



## Assessment Narrative

**Institution:** Tidewater Community College, Virginia Beach Campus

**Type of Writing Program:** FIPSE Writing Coalition of secondary and postsecondary institutions

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### Background and Assessment Questions

This project extended over a period of seven years with collaboration between secondary and postsecondary English faculties. It began when Alma Hall, a Salem High School (SHS) English department chairperson, contacted Tidewater Community College (TCC) to open discussion about the college's method of placing students in dual enrollment classes and college remedial composition courses. That inquiry became the jumping-off point for exploration of writing assessment initiatives with support from TCC and Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VBCPS) and funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) for two comprehensive projects (1998–2001; 2001–2005) to explore solutions and disseminate results.

Teachers have been the crux of this project that began with a simple question: "What are differences between the expectations of college and high school instructors?" Teachers have come together to investigate the problem and explore remedies. Teachers have empowered their students and themselves through reflective practices. And teachers have not only found answers but also developed innovative strategies to improve student readiness for success in college composition.

### Assessment Methods

#### *Teacher Designed Workshops*

To promote meaningful conversations, teams from SHS and TCC planned and facilitated professional development workshop activities each semester in response to topics initiated in roundtable discussions. Six instructional needs were identified: (1) engage students' interest in writing, (2) clearly articulate college writing requirements, (3) emphasize instruction on editing and proofreading, (4) clarify requirements of the state

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assessment tool, i.e., the Virginia Standards of Learning, (5) revise syllabi to include collaborative writing strategies, and (6) develop ongoing teacher self-assessment. Sessions were usually scheduled at noninstructional sites where participants discarded institutional titles, convened informally in roundtable settings, brainstormed and reflected on teaching practices, and continued lively repartees over box lunches. Collaboratively, they identified what they valued in writing and what they expected of their students.

The next step was to bring in a consultant, Kathleen Blake Yancey, to help with assessment strategies. Beginning in 1999 as a writing consultant for VBCPS, Yancey led sessions to train 600 teachers in portfolio methodology over a six-year period. Subsequently, a cadre of participants evolved for peer training in all schools, and every VBCPS English curriculum guide now starts with a unit on the use of portfolios.

Yancey turned the normal negative tone of “grading” or “marking” student compositions into a positive one focusing on what a student could do well, to promote more of that skill set. Reading portfolios as a whole text, teachers looked for evidence of reflection and control of language instead of comma splices and split infinitives. Teaching strategies were developed and refined following each of the all-day, project-sponsored workshops, usually two per semester. Initially suspicious of the portfolio method, secondary and postsecondary teachers, after exposure to the process through workshops and roundtable discussions, set aside their reservations and experimented with collection, reflection, and presentation concepts in their classrooms. Through faculty participation in workshops and portfolio grading sessions, high school and college instructors became comfortable with this teaching culture. Both adjunct and full-time college instructors implemented and honed portfolio strategies in their classrooms as they discovered that their students were taking greater ownership of the writing process.

Following TCC’s initial experimentation with the use of SHS seniors’ portfolios as an alternative placement method, the program was made available to 4 project schools and subsequently to all 13 VBCPS high schools. To support this methodology, over 30 high school and college teachers were trained each year in development and use of rubrics, anchors, and scoring guides to evaluate senior-year portfolios and use the assessments for college placement in developmental and college-transfer writing courses.

Portfolio readings demonstrated an increased understanding among educators of what student skills are necessary for college work. At the TCC site, high school and college instructors who participated in readings of over 300 portfolios each year repeatedly demonstrated over 92 percent inter-reader reliability rates.

### **Assessment Results**

As a result of this extensive collaboration, each institutional partnership has developed lines of communication and contacts between postsecondary and secondary faculties to improve student preparation for college writing. Both teachers and students have benefited from the collaborative activities. Many of the college and university sites have

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expanded their programs to additional secondary sites and are actively developing institutional measures to support collaboration between their faculties.

Identifying a large population of students from the two FIPSE projects (1998–2005), TCC’s Institutional Effectiveness Office gathered and interpreted data on student placement, success, and retention. Project students were found to more frequently place into college-level work using portfolios rather than through traditional placement methods, as demonstrated in spring 2001 when project students placed into first-year composition with COMPASS at a rate of 54.4 percent. A control group placed at a rate of 36.96 percent with COMPASS. More important, those same project students placed into first-year composition at a rate of 75.2 percent using portfolio assessments. With increased accessibility to college transfer work through the portfolio methodology, critics still questioned those students’ preparation for the rigors of college work. Following the success rates (A, B, or C in course work) of project students each year, the TCC assessment office found that project students consistently matched the performance levels of traditionally placed students. From 2001 through 2005, final placement levels into first-year composition for project students increased each year. In the last year of the FIPSE Writing Coalition, 70 percent of project students received a first-year composition placement using their senior-year portfolios. Moreover, the overall retention rate for project high school students in three identified high schools who entered TCC each fall over the period of 1999–2002 was 63 percent versus that of nonproject students, whose rate was 48 percent. Additionally, as compared to the 68 percent retention rate for all TCC students in spring 2004, the retention rate for project students in spring 2005 grew to 88 percent.

Further qualitative reflection on the success of this project as measured by the portfolio component is offered by Michele Marits, TCC instructor and project team member:

I emphasize “accomplishment” because these portfolios represented the unique collaboration between area high schools and TCC; they represented all we had learned from the workshops, such as those offered by Kathleen Yancey and by The Bard Institute; they represented all the collegial discussions at the roundtables and seminars; and they represented all the years of ponderings about “what we value in a piece of writing,” which culminated in the assessment rubric and the Placement Portfolio Scoring Guide. But, most of all, they represented students’ accomplishments—students’ essays, rough and final drafts, their letters to us, the readers, and their reflections on their bodies of work. We heard their “voices,” their hopes and aspirations for the future, and we all became better teachers in the process.

Partnering institutions found similar results with students and teachers. Some of the institutions were able to identify positive trends in student achievement via overall state-mandated writing assessments. Using pre- and postwriting samples to garner data during the secondary school year, Greenville Technical College (GTC) project students demonstrated a 15 percent improvement from pre- to post-tests of college writing. Enlisting help from their offices of institutional assessment, the postsecondary

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institutions attempted to track the progress of their project students from high school to college, although most of the sites found these data difficult to identify due to small numbers or lack of follow-up information. Fear of identity theft prompted many students and teachers to dismiss requests for social security numbers that are essential to acquire such data. Additionally, many of the two-year institutions were unable to monitor performance of project students due to the transitory nature of their student bodies.

Follow-up information from the Florida Community College at Jacksonville site found 38 Wolfson project graduates at the college campus in fall 2004 placing into college transfer composition courses. Of those students, 90 percent completed the course successfully and 95 percent reenrolled for the next semester. In spring 2005, 28 Wolfson project graduates enrolled in college composition for the first time and 83 percent completed the course successfully. Totals for the year show that 90 percent of the Wolfson project students completed college composition successfully. Further encouraging data were found by the assessment office at Southwestern Michigan College (SMC) in its review of data for Ross Beatty project graduates: “Since the FIPSE program has been in place, 100 percent of students taking English 103 (college transfer) have passed with a ‘C’ or above, as opposed to the 78 and 73 percent in the two years preceding the grant.”

### **Assessment Principles**

The basic principles informing our project included our belief that assessment should be consistent with what we know about language and literacy, that it should improve teaching and learning, and that it should be accessible to all stakeholders. We also endeavored to make our assessment meet professional guidelines while also meeting local needs.

As high school students enrolled in college and found their writing skills deemed deficient by college placement tests, high school teachers asked, “What is it you want my students to be able to do?” High school and college teachers felt disconnected from the other’s institution and wondered if they would have administrative support to try new approaches to writing instruction. Although surveys and research confirmed the need to open dialogue, teachers were initially suspicious of yet another mandate from afar, especially in light of ever increasing accountability requirements brought on by high-stakes testing. They raised the question, “How can you be innovative in a structured environment?”

### **Experimenting with Writing Assessment**

Emerging as a proverbial “guiding force” for an examination of writing practices and assessment, Kathleen Blake Yancey became the project’s informal writing advisor and head cheerleader. Her work on portfolios lent further justification to another project goal—to demonstrate the effectiveness of portfolio instruction, evaluation, and placement. From October 1998, when Yancey led a FIPSE-TCC-sponsored session entitled “Engaging Student Interest in Writing and Development of Writing Portfolios,” portfolios permeated secondary and postsecondary composition classrooms.

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### *Using Assessment to Identify Good Writing*

Not only did portfolios provide an important link between institutions, but the approach also promoted innovations in assessment. The routine testing practice at TCC, as at many colleges across the nation, requires that all entering students be placed in writing, reading, and mathematics courses by COMPASS, a multiple-choice, commercially developed, computerized assessment tool. The writing section is essentially an editing test of a few selected pieces. If a student's score falls into a borderline "gray" placement area, he or she may be required to write to a prompt for 20 minutes. As an aside, with the need to ensure student readiness for timed writing samples, writing-on-demand strategies were identified and refined for classroom use to provide opportunities for students to practice writing to a prompt in a limited period; however, the use of a single indicator and/or a timed writing sample for demonstration of a student's readiness for college work was and remains a concern of students and of teachers who utilize the writing process in their classrooms.

### **Assessment Resources and Sustainability**

#### *Propagating Portfolios*

Since the initial sessions, participants and consultant Yancey have engaged in workshops exploring print and digital portfolios at multiple national project sites. Many dissemination sites found the portfolio to be a fundamental element of collaboration and a vehicle for alignment of writing.

At the conclusion of the FIPSE grant, TCC supported the portfolio project for area VBCPS senior English students for one year; however, problems in administration affected continuation of the program because of cost and labor. Administrators seem to view the activity as labor-intensive, unwieldy, and yet another item to add to their already overextended budgets. Despite the validation for authentic assessment provided by the portfolio placement methodology and its attendant demonstration of success for students and teachers, institutionalizing this approach requires identification of additional sources of funding, reenergizing secondary and postsecondary staff, and renewed administrative direction. Fortunately, grant funding enabled dedicated project personnel to receive monetary compensation for their efforts to resurrect additional reserves of energy and time to develop innovative approaches to writing instruction.

#### *Problems and Opportunities*

As with any innovation, unexpected hurdles were encountered and challenges were met through adjustments and alternative strategies. Personnel changes, increasing personal responsibilities of teachers, and faculty attrition were all part of the growing pains of this project. A lack of continuity in administrative and instructional partnerships at all sites created a constantly changing canvas of educators, necessitating repeated orientations, updating, and retraining. GTC site leader Allen describes the problem of maintaining

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momentum despite teacher turnover: “Surprising and challenging.” Likewise, SMC site leader Lemrow comments on the repercussions of reassigned principals: “A good deal of time will have to be spent just to arrive at where we were.” Locally, targeted high schools in VBCPS rotated staffs and altered teams. However, when one high school team “disappeared,” other teams were forged.

However, this project demonstrates that the real solution to the problem of student writing success is not a strategy or a skill set, or even an assessment tool. Working through two FIPSE projects over a seven-year period, teachers demonstrated amazing resiliency to overcome the public’s finger-pointing when headlines claim “Johnny Cannot Write” or “Senior Year Is Largely a Waste” and to deal with unspoken state mandates that seem to promote teaching to the test. Through partnerships in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida to Michigan, Arizona, and California, secondary and postsecondary teachers have demonstrated a common belief in student success and diligently sought new routes for student preparation for college writing.

When teachers are given the tools and support they need to instruct, students succeed. Those who produce the tests or pen the news articles need to listen to high school and college teachers, as teachers have listened to and responded to each other. Despite time constraints and multiple social and education issues inherent in teaching in public secondary schools, teachers in this project adopted a focused approach to writing instruction and altered their roles from dispensers of information to coaches of composition. While institutions seem more than willing to find funding for outside consultants, testing firms, and electronic software programs, they rarely turn inward to mine the treasures within. Opportunities for reflection and dialogue need to be built into the fiber of educational research and measurement of student success.

For more information on this project, see *Lesson Plans for Teaching Writing* edited by Chris Jennings Dixon (NCTE, 2007).