
23. When I don't know how to do something, I look for ways to find out.  
disagree 1-----2-----3-----4-----5 high
24. What was your overall high school GPA? \_\_\_\_\_

**Part 2 (used only in study #3)**

1. Did you take MtSAC's online assessment questionnaire (AQ) to help determine your placement into English?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Not sure

If yes, what was your course placement recommendation for English?

- \_\_\_\_\_ ENGLISH 1A (Freshman Composition)  
\_\_\_\_\_ ENGLISH 1A/80 (Freshman Composition & 1 unit support course)  
\_\_\_\_\_ other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

Did you follow the recommendation? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

Why or why not? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Did you take MtSAC's Assessment of Written English (AWE), the writing placement exam?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Not sure

If so, **when** did you take it? (circle) Summer Fall Winter Spring \_\_\_\_\_ (Year)

What course did you place into?

- \_\_\_\_\_ ENGLISH 1A (Freshman Composition) \_\_\_\_\_ ENGLISH 67 (Writing Fundamentals)  
\_\_\_\_\_ ENGLISH 68 (Preparation for College Writing) \_\_\_\_\_ LERN 81 (Improving Writing Skills)  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

3. Do you think this English class you are enrolled in now is at the right level for you? (circle)

Yes                      No                      Not sure

If yes or no, please explain why or why not? \_\_\_\_\_

4. How prepared are you for this class? (circle one)

Very prepared                      prepared                      somewhat prepared                      not prepared

5. What other English/writing classes have you taken at Mt.SAC? \_\_\_\_\_

6. What high school did you attend? (school name)\_\_(city/state/country)\_\_\_\_ Year of Graduation\_\_\_\_\_

OR if you completed another type of high school equivalency program (such as GED, HSED, alternative ed, home school, etc.) please list here: \_\_\_\_\_

7. What is your ethnicity?

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> White            | <input type="checkbox"/> Asian (please specify)_____         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> African American | <input type="checkbox"/> Middle Eastern (please specify)____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Latino/ Hispanic | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)_____         |

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