OVERVIEW

The English department was asked to assess its ENGL 101 program for the 2006-07 academic year, in accordance with CSULA's Block A General Education Assessment, under the direction of Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies Cheryl Cruz. Our primary objective in this assessment was to observe the knowledge and skills students exhibit at the end of ENGL 101.

Numerous legitimate approaches exist for assessing student writing, including examining individual writing samples, student portfolios or other evidence of student progress; comparing the achievement in other university courses of students who have taken the course to those who have not; creating an external exam to measure student achievement and knowledge, setting up pre- and post-test assessments; etc. Each method has its own strengths and weaknesses, allowing the collection of different kinds of data.

Given the time and financial constraints imposed by the assessment, it was decided to review essays from a small sample of students. To measure student progress in the course, two sets of essays were collected, the first formal draft of the first essay and the final draft of the final essay, written approximately eight weeks apart. This method was also chosen because it allowed the most natural assessment of student writing with the least amount of interference with students' coursework.

To score each essay, analytic scoring of primary traits, an assessment measure developed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, was used, rather than holistic scoring. Although holistic scoring is useful in quickly assessing individual students' overall level of success on a given writing task, analytic scoring allows finer-grained assessment of student skills across a range of criteria on a given writing task.

Our goal was to determine what specific skills students are both mastering and struggling with. This knowledge will allow the department to plan curricular revisions or instructional activities to help improve student mastery across the range of ENGL 101 outcomes. We will add this data to other qualitative information we have collected about the program.

PROCEDURE

Collection and sample selection
Two sets of papers were collected from each section of ENGL 101 during the Winter 2006 quarter; instructors removed all identifying information from each paper, making the assessment anonymous. Students also filled out an anonymous survey [see Appendix B] which asked them about writing problems and collected demographic data.

To conduct the assessment, a random sample of 75 paper sets (150 essays) were drawn. Four sets were removed due to data errors, leaving a final sample set of 71 students (or 142 papers). These papers were then coded so that scorers would not know who wrote each paper, what section it came from, or whether it was a first or final paper. [For detailed procedures, see Appendix A.] Ten scorers were hired, then a calibration and scoring was conducted at the end of quarter. The data was then entered into a spreadsheet and analyzed.

**Scoring Criteria**

The catalog description for ENGL 101 is as follows: "Reading and writing to develop and communicate ideas. Instruction in basic strategies for planning, composing, and revising college writing. Use of authorities, examples, arguments, and facts." English 101 moves beyond ENGL 096 by focusing on analytic writing based on critical reading of texts. In ENGL 101, students write thesis-driven arguments that make use of external evidence. Although students may draw on their personal experiences and observations for examples when relevant, essay topics are based on texts that are discussed in an analytic framework. Students typically write 3-4 formal essays of 3-4 pages each in response to selected readings. Students also participate in prewriting and revision activities as well as in other activities that encourage conceptual development and an enhanced sense of audience.

Based on a review of our program conducted in concert with the composition faculty, five main student learning outcomes for writing in the course were identified:

1. **Purpose, focus, and development:** Does the essay have a clear and narrowly focused thesis? Does it persuasively develop that thesis though appropriate use of well-chosen examples and/or evidence drawn from a variety of sources?

2. **Organization and structure:** Does the essay structure enhance the author’s purpose and guide the reader smoothly through the essay? Are paragraphs arranged in logical and effective order? Are paragraphs cohesive and internally consistent?
3. **Sentence-level clarity, complexity, and precision:** Is the essay effective at the sentence level? Are the style and voice lively and engaging? Does the essay make effective use of transition and employ a variety of sentence patterns and clause structures? Are diction and word choice appropriate?

4. **Grammar, usage, and mechanics:** Does the essay effectively follow conventions of grammar, usage, and mechanics? Does the writer demonstrate mastery of key conventions such as sentence boundaries, subject-verb agreement, apostrophes, and spelling? If conventions are violated for stylistic effect, are they rhetorically successful?

5. **Use of source material:** Does the essay use sources effectively to support or illustrate its points? Are quotes, paraphrases, and summaries integrated smoothly and used effectively? Are the writer's own points clearly distinguished from that of the sources? Are sources documented correctly?

Using these criteria, a five-trait scoring rubric using a four-point scale for each trait was developed. [For the full scoring rubric, see Appendix C.]

### RESULTS

**First essay vs. final essay**

Average scores for the first and final essay were computed and compared.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait</th>
<th>First</th>
<th>Final</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>2.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>2.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>2.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>2.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.70</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.77</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students showed slight gains in every category, with the most significant gains in use of source material. This includes not simply citing source material correctly in MLA or APA style, but incorporating source material smoothly into text, particularly paraphrases and quotes. The large gain in this latter category is consistent with the goals of the class, as this course formally introduces the incorporation of outside source material. Student improvement and achievement in this category suggests that they are beginning to acquire this difficult skill and are adequately prepared for ENGL 102.
The smaller gains in other categories is likely due to the brevity of the quarter and the fact that students had already received some instruction by the time they had written the first essay. Moreover, the majority of the students had prior preparation in ENGL 095 and 096, which teach more simplified renditions of the skills taught in ENGL 101.

Comparing traits, students scored highest in organization and purpose, followed by use of source material and grammar. They scored poorest in sentence-level clarity, complexity, and precision. These results are consistent with expectations. Rhetorical skills, such as writing and supporting a thesis, are more easily taught and practiced than sentence-level style and clarity, which is much more dependent on students' fluency in English and experience reading and writing complex texts.

**Non-native English speakers v. native speakers**

There were 33 non-native English speakers and 38 native English speakers in the sample. (As all but one of the non-native speakers had been speaking English five or more years, no attempt was made to create a sub-sample of these scores based on length of English experience.) The average scores for both essays for each group was computed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-native</th>
<th>Native</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>2.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>2.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>2.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>2.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>2.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Native speakers scored slightly higher in all categories than did non-native speakers, with the greatest discrepancy in sentence-level clarity and use of source material. Perhaps surprisingly, non-native speakers did not score noticeably poorer on grammar; this suggests that non-native speakers, on average, have adequate grammatical knowledge to write successfully, but do not yet have the idiomatic knowledge of English and familiarity with the conventions of academic writing as do their native English-speaking peers. These skills can be expected to continue to evolve with practice writing.

**Basic writing at CSULA v. direct placement**
Of the 71 students in the sample, 11 placed directly into ENGL 101 based on their SAT or EPT scores and 60 took ENGL 095 or 096 at CSULA. The average scores for both essays for each group were computed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Basic writing</th>
<th>Direct placement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>2.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>2.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>2.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.71</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.88</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students who placed directly into ENGL 101 based on their EPT or SAT score scored higher in every category but use of source material. These results are not surprising, as students who place directly into 101 are presumed to have stronger reading and writing skills. These results also suggest the strength of the CSULA pre-baccalaureate writing program, as the smallest difference in scores occurred in purpose and organization, skills which lend themselves to improvement through direct instruction and practice. Indeed, the slightly higher scores of CSULA ENGL 095 and 096 students in use of source material may reflect the emphasis on quoting, paraphrasing, and incorporating outside source material in the program.

**Writing problems**

Students were surveyed as to what part of the writing process gave them the most difficulty. As the question was left open-ended to promote authentic responses, some students cited more than one problem; each citation was noted and the results coded into categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problems cited</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Getting started</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding/writing a thesis</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style/sentences</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focusing argument</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time pressure</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revision</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>104</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*does not equal 100% due to rounding
By far the most common answer was getting started—coming up with a topic, gathering or brainstorming ideas, and putting ideas on paper—which accounted for 21% of cited problems. Finding or writing a thesis accounted for a further 19% of cited problems. Grammar was the third most-cited problem.

Perhaps surprisingly, only one student cited revision as the most difficult part of writing. Although ENGL 101 courses commonly focus on revision as an integral part of the writing progress, the program places less formal emphasis on activities to help students get started writing. We might encourage instructors to provide students with heuristic activities for writing papers and developing theses.

CONCLUSIONS

No single course in writing, particularly one 10-week course, will produce perfect facility in writing. Nor can a single writing course correct all a student's grammatical or stylistic difficulties. Without continual practice in other courses, skills learned in ENGL 101 and other writing courses may be neglected or forgotten. Students who are not native speakers of English or have inadequate preparation in reading, responding to, and writing about complex texts may take many years to develop these skills. ENGL 101 is just one part of what should be a campus-wide commitment to student communication skills.

This assessment indicates that students are acquiring the skills necessary for success in ENGL 101 and that the program is meeting its institutional requirements.

Students did particularly well in focusing, developing, and organizing their papers, suggesting the success of the program's orientation toward thesis-driven arguments. They did less well—though still above the expected mean—in sentence-level clarity, complexity, and precision. As the program develops, we may encourage faculty to devote more time to having students work on their writing at the sentence level. It should be understood, however, that the emphasis of any skill comes at a cost to the emphasis of other skills, especially given CSULA's brief quarters. Instructors may rightly feel that students need to develop skill in writing and supporting theses before they can work on other skills; moreover, revising and editing at the micro-level, though rewarding, is extremely time intensive.

Perhaps the most challenging result was the survey indicating students have the most difficulty in getting started on their papers. On the one hand, this indicates
that instructors are likely correct in their general assessment that students need the most intensive work in developing strong theses; on the other hand, it also suggests that students may need more hands-on exercises and heuristics designed to help them "get started." We will continue to work on developing such strategies as a program.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Assessment Instructions

Dear Faculty:

As mandated by the university, we will be conducting an assessment of the ENGL 101 program during the Winter quarter. We ask for your help in this activity.

1. **At the start of the quarter**: Please ensure that your formal writing assignments for the quarter allow for assessment in all of our five Student Learning Outcomes. (I have attached detailed descriptions for your review.) It is particularly important that your first and final assignments ask for thesis-driven arguments requiring support from textual sources.

2. **First major assignment**: Please ask students to submit an extra copy of their first compete typed formal draft (such as what they would submit to you for comments or peer review) for the first essay assignment. Please set these aside and reserve them in a safe place.

3. **Final major assignment**. Please ask students to submit an extra copy of the final draft of their final major assignment, along with a completed Student Information Survey (attached). Please set these aside and reserve them in a safe place.

4. **At the end of the quarter**. We will provide you with manila folders, accordion folders, and pencils. At the end of the quarter, please collate the surveys and assignments and place each student's in a separate manila folder. Please remove the student's name from each essay. Remove any information from the assignment sheets that would identify the date or sequence and attach these to the essays.

Place each student's essays and survey in a separate folder and assign each folder a two-digit code. Write your ENGL 101 section number and the student's number in pencil on the tab of the folder, like so: Section Number-Student Number (for
example, 03-24). Before the assessment is done, these will be recoded so that both you and your students are anonymous when the essays are scored.

6. Please turn in your completed folders no later than noon on Tuesday, March 13, to Jeanne or to David Gold's office.

7. We will conduct a scoring session on Saturday, March 17 and will put out a call for volunteers early in the Winter quarter, as soon as we finalize payment details.

Once again, thank you for your cooperation in this important activity.

Appendix B: Student Information Survey

Section code: ______  Student Code: ______

1. Are you a native speaker of English?
   
   Y_____  N_____  

2. If you answered "no" to question 1, how long have you been speaking English?
   
   Five or more years_____  Less than five years_____  

3. How did you initially come to be placed in ENGL 101?
   
   Took a basic writing course (095 or 096) at CSULA_____  
   
   Took a basic writing course at another college and transferred in_____  
   
   Placed directly into ENGL 101 based on EPT or SAT score_____  
   
   Other_____ (Please explain)
4. What part of the writing process causes you the most difficulty?

__________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________

Appendix C: Scoring Rubric

As per the requirements of GE Block A, the goal of ENGL 101 is to provide students with written communication skills needed for success at CSULA. Based on a review of our program conducted in concert with the composition faculty, we have identified five main student learning outcomes for writing that support this goal:

I. Purpose, focus, and development
II. Organization and structure
III. Sentence-level clarity, complexity, and precision
IV. Grammar, usage, and mechanics
V. Use of source material

For each primary trait category, essays will be scored on a four-point scale, as follows:

I. Purpose, focus, and development

4. Effective. The essay has a clear and narrowly focused thesis or purpose, which it persuasively develops through appropriate use of well-chosen examples and/or evidence drawn from a variety of sources. The writer demonstrates clear engagement with and understanding of source material used. Logic is strong. Essay places the argument within a clearly
defined rhetorical context; writer demonstrates some understanding of what has been said on the topic and situates him/herself accordingly.

3. **Adequate.** The essay has a clear thesis or purpose developed through supporting evidence and/or examples, but it may not be consistently persuasive or effective. The writer may not fully develop details or choose appropriate evidence, or evidence may come from a narrow range of sources or over-rely on personal experience. The writer is engaged with but may occasionally misread or misrepresent source material. There may be some gaps in logic, and the writer may not fully understand the rhetorical context for his/her argument.

2. **Inadequate.** The thesis or purpose may be unclear or inadequately supported. Examples or evidence may be insufficient in detail or depth to support the writer's purpose or chosen from a restricted range of sources. The essay may exhibit major gaps in logic, and the writer may seriously misread or misunderstand source material. Writer demonstrates little or no sense of rhetorical context.

1. **Poor.** The essay has no identifiable thesis or pattern of development.

II. Organization and structure

4. **Effective.** Essay structure enhances the author's purpose and guides the reader smoothly through the essay. Paragraphs are arranged in logical and effective order, and each has a clear purpose, making use of either topic sentences or other appropriate organizing patterns. Paragraphs are cohesive and internally consistent.

3. **Adequate.** The organization is adequate, though it may be somewhat formulaic or inconsistent. Paragraph arrangement generally makes sense, though paragraphs may not be arranged in the most rhetorically effective manner; paragraphs are generally cohesive, though they may occasionally lose focus or contain some inessential elements.

2. **Inadequate.** A generally consistent and loosely followed structure may be discernable, but it may not necessarily be appropriate or effective. Or, parts of the text may evidence an intended pattern of organization, but the text as a whole lacks a coherent structure. Coherence within paragraphs may not hold.
1. **Poor.** There may be elements of an introduction and a conclusion, but as a whole the text evidences no discernable pattern of organization, either within or between paragraphs.

### III. Sentence-level clarity, complexity, and precision

4. **Effective.** The essay is effective at the sentence level. The style and voice are lively and engaging. The sentence flow is smooth; the essay makes effective use of transition and appropriately employs a variety of sentence patterns and clause structures. The writer demonstrates some skill in manipulating syntactic elements such as complex and compound sentences, coordinate and subordinate clauses, noun, verb, adjective, and prepositional phrases. Diction is appropriate and word choice generally descriptive and precise.

3  **Adequate.** The essay is adequate at the sentence level. Some sophisticated sentence structures are used, and though sentence construction may become convoluted at times, the writer's meaning is generally clear. Transitions are generally present, but may not always be effectively employed. There may be some ineffectively choppy structuring, limited use of subordination, simple vocabulary, or imprecise word choice, but these features do not significantly interfere with the coherence of the argument. The writer may occasionally lose control of tone or struggle with discourse conventions, but generally maintains a consistent voice.

2  **Inadequate.** The essay is inadequate at the sentence level. Sentence style may be monotonous, relying on only a few simple sentence constructions. Transitions may be limited. The flow may be choppy and/or the syntax so convoluted that meaning becomes difficult to discern, and word choice may be repetitive and/or overly vague. The writer struggles to maintain an appropriate academic voice.

1. **Poor.** At the level of the sentence, the writing is extremely simple, making the essay ineffective.

### IV. Grammar, usage, and mechanics

4. **Effective.** The essay effectively follows conventions of grammar, usage, and mechanics. There are few errors, and the writer demonstrates mastery of key conventions such as sentence boundaries, subject-verb agreement, apostrophes, etc. Conventions of punctuation and capitalization are
followed, and spelling is accurate. If conventions are violated for stylistic effect, they are rhetorically successful. The essay appears carefully edited and proofread.

3. **Adequate.** The essay adequately follows conventions of grammar, usage, and mechanics, though the writer may not have full control or understanding of the minutiae of edited English. Although some errors will be evident, they are not serious or frequent enough to obscure meaning. Punctuation is generally effective, though there may be some inconsistencies or errors with more difficult constructions.

2. **Inadequate.** The essay inadequately follows conventions of grammar, usage, and mechanics. Errors (comma splices, fragments, agreement, spelling, etc.) are serious or frequent enough to obscure meaning or interrupt reading.

1. **Poor.** The essay demonstrates little understanding of English syntax and/or the conventions of edited English, making the essay incoherent.

V. Use of source material

4. **Effective.** The essay uses sources effectively to support or illustrate its points. Quotes, paraphrases, and summaries are integrated smoothly and used effectively to illustrate the writer's point. The writer's own points are clearly distinguished from that of the sources. Sources are documented correctly through parenthetical in-text citations and a works-cited page formatted to MLA or APA standards.

3. **Adequate.** The essay uses sources adequately, but may not exhibit full control over their use. The text might occasionally use quotes or extended paraphrases in lieu of making a point, take the reader away from the writer's arguments, or inadequately introduce or attribute a few quotations. A few sources may not be accurately documented, but in general the in-text citation and the works-cited page are constructed properly.

2. **Inadequate.** The essay demonstrate some understanding of sources but uses them poorly. There is an attempt to integrate the sources, but many quotations may seem to be dropped into the essay without introduction or transition. Quotes and paraphrases may be consistently strung together without an apparent organizing purpose. Several sources may be improperly documented; several quotations may be inadequately
introduced. There may be numerous errors in the works-cited page and in the in-text parenthetical citations.

1. Poor. Source material may not be used at all or may be so poorly integrated and attributed that the text indicates little or no understanding of the process of using and documenting source material.