Fall 2008/ Spring 2009 Learning Skills Writing Program Assessment Report

Narrative Submission:
1. What goals or learning objectives/outcomes were assessed in the AY ending June 30?

The Learning Skills Reading/ Writing program in 2008-09 continued to focus on the ability of students to understand and evaluate written sources on a topic and then use those sources accurately and effectively as they construct an argument of their own in an academic essay. We directed our efforts toward Learning Skills 87, but the changes we made impacted all of the first-year writing courses in the department.

We revised the grading rubric for each writing class to reflect the need to improve analytical reading, focusing particularly on the second semester multilingual writing class, LS 87, where we needed to differentiate expectations from the two lower level classes. We also continued the pilot program to improve students’ ability to read critically and incorporate what they have read effectively in expository essays, finding their personal voice and communicating their position without over-reliance on the texts of others. In the process of evaluating and discussing student essays, faculty discovered that students continued to misinterpret what they read, select inappropriate or contradictory material to quote or paraphrase as support for their argument, and fail to incorporate the text accurately into their own writing. As a result of our successful pilot last year, we expanded the protocol to all students in LS 87. They read four or five readings on a topic independently and participated in in-class in activities and discussions culminating in creating a chart (graphic organizer) to bring with them to the exam. When they took the two-hour sit-down exam, they could refer to information on the chart, but they did not have access to the articles themselves.

2. How did you assess these learning outcomes?
Describe the measures you used and the information gathered.

We evaluated the essays both in LS 87 and in the LS 15 and LS 86 classes using the established grading rubrics for each class. As a result of this evaluation, the consensus was that students who used the chart method generated more original ideas, were forced to use paraphrase and short quotations rather than relying on “cut-and-paste,” and could not resort to plagiarism from the articles. Over-reliance on ideas in the readings, “mosaic” essays that relied on chunks from the articles, and plagiarism from the articles continued to be more evident in the LS 15 and LS 86 classes where students had access to the reading passages during exams.

3. As a result of faculty reflection on these results, are there any program changes anticipated?
a. If so, what are those changes?

After consultation with our writing faculty at the summer retreat, we will either pilot or fully implement the process of having students construct charts for use during midterms and finals in our two lower level classes.
b. How will you know if these changes achieved the desired results?

The program has now gathered portfolios that represent superior, adequate, and developing student writing in LS 87 over the course of spring semester in order to evaluate the degree to which students improve their ability to critically read text and incorporate it in support of their own arguments. In 2009-10 we will continue to evaluate student essays using grading rubrics, we will determine whether students in LS 15 and LS 86 also show more independent thinking in their exams, and we will gather portfolios, this time in LS 86, the course that precedes LS 87.

4. Did your department engage in any other assessment activities such as the development of rubrics, course alignment?

- **HOLISTIC SCORING OF MIDTERMS AND FINAL EXAMS:** The department continued to holistically score midterms and final exams for each of the three developmental writing courses using course-specific rubrics developed for that purpose. The results of the midterms were used formatively in classes; the results of the final exams determined whether students had acquired adequate proficiency to pass the course.

- **REVIEW OF PORTFOLIOS:** We also continued to review portfolios for students who did not pass the final but who had done passing work during the semester. The portfolios were submitted by the teachers and reviewed by a committee.

- **REVISED LEARNING OUTCOMES:** The writing program revised the statement of learning outcomes for each writing class. We differentiated more clearly between the goals for analytical reading and writing in the first level classes (two semesters below freshman composition) in contrast to the second level class (one level below).

**Activities for Closing the Assessment Loop 2008-09**

- **DISCUSSION AS PART OF HOLISTIC SCORING:** All reading/writing faculty participate in discussion of student work at the two group grading sessions that we hold each semester, one at mid-term and one at final exams.

- **BI-WEEKLY COORDINATOR MEETINGS:** Coordinators in the writing program also meet twice a month to discuss issues in the program. In these sessions program improvement is an on-going topic. As a consequence we have created and evaluated new topic types, brainstormed new instructional activities, and developed ideas for sharing these activities across the program.

- **ASSESSMENT RETREAT:** We held an Assessment Retreat on August 23 in collaboration with the Reading Institute for Academic Preparation (RIAP) that is held annually at Sacramento State to improve the teaching of critical reading across the curriculum in high school, community college and the university. We discussed the challenges that we
had observed in getting students to read critically and use evidence from the readings effectively in their own writing. We invited Learning Skills faculty to present activities that they had developed to address these issues. We then held a break-out session for the Learning Skills faculty to reflect on what we have observed and brainstorm ways in which we can modify our instruction to improve student performance in both on-demand and out-of-class writing situations. We also brainstormed measurable outcomes that we observe in our courses and created an ad hoc committee to rewrite our learning outcomes to clarify the differences among our courses.

- **ASSESSMENT BINDER FOR WASC ACCREDITATION VISIT:** Learning Skills created a binder of data and exemplars of student work reflecting the ways in which assessment activities are carried out in both the writing and the math program. For the writing program, we included charts showing the percentages of students receiving credit in the courses from 2003 – 2008, the revised Student Learning Outcomes, sample student writing exam topics, grading rubrics, and exemplars of strong passing, passing, and failing student papers for each course.

- **INCREASED DISSEMINATION OF MATERIALS:** The writing program created a website using LOCUS, the library open source resource management system, to further facilitate the sharing of activities and materials as they are developed by teachers and program coordinators. By the end of Spring 2009, the “LS Writing Instructor” site had 74 files and 16 You Tubes posted to it and arranged by essay topic. For example, for the memoir *Breaking Through*, teachers posted quiz questions, journal topics, research activities, verb tense exercises, essay prompts, and related articles. For a midterm essay on Juvenile Justice, teachers shared exercises on critical thinking, six videos on the issue of kids in prison, vocabulary activities, graphic organizers, an activity on the use of passive voice, pre-reading activities, and four sets of study questions for the four required readings. These shared resources have enriched instruction and reinforced the culture of collaboration that we foster in the Learning Skills Center.

- **EXEMPLARY**: We gathered portfolios that represented superior, adequate, and developing student writing in LS 87 over the course of Spring 2009 in order to evaluate the degree to which students improve their ability to critically read text and incorporate it in support of their own arguments. We will continue to evaluate whether students are able to better write about texts in a sit-down exam if they are only allowed to bring notes rather than entire essays with them to the exam.

5. What assessment activities are planned for the upcoming academic year?

- **ASSESSMENT RETREAT:** We plan to hold another Assessment Retreat (tentatively scheduled for July 24). We will read and evaluate the strong, adequate, and poor student portfolios, especially with respect to the ways in which students read texts and integrate them into their writing. We will reflect on what we have observed and brainstorm ways in which we can modify our instruction to improve student
performance in both on-demand and out-of-class writing situations. We will also have a presentation by a Learning Skills faculty member who is engaged in on-going research into teacher response to student writing and discuss ways in which teachers can improve the effectiveness and efficiency of their feedback to students.

- **PILOT ON-LINE READING MODULES IN THE LSC COMPUTER WRITING LAB:** A TESOL graduate student is currently creating an on-line independent reading course that provides students with instruction and practice in before-reading, during-reading, and after-reading strategies. These modules use the LOCUS platform. Teachers will have the option of assigning these modules to students to complete in the Learning Skills computer writing lab. Students and teachers using these modules will provide feedback using the survey function in LOCUS; we will use the survey data as well as student work to evaluate the effectiveness of the modules.

- **HOLISTIC SCORING OF MIDTERM AND FINAL EXAMS AND PORTFOLIO REVIEW:** We will continue to evaluate our students’ critical reading and expository writing proficiency through holistically scored essays. Teachers will be normed to use the course rubric with benchmarks and rangefinders. Teachers will continue to submit portfolios of in-class and out-of-class work for review if a student fails the final exam but has a portfolio of passing level work. We will continue to collect data on student performance and analyze it for any trends that could help inform our instruction.

- **DISCUSSION AS PART OF HOLISTIC SCORING:** Discussion of student reading and writing issues will continue to occur at the two group grading sessions that we hold each semester, one at mid-term and one at final exams.

- **BI-WEEKLY COORDINATOR MEETINGS:** Coordinators in the writing program also will continue to meet weekly to discuss issues in the program. In these sessions program improvement is an on-going topic. As a consequence we have created and evaluated new topic types, brainstormed new instructional activities, and developed ideas for sharing these activities across the program.

- **CONTINUED DISSEMINATION OF MATERIALS:** The writing program will continue using LOCUS, the library open source resource management system, to further facilitate the sharing of activities and materials as they are developed by teachers and program coordinators.

- **EXEMPLARY:** We will continue to gather exemplars of student work over the course of AY 2009-10, this time with a focus on LS 86. We will gather portfolios that represent superior, adequate, and developing student writing over the course of a semester in order to evaluate the degree to which students improve their ability to critically read text and incorporate it in support of their own arguments. We will introduce the process used in LS 87 where students can only bring their chart to the exam rather than all the readings. We will evaluate whether students at this lower level of ability are able
to better write about texts in a sit-down exam if they are only allowed to bring notes rather than entire essays with them to the exam.

6. Obstacles to Closing the Loop

We are maximizing our use of electronic communication to disseminate materials; however, it cannot replace face-to-face communication in order to close the assessment loop. Everyone who teaches writing classes in the Learning Skills Center is a lecturer or teaching associate. Creating opportunities to bring everyone together to reflect on the outcomes of our assessment efforts and to devise ways to improve student performance is challenging because teachers often also work in other departments and at other campuses and must volunteer their time to participate. In addition, the Learning Skills Center only has access to General Fund money which cannot be used to provide food to faculty. Although we applied to Academic Affairs for $400 for a summer retreat, our proposal was not funded. As a result, we will not be able to provide food at our retreat and will have to rely on the good will of our teachers to take a day out of their summer holidays for professional learning. We desperately need on-going funding to ensure that we can continue and expand our assessment efforts and reward in even a minimal way the time and effort that teachers put into these activities.