

**Summary of Institutional Assessment of Core Competencies:
Written Communication and Critical Thinking
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Report prepared by Jessica Dennis

Background:

Based on the recommendation of the Educational Effectiveness and Assessment Council (EEAC), efforts were made to evaluate student progress on two of the five core competencies established by the 2013 Handbook of Accreditation by the WASC Senior College and University Commission's (WASC). According to the WASC Handbook of Accreditation, Component 4 of the Institutional Review Process asks that institutions "describe how the curriculum addresses each of the five core competencies, explain their learning outcomes in relation to those core competencies, and demonstrate, through evidence of student performance, the extent to which those outcomes are achieved." The core competencies examined were *critical thinking* and *written communication*, and below are the definitions provided by WASC:

Critical thinking is the ability to think in a way that is clear, reasoned, reflective, informed by evidence, and aimed at deciding what to believe or do. Dispositions supporting critical thinking include open-mindedness and motivation to seek the truth.

Written Communication is communication by means of written language for informational, persuasive, and expressive purposes. Written communication may appear in many forms or genres. Successful written communication depends of mastery of conventions, faculty with culturally accepted structures for presentation and argument, awareness of audience and other situation-specific factors.

These core competencies assessed are also aligned with two of Cal State LA's Institutional Learning Outcomes: *Knowledge: Mastery of content and processes of inquiry* and *Proficiency: Intellectual skills*:

Knowledge: Mastery of content and processes of inquiry - CSULA graduates have a strong knowledge base in their academic major and can use powerful processes of inquiry in a range of disciplines. They engage contemporary and enduring questions with an understanding of the complexities of human cultures and the physical and natural world and are ready to put their knowledge into action to address contemporary issues.

Proficiency: Intellectual skills - CSULA graduates are equipped to actively participate in democratic society. They are critical thinkers who make use of quantitative and qualitative reasoning. They have the ability to find, use, evaluate and process information in order to engage in complex decision-making. They read critically, speak and write clearly and thoughtfully and communicate effectively.

Summary of Pilot Testing Phase I: The Development and Testing of the Rubric

In 2013, the EEAC developed a rubric for use in this project (see Appendix A). A variety of rubrics were considered in order to accommodate the concerns and interests of various programs, and to address issues of validity. The pilot committee collected both content area and general rubrics, including the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) VALUE rubrics and the holistic rubric used to assess CSULA's Writing Proficiency Exam. The final instrument was a holistic rubric which assesses students' mastery of both *written communication* (e.g., mastery of conventions, faculty with culturally accepted structures for presentation and argument, awareness of audience and other situation-specific factors) and *critical thinking* (e.g., ability to think in a way that is clear, reasoned, reflective, informed by evidence, and aimed at deciding what to believe or do). Both competencies were included within the rubric because of the close connection between evidence of effective writing skills and the demonstration of critical thinking on a topic. The rubric has 6 levels of proficiency, with level 4 corresponding to "adequate" proficiency. The rubric was judged by the pilot committee to contain sufficient distinctions between each level so that judges could achieve satisfactory reliability with minimal training.

In spring 2013, samples were collected with the goal of assessing student skills at three points in time: when first-time freshmen enter the university (through work collected in Introduction to Higher Education courses), when transfer students enter the university (through work collected in Transfer to Higher Education courses), and when seniors are finishing their coursework (through work collected in upper division capstone or other writing intensive classes within the majors). All six colleges were invited to participate. Participation of academic programs was voluntary and we stressed that this is a university level evaluation of ILOs, not an evaluation of individual instructors or classes. In order to assess student achievement on authentic assignments, instructors were asked to provide a full set of copies of one paper assignment for all students in their class.

The pilot committee then met in the fall of 2013 to score a sample of the written products collected in the previous spring. Ten essays were chosen from different classes and different levels (i.e., freshmen, transfer senior) and these were scored by the members of the committee using the rubric. The committee members were able to achieve agreement on the scoring of the samples using the rubric and the consensus of the committee was that the rubric was both a reliable and valid measure of the learning outcomes to be assessed. Nevertheless, the written products collected were too diverse to be comparable. The assignments ranged from brief (1-2 pages) reflection papers to lengthy (more than 10 pages) research papers. Of particular concern was that the paper assignments in senior courses were significantly more complex and challenging in comparison to those in freshman classes, which makes it more difficult for seniors to achieve "adequate" proficiency on their respective assignments. The pilot committee recommended that a common assignment be given to students at all classes in order to allow

comparisons to be made in the effectiveness of written communication and critical thinking proficiency at the freshmen level, transfer level, and near graduation.

Summary of Pilot Testing Phase II: The Development and Scoring of a Common Assessment Assignment

A common assignment prompt (see Appendix B) was created by a member of the pilot committee with experience in developing prompts for the CSULA Writing Proficiency Exam (WPE). The assignment gave students two similar essay options, instructed students to spend 30-45 minutes to complete the essay, and asked that they upload the essay to Moodle. Instructors from freshmen IHE, transfer IHE courses, and senior capstone or writing intensive courses were invited to participate. Volunteer instructors asked their students to complete the assignment (for class credit or extra credit) and upload the writing samples to a designated Moodle site. These samples were then accessed by the pilot committee. In spring 2014, writing samples were collected from 5 classes: 40 freshmen samples (BUS 101), 25 midlevel/transfer samples (from NSS 301, BUS 301), and 43 senior samples (from PSY 304, ML 450).

The project was put on hold until fall 2016 due to semester conversion. In fall 2016, the essays were scored using a set of procedures modeled after the ones used for the Writing Proficiency Exam. A group of 4 faculty from different disciplines (English, Sociology, Geosciences, Psychology) scored the essays after a brief norming session in which they scored examples and discussed the rubric. Each essay was scored by 2 scorers and if the two scores were off by more than 1 point, then the essay was scored by a third scorer. The final score was the average of the two scores (or the two most similar if there was a third scorer). After scoring all 108 essays, the intraclass correlation between the two original scorers was .82, indicating good reliability.

The results showed that there was a significant difference between proficiency scores of students at the freshmen ($M = 3.278$, $SD = .74$), midlevel/transfer ($M = 4.02$, $SD = .98$), and 43 senior ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 1.03$) levels, $F(2, 105) = 16.12$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .24$. This difference represents a medium to large effect. Furthermore, the mean scores for midlevel and senior students were over 4, corresponding to “adequate” proficiency. Table 1 shows the number of students scoring within each proficiency category. Although only 20% of freshmen achieved a score of 4 or above, 60% of mid-level students, and 74% of seniors achieved this score. This indicates that, based on this sample, the majority of students are achieving adequate proficiency in their written communication and critical thinking performance near the time of graduation from CSULA.

A written report of the findings will be shared with the EEAC, the Dean of Graduate Studies, and faculty and administrator participants. Findings will be discussed at meeting of the EEAC in order to seek input on further actions to be taken based on results and ways to further disseminate findings.

Reflection and Recommendations for Next Steps:

The results of phase II of the pilot study indicate that the procedures developed for assessing written communication and critical thinking at the institutional level can yield results that provide the University with valuable information about student proficiency in achieving these core competencies near graduation. Nevertheless, there are a number of challenges and limitations to these procedures which must be acknowledged. Based on input from the pilot committee and faculty scorers, below is a set of recommendations for next steps:

- 1) A major limitation to the pilot study was the small sample size and representation by only a few classes. Attempts must be made to **obtain participation by instructors for courses representing all 6 colleges, at all 3 levels.**
- 2) Although the use of a common prompt did allow for greater consistency in the length of essays received, the two options resulted in some inconsistencies and made it difficult at times to have the same expectations for each essay option. Furthermore, the essay choices may have been too simple. In the future, **a single prompt that allows for greater evidence of critical thinking should be developed.**
- 3) The rubric used was holistic and combined many issues regarding critical thinking and written communication. **Using a rubric that breaks down these skills into categories might provide more actionable implications.**
- 4) In converting to semesters, CSULA has also made significant changes to the writing curriculum, establishing a new *Writing across the Curriculum Program*. The courses that make up this program would be the ideal place to target for the assessment of written communication and critical thinking. Furthermore, the instructors who teach these courses are the ones whose input and buy-in can best facilitate the improvement of assessment practices and instructional changes that might result from the results of assessment on this topic.
- 5) With greater participation across the campus, results will be more useful to faculty across the campus, and not just those who are members of EEAC.
- 6) Better communication about the purpose of the assessment project and dissemination of the adopted rubric to instructors in classes throughout the campus would help to stimulate conversations and actions relating to the core competencies. It would also aid in establishing shared expectations for written communication and critical thinking across the institution.
- 7) In planning future directions regarding the assessment of the core competencies, longitudinal designs should be considered. **A longitudinal within-subjects design would allow much more robust assessment of student growth over time** and provide a better indication of the learning that occurs while students attend the university.

Appendix A: Writing and Critical Thinking Assessment Rubric

EEAC Pilot Scoring Guide

California State University, Los Angeles

6 - SUPERIOR: A paper receiving a score of 6 is distinguished by its thoughtfully and effectively developed content and by its rhetorical sophistication. A paper in this category typically

- is insightful, cogent, and perceptive, indicating that the writer has a very clear purpose and strong sense of audience.
- has a clearly focused, coherently developed main idea and is effectively organized.
- offers specific and convincing evidence, examples, and details, which are presented appropriately and effectively.
- exhibits superior control of language, including diction, phrasing, and syntactic variety.
- avoids errors in mechanics, grammar, and usage, although it may have a few minor flaws.

5 - STRONG: A paper receiving a score of 5 is solid in content and development and employs an effective, confident style, though it may be less thoughtful or sophisticated than the 6. A paper in this category typically

- goes beyond a routine response, exhibiting a clear purpose and sense of audience.
- has a well-focused main idea and a clear and appropriate organization.
- is fully developed using specific, convincing evidence, examples, and details.
- demonstrates strong control of language and a general facility with diction, phrasing, and sentence structure.
- may have minor flaws or occasional awkwardness, but it will be largely free of errors in mechanics, grammar, and usage.

4-ADEQUATE: A paper receiving a score of 4 demonstrates **adequate** writing ability. It may be unremarkable in content, development, or style, but the writing is competent and sufficient to convey the writer's meaning. An essay in this category typically

- may indicate that the writer has a vague or uncertain sense of purpose or audience, which leads to a routine or simplistic approach to the task/topic/assignment.
- has a recognizable main idea and an apparent organization, however mechanical.
- uses some specific evidence to develop and clarify ideas.
- demonstrates basic competence in diction, phrasing, and sentence structure, although there may be some imprecision, clumsiness, and/or repetitiveness.
- has minor errors in mechanics, grammar, and usage, but these will be neither frequent nor serious enough to confuse or significantly distract the reader.

3 - DEVELOPING: A paper receiving a score of 3 is marked by significant weaknesses in content, development, or expression that may impair the writer's ability to generate and convey ideas clearly and effectively. An essay in this category typically has one or more of the following weaknesses: It may

- indicate that the writer has a confused or uncertain sense of purpose or audience, which leads to a vague, unfocused, or inconsistent approach to the task/topic/assignment.
- be unclearly or incoherently organized or logically flawed.
- lack sufficient evidence to clarify or develop ideas.
- be uncertain or confusing in diction, phrasing, and sentence structure.
- have errors in mechanics, grammar, and usage that are frequent or serious enough to distract or confuse the reader.

2 -NOT PROFICIENT: A paper receiving a score of 2 is marked by weaknesses in both development and expression that severely limit the writer's ability to develop and communicate ideas. An essay in this category typically has several of the following weaknesses: it may

- have no clear purpose, focus, or awareness of audience.
- have obvious and significant flaws in organization and/or logic.
- lack specific evidence, or the evidence offered is largely irrelevant.
- lack control of diction, phrasing, and sentence structure.
- have such frequent and serious errors in mechanics, grammar, and usage that the writing is largely incoherent and meaning is nearly lost.

1 - UNACCEPTABLE: A paper receiving a score of 1 represents an unacceptable approach to/treatment of the assignment: it may be inappropriate in content, tone, or genre; it may have completely misconstrued the topic; or it may appear to be largely patchwritten from other texts

Appendix B: Writing Assessment Prompt

Please take approximately 30 – 45 minutes to complete this assignment. The essay topics are designed to give you an opportunity to demonstrate your ability to write clearly and effectively. Perfection is not expected, but you should try to produce the best essay possible in the time allotted. Word process this assignment and then upload the digital file to the course Moodle site. The file should be saved with the following naming convention: Course Number_CIN_Instructor_Quarter. For example 301_2203457_Smith_Fall2013.

Choose **one** of the following topics. Read the topic carefully, and take a few minutes to **plan your essay** and **make some notes** to yourself before you begin writing. You don't need to write a whole rough draft and a revision; you won't have enough time. However, you should allow yourself a few minutes after you have finished writing to go back over your essay to check for errors or omissions and make any necessary corrections. Be as specific as you can in your response to the topic, drawing on your own observations and experiences for examples to illustrate your ideas (if you wish, you may also make references to any readings you did in class, but you are not expected or required to do so).

One of the major reasons for getting a college education is to prepare for a job or a career, but it is not the only reason to attend college. The discipline required to complete a four-year degree can teach people many different lessons and habits. Other than preparing for a career, what is **one** thing you hope to gain from attending college? How or why is college the best place to get whatever it is you want from the experience?

OR

Besides specific content knowledge you have learned in your classes, what is the most important thing you have learned from being a college student?

Table 1

Written Communication/Critical Thinking Proficiency Scores for Students at the Freshman, Transfer, and Senior Levels

Proficiency Score	Freshman (<i>n</i> = 40)	Midlevel/Transfer (<i>n</i> = 25)	Senior (<i>n</i> = 43)
2-2.5	12 (30%)	2 (8%)	3 (7%)
3-3.5	20 (50%)	8 (32%)	8 (19%)
4-4.5	6 (15%)	9 (36%)	13 (30%)
5 or above	2 (5%)	6 (24%)	19 (44%)

Note. Scoring was as follows: 1 = *Unacceptable*, 2 = *Not proficient*, 3 = *Developing*, 4 = *Adequate*, 5 = *Strong*, 6 = *Superior*. No students received a score of 1.