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# Analysis of Student Essay Writing Skills in Entry-level English Composition Courses at Western Washington University

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Analysis of Student Essay Writing Skills  
in Entry-Level English Composition Courses  
at Western Washington University

Report 1991-08

Gary R. McKinney  
Jacqueline M. Andrieu-Parker  
Joseph E. Trimble

August 1991

## Executive Summary

During the Fall Quarter of 1990, all enrollees of English 101 and English 100 took ACT's Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) Writing Test (Essay); during the Winter and Spring Quarters all enrollees of English 101 took the CAAP test. Administration of the test was done by a joint effort of Western Washington University's Composition Program in the Department of English and the Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing.

The CAAP test took two samples, both requiring students to respond in a persuasive or argumentative mode. This was considered appropriate for two reasons: 1) traditionally, freshmen college students do not handle analytic writing well; and 2) the analytical mode is the emphasis of English 101.

In all, 1044 students took the CAAP. Each instrument was scored on a scale of 1 to 4 (1 = poor, 2 = weak, 3 = good, 4 = excellent). The mean scaled score (combined score) of this sample was 2.51--not an unexpected outcome.

The mean grade in English 101 for this sample was 3.04. The discrepancy between CAAP score and English 101 grade is at least partially due to the fact that the more difficult writing modes are not the first graded modes that students write in, and that students revise and resubmit papers as part of their grade.

Students between the ages of 19 and 20 made up 86.1% of the test takers. Females made up over half the sample of CAAP takers (57.4% females; 42.6% males). Ethnically, the overwhelming majority of CAAP takers were Caucasians (83.7%).

Females scored higher than males on both the CAAP and in English 101 with statistical significance. (CAAP score: females 2.61, males 2.37; English 101 grade: females 3.11, males 2.95.)

Multiple regression analyses for predictors of both CAAP score and English 101 grade were run. No variable predicting CAAP scores with any degree of statistical significance was found. Only the SAT-Verbal was found as a weak predictor of English 101 grade.

A special data analysis was conducted for students who took the CAAP in English 100 in the Fall Quarter, then subsequently took the CAAP again in English 101 in either the Winter or Spring Quarters. It was found that students who took English 100 in the Fall Quarter then took English 101 in the Winter Quarter had better CAAP scores, as well as better English 101 grades relative to the general population of English 101 students than students who took English 100 in the Fall Quarter and waited until Spring Quarter to take English 101.

## Introduction

Although Western receives pre-college test scores that take a measure of verbal achievement--the SAT, ACT, or WPCT--these tests do not include a writing sample. Currently, assignment to English courses at Western is done completely by these test scores. Students with scores in the top ten percent receive English 101 waivers; students with scores in the bottom ten percent are assigned to English 100. The middle eighty percent of students are required to take English 101, although this does not preclude these 'middle' students from taking English 100 if they feel it would benefit them.

That few, if any, of these 'middle' students seriously consider the above option is part of the concern that English 101 instructors have long had. Those charged with classroom instruction of English especially feel that the omission of a writing sample may be adversely affecting the most effective placement of students in English courses. Indeed, one of many benefits of a writing sample, especially if it were done pre-enrollment, would be to identify cases where verbal skills quantified from multiple choice tests might belie a student's actual ability to write.

The issue of a writing sample--or lack thereof--has been around for some time, and in recent years has been gaining more and more attention, locally and nationally. A writing sample is beginning to be recognized as a vital component of a student's complete academic profile, important enough that the SAT test will soon include a graded writing sample as part of its regular testing program.

Western, too, has been very concerned with student writing, and much interested in the idea of obtaining a writing sample from its freshmen students. As an initial response to this issue, the Composition Program of the English Department and the Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing decided to administer ACT's Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) Writing (Essay) Test to English students beginning in the Fall Quarter of 1990. Both English 100 and English 101 students took the CAAP test in the Fall Quarter; English 101 students only took the CAAP test in the Winter and Spring Quarters of 1991.

While in the long run other, more suitable, even self-generated writing assessment instruments may be utilized by Western, the CAAP test was considered a good start, and appropriate to current concerns, at least partially because of its structure.

The CAAP test takes two writing samples, both requiring the student to respond in a

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The Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing would like to acknowledge the participation of English Department Director of Composition William Smith in the preparation of this report.

persuasive or argumentative mode to separate assigned readings. (The reasoning behind taking two samples of the same style of writing is at least partly due to the idea that it sometimes takes students a while to "warm up" to a writing task.) National reports have documented that high school students do not write well in an analytic mode (see appendix A)--the heart of both persuasion and argument. And since the current English 101 syllabus is directed at the teaching and improving of analytic writing, it was considered a plus that the CAAP emphasized it.

Of the five essays required in English 101, the first two are personal responses to a text; the third is a summary of a text or texts; and the last two are analyses of a text or a series of texts. The culminating paper requires that students assimilate concepts from at least three texts, and respond to them analytically, in a persuasive or argumentative mode. As well, students keep a journal of responses to 25-30 readings, and submit written self-assessments of each required essay.

Most students taking English 100 and 101 at Western are freshmen and taking a writing sample that played to their strengths (description, process, or narrative) did not seem like the best way to gauge their writing abilities as they entered their first college English course. English 101 works through these strengths early and gets quickly to a student's usual weaknesses; they go from the personal to the subjective, from description and narrative to analysis. It was felt that instructors of English 101, and those responsible for developing its syllabus, would benefit more from knowing where in-coming students need to get to rather than reinforcing their knowledge of what students are already good at.

Thus, the CAAP Writing Skills Test was administered at the onset of the English courses mentioned above, procuring a pre-instruction level of writing ability that this report will address in detail later in the paper. For now, it will suffice to say that it was expected that scores would be relatively low, in the area between weak and good, and, indeed, this was found to be the case. According to the CAAP test, Western students enter their initial English course relatively weak in the area of argumentative or persuasive writing.

However, this initial administration of the CAAP test did more than just quantify what was already suspected. When analyzed together with the grades received in the English course taken, with pre-college test scores, and with other standard measures such as admit status and gender, much data of interest was generated.

### General CAAP Test Results

Discussion of frequencies will mostly center around the combined totals of the three quarters in which the CAAP Writing (Essay) Test was administered. This total will include

data on students who took the CAAP in English 101 only, even though another 74 students took the CAAP in English 100 during the Fall Quarter of 1990. The data on these 74 students was separated from the combined totals for a different statistical analysis--which information will be reported on later in this paper--and is the reason for excluding it from the combined totals. In any case where the reported combined totals do not match the presented quarterly totals, this factor would be part of the reason. These figures should be slight, however, since 55 of the 74 students who took English 100 in the Fall subsequently did take English 101 in either Winter or Spring Quarter, and that information was included in the combined total report.

As well, when analyzing data some frequencies come up described as "missing" for any number of reasons (drop-outs, scores not given for whatever reasons, etc.), and sometimes participants decline to answer certain questions, and these factors would account for any other frequency discrepancies.

In regards to any reporting of differences in CAAP test score and English 101 grade by ethnicity, the sample was so overwhelmingly weighted towards Caucasians and contained frequencies within various ethnic groups so minuscule that any relevant statistical analysis would have been rendered suspect at best, and at worst, misleading, and has been disregarded for purposes of this paper.

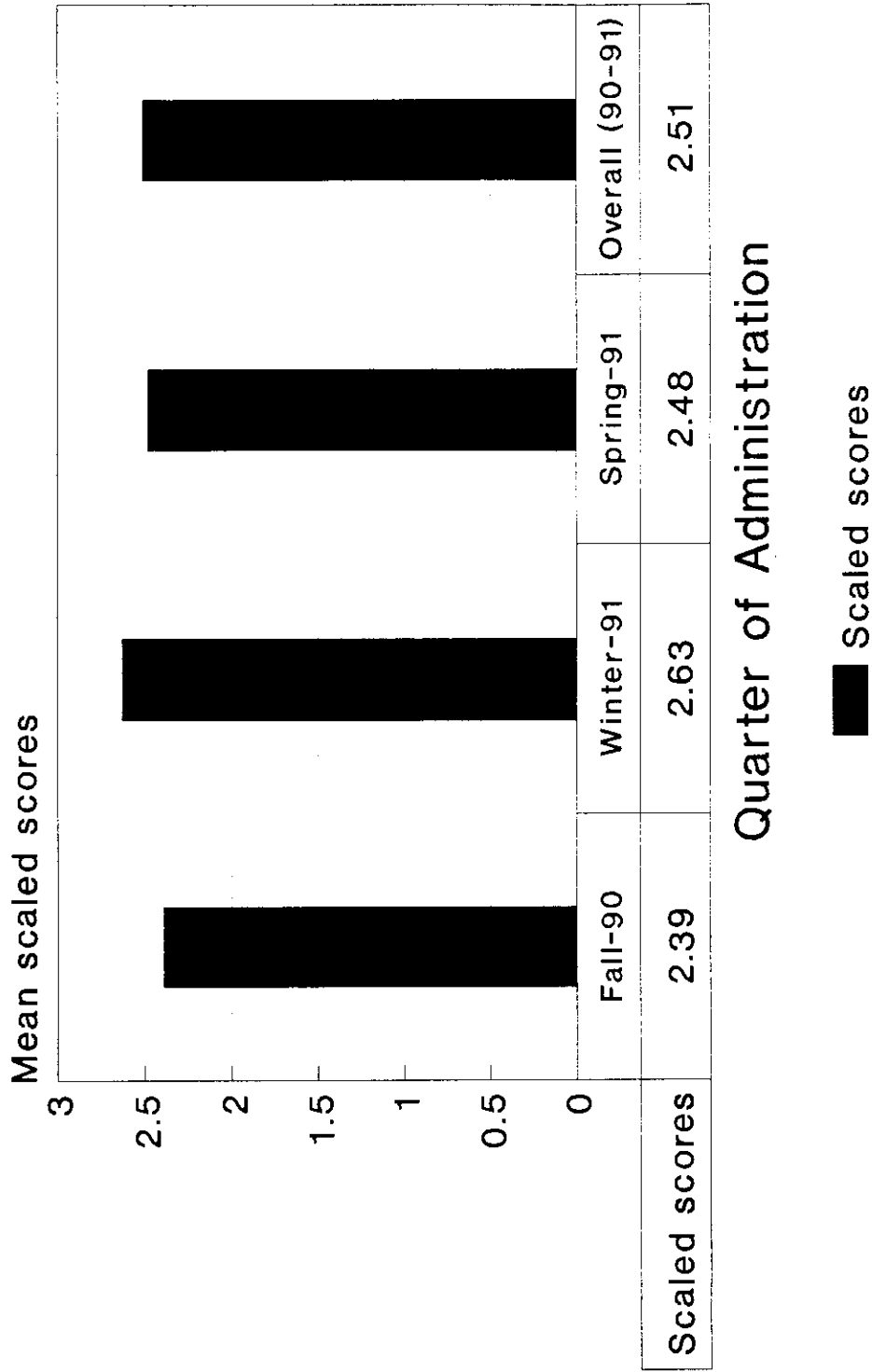
The CAAP Writing (Essay) Test has two sections. Each asks students to develop a persuasive or argumentative (analytical) response to a reading. Each response is scored on a scale of 1 to 4 (1 = poor, 2 = weak, 3 = good, 4 = excellent). The scaled score (combined first and second essay score) is the score reported in this paper. In all, 1044 students took the CAAP. Quarterly, 592 took the CAAP in the Fall, 319 in the Winter, and 227 in the Spring. Their scaled score on the CAAP test was 2.51. Students scored highest in the Winter Quarter (2.63), next highest in the Spring Quarter (2.48), and lowest in the Fall Quarter (2.39). (See Figure 1.)

The samples' mean grade in English 101 was 3.04. Students scored highest in the Spring quarter (3.19), next highest in the Winter Quarter (3.06), and lowest in the Fall Quarter (2.96). (See Figure 2.)

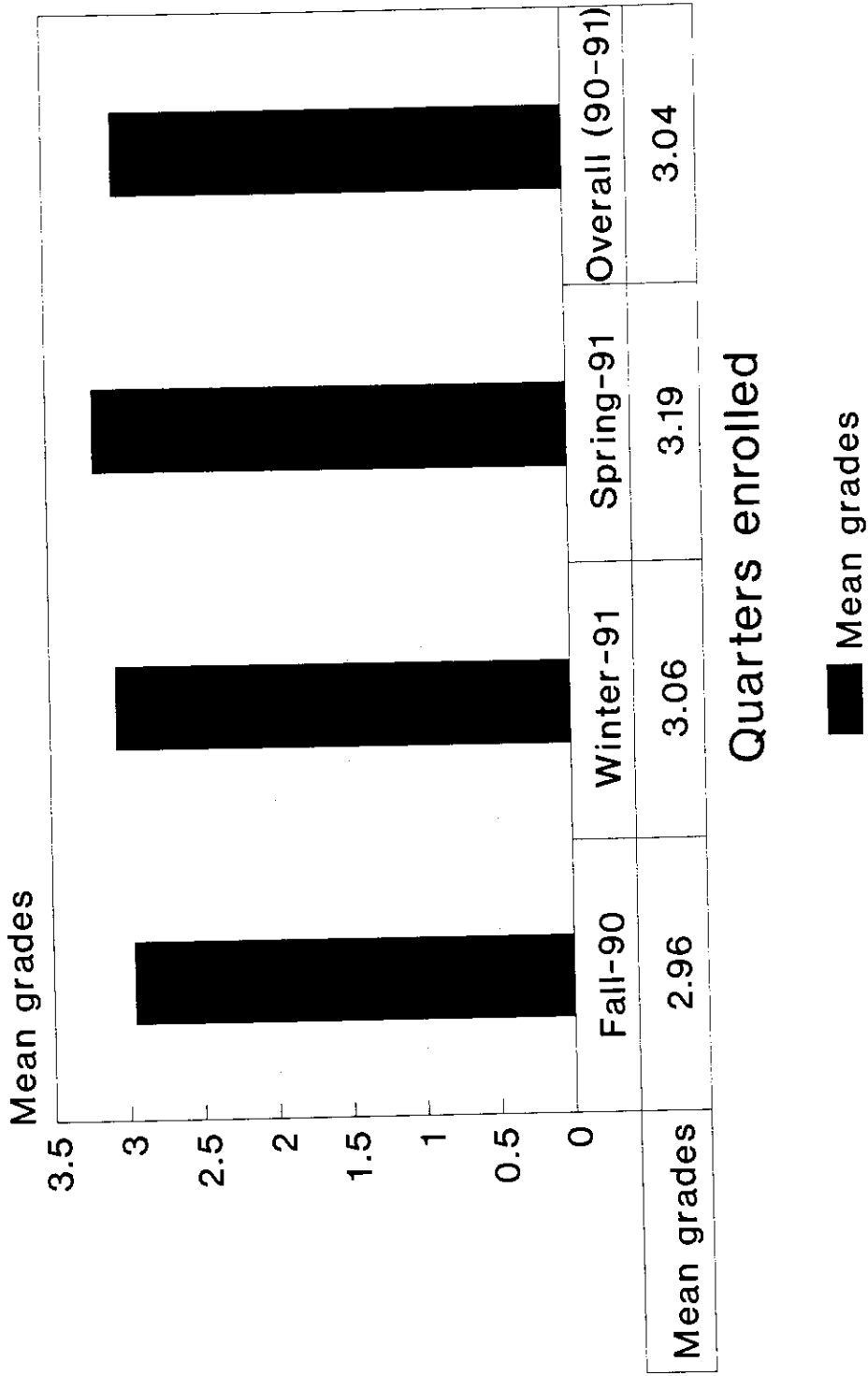
The grades, at first glance, appear rather high in comparison to the low score received on the CAAP test. Part of the reason for this would be the fact that the more difficult mode of writing that the CAAP test requires (analytical) is not the first graded mode that students write in at the beginning of English 101. They work up to this mode as the quarter progresses. Furthermore, students are allowed to revise and resubmit papers in English 101, whereas they are allowed no such recourse on the CAAP test. (A further analysis of grading factors is included in the discussion section of the report.)

The modal age of students taking the CAAP was 19, accounting for 617 of the 1044 total. Students between the ages of 19 and 20 accounted for 88.5% of the test takers.

**FIGURE 1 - MEAN CAAP ESSAY TEST SCORES**  
**Quarters of Administration**



**FIGURE 2 - AVERAGE GRADES IN ENGLISH 101**  
**Grades by quarter enrolled**





Freshmen made up 928 of the total, or 89.4%. Sophomores made up 72 of the total (6.9%), Juniors 24 (2.3%), and Seniors or 'Others' 14 (1.4%). The age and education level frequencies point out that the CAAP was taken by the student most desirous to have information on, that being in-coming freshmen. (See Figure 3.)

The mean high school GPA of the students who took the CAAP was 3.34; the mean GPA of transfer students was 3.07. The mean SAT-Verbal score of all students who took the CAAP was 451.42, which placed it at the 59th percentile of 1990 college-bound seniors; the mean WPCT-Verbal score of all students who took the CAAP was 50.38, which placed it at the 65th equipercetile of SAT-Verbal scores of 1990 college-bound seniors. The SAT-Verbal national mean for 1990 college-bound seniors was 424.

In total, 598 of the students who took the CAAP were females, and 444 males. In each quarter, more females than males took the CAAP test: 344 females to 246 males in the Fall Quarter, 191 females to 127 males in the Winter Quarter, and 118 females to 109 males in the Spring Quarter.

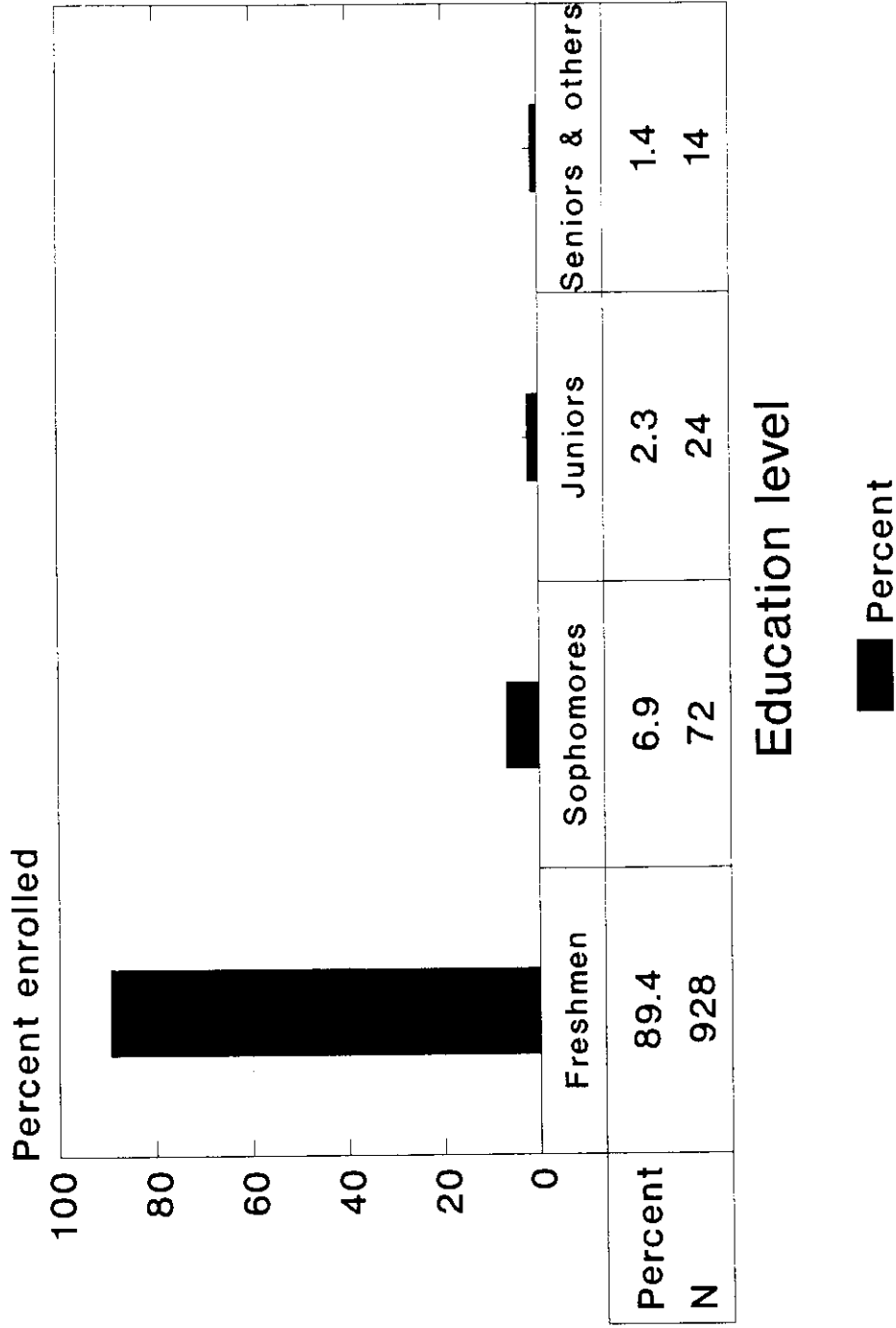
Ethnically, the overwhelming percentage of the students who took the CAAP were Caucasian (834, or 83.7%). Other ethnic origins combined to account for 119 CAAP takers (11.9%). The largest ethnic group outside Caucasians taking the CAAP were Asian/Pacific Islanders at 6.8%. No other ethnic group accounted for more than 1.5% of the total number of CAAP takers. Similar percentages of ethnicity were found in each of the three quarters in question. (See Figure 4.)

An overwhelming majority of the students who took the CAAP listed English as their first language (96.7%). Although the sample sizes for this variable were extremely unbalanced--96.7% to 3.3%--some interesting data was discovered nonetheless.

Students whose first language was English had a mean score of 2.52 on the CAAP test; students whose first language was something other than English scored a 2.13. Students whose first language was English had a mean score of 3.05 in English 101; students whose first language was something other than English had a mean score of 2.87 in English 101. The difference in CAAP score means was statistically significant; the difference in English 101 score means was not. (CAAP:  $f = 14.48$ , sig of  $f = .000$ ; English 101:  $f = 2.94$ , sig of  $f = .087$ .) Students whose first language was something other than English, in other words, did not do well compared to English as first language students on the CAAP, but held their own competitively in English 101. (See Figure 5.)

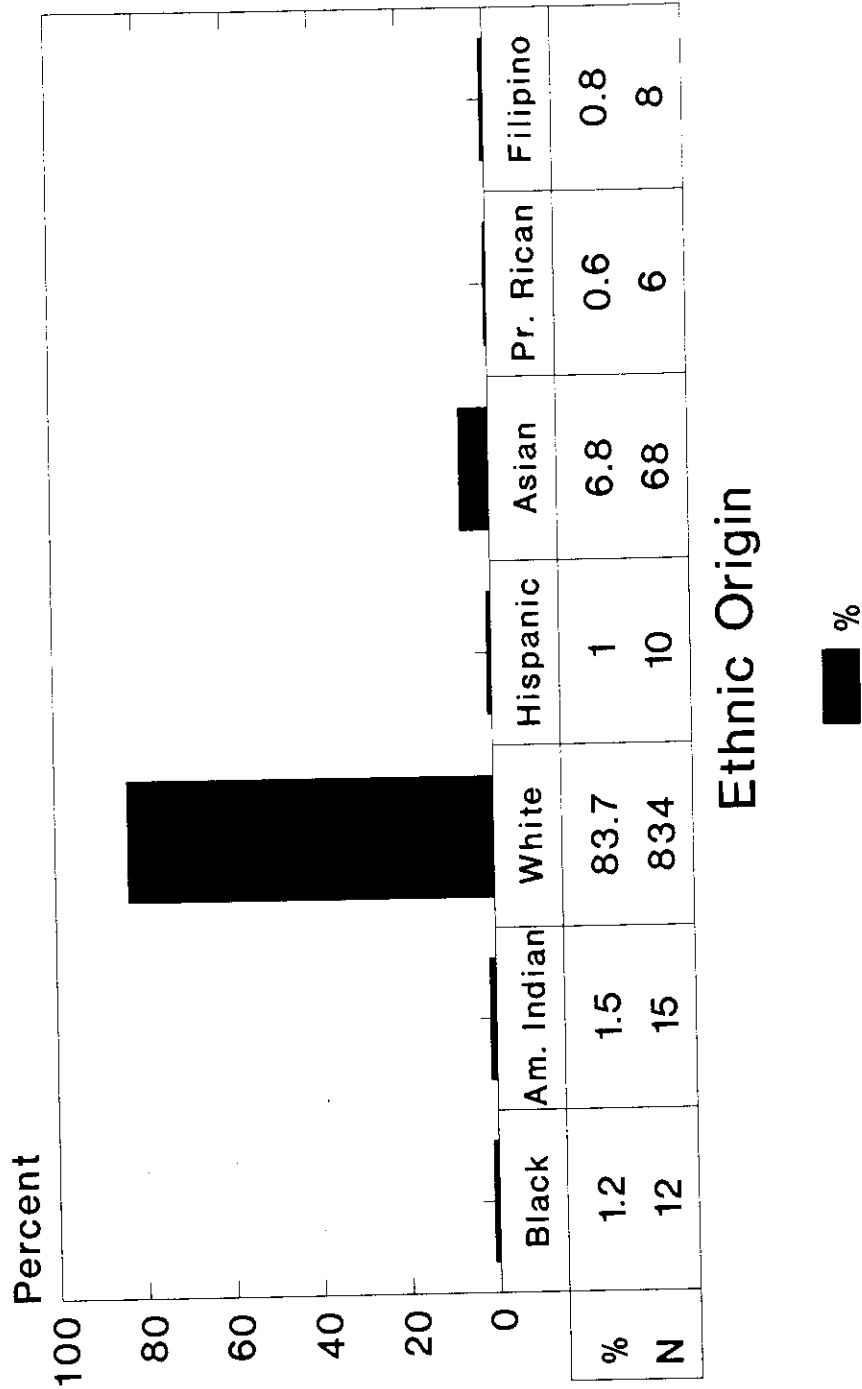
When students enrolled as freshmen were compared to non-freshmen (sophomores or higher) a similar pattern appeared. The mean CAAP score for freshmen was 2.52; the mean CAAP score for non-freshmen was 2.31. The mean English 101 score for freshmen was 3.05; the mean English 101 score for non-freshmen was 2.92. Again, the difference in mean scores on the CAAP was statistically significant, while the mean score in English 101 was not. (CAAP:  $f = 9.90$ , sig of  $f = .002$ ; English 101:  $f = 3.52$ , sig of  $f = .061$ .) The

**FIGURE 3 - ENROLLMENT IN ENGLISH 101**  
**Enrollment by Education level**

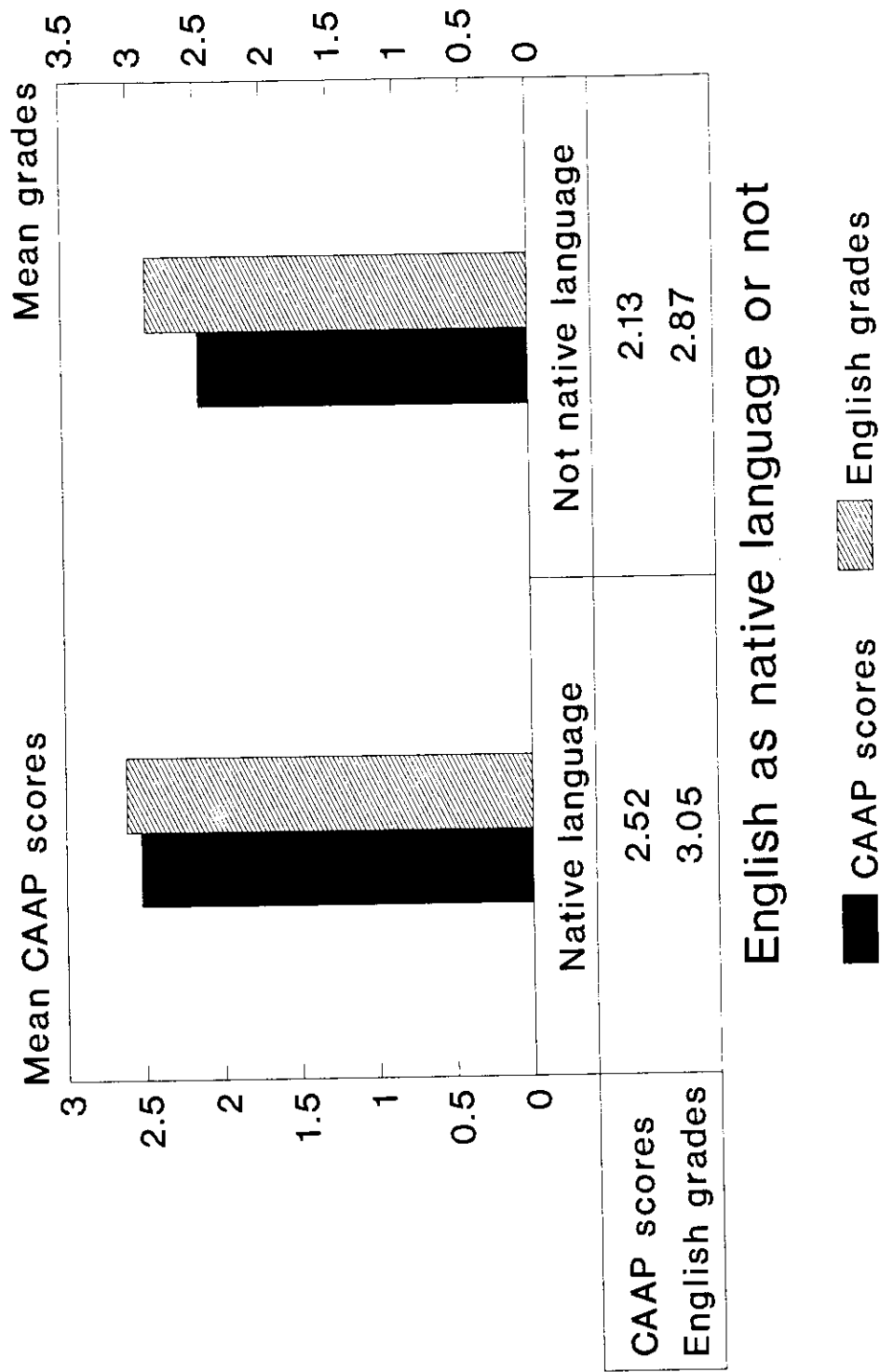


# FIGURE 4 - CAAP ESSAY TEST

## Ethnic Distribution



**FIGURE 5 - CAAP SCORES & ENGLISH GRADES**  
**English as Native language or not**



other issue of note here is that statistically significance aside, freshmen scored better than non-freshmen on both counts.

No answer as to why this was the case was reached, although answers most speculated on all had to do with writing anxiety. How many of these students, for instance, had taken English 100 or English 101 previously and failed? How many had taken English 100, then put off taking English 101 until later? How many had avoided courses with writing requirements before returning to take English 101?

Comparison by gender, on the other hand, produced different results. Females scored higher on the both the CAAP and in English 101 at a statistically significant level. The mean CAAP score for females was 2.61; the mean CAAP score for males was 2.37. The mean English 101 score for females was 3.11; the mean English 101 score for males 2.95. (CAAP:  $f = 41.79$ , sig of  $f = .000$ ; English 101:  $f = 16.81$ , sig of  $f = .000$ .) (See Figure 6.)

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine if there were any utilized variables (high school GPA, SAT-Verbal, WPCT-Verbal, transfer GPA) that could predict how well students might score on the CAAP, or in English 101. At the statistical criterion of .05 (the figure at which the most accurate information is generated) the SAT-Verbal was shown to be a weak predictor of English 101 grades ( $R\text{-square} = .23$ ), and no variable existed that could predict CAAP scores with any degree of statistical significance.

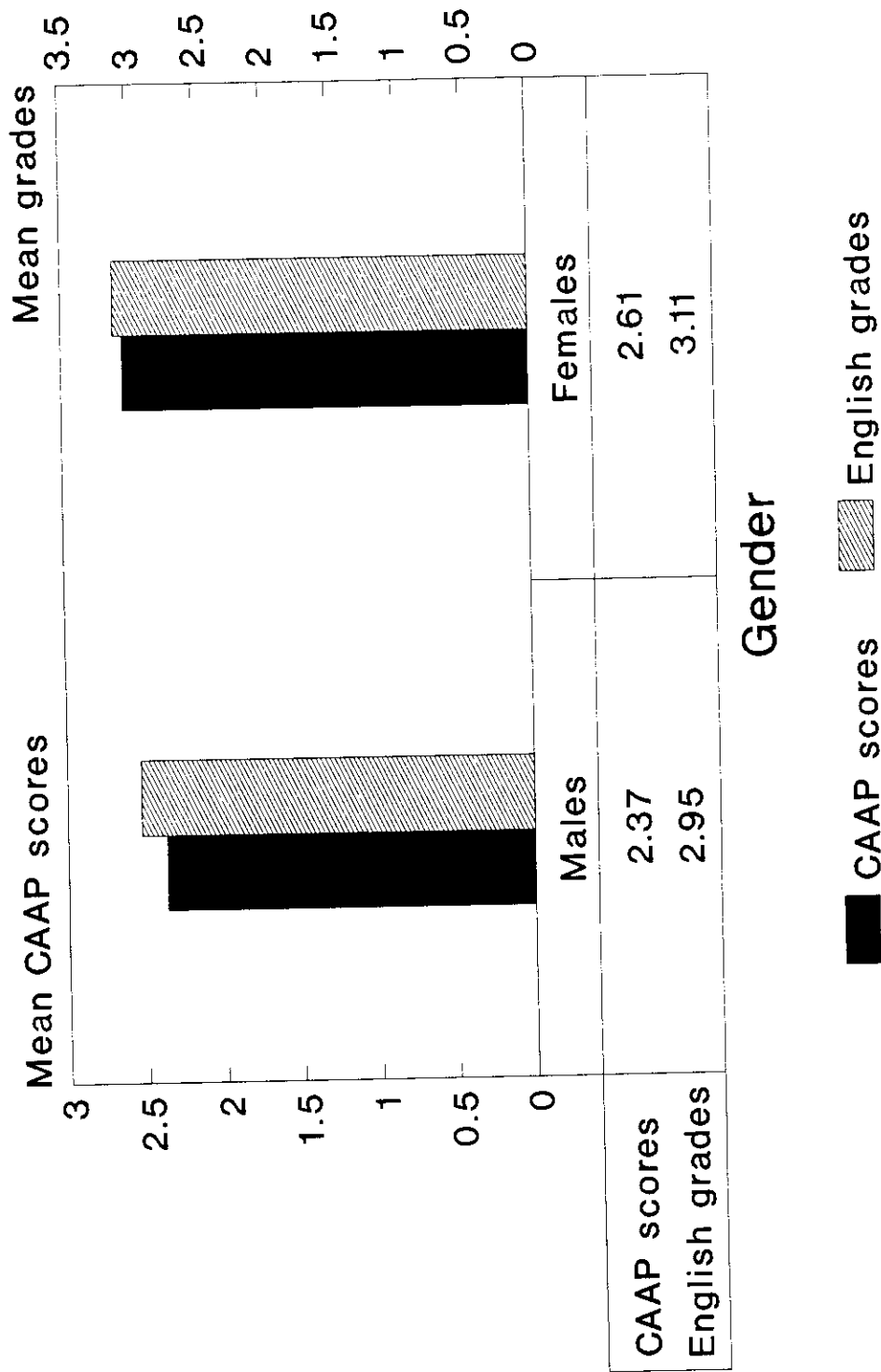
Similarly, when correlations (statistical comparison between variables) were run, no two variables were strongly correlated, although there was a statistically significant, moderate correlation between the grade received in English 101 and high school GPA ( $.31$ ,  $P = .000$ ). What this tells us is that to a moderate extent, the higher the high school GPA the higher the grade was in the English course taken, although this result should be taken lightly.

Other variables that were statistically significant, yet with only a slight degree of correlation to the grade received in English 101 included: transfer GPA ( $.21$ ,  $P = .014$ ); SAT-Verbal ( $.15$ ,  $P = .000$ ); and WPCT-Verbal ( $.14$ ,  $P = .001$ ). The CAAP test was statistically significant in relation to the grade received in English 101 ( $.000$ ), but it had only the slightest degree of correlation ( $.12$ ). Regarding CAAP test score, only high school GPA had statistical significance, but was only slightly correlated ( $.21$ ,  $P = .000$ ).

#### Special Data Analysis of Fall Quarter English 100 Students

There were 74 students who took the CAAP in English 100 during the Fall Quarter. Subsequently, 55 of these students enrolled in English 101, 39 of them in the Winter Quarter

**FIGURE 6 - CAAP SCORES & ENGLISH GRADES**  
**By gender**



(Group A), and 16 in the Spring Quarter (Group B).

The mean score for Group A students (took CAAP in English 100 in Fall) was 2.06. The mean score for Group A students who took the CAAP again in the Winter Quarter was 2.60. A repeated measure analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test for statistical significance was run on this data, and, indeed, the improvement of CAAP test scores for this sample of students was strongly significant ( $f = 26.33$ , sig of  $f = .000$ ). (See Figure 7a.)

The mean score for Group B (also took CAAP in English 100 in Fall) was 2.02. The mean score for Group B students who took the CAAP again in the Spring Quarter was 2.28. An ANOVA was also run on this data, and indicated the improvement of CAAP test scores for this sample of students was statistically not significant ( $f = 2.13$ , sig of  $f = .165$ ). (See Figure 7b.)

The mean English 101 grade for Group A students, those who took English 100 in the Fall Quarter and English 101 in the Winter Quarter, was 2.78. The mean English 101 grade for the general population of students taking English 101 in the Winter Quarter was 3.06. The difference between the two mean grade scores indicates that the sample under question scored .28 points less than the general population of students.

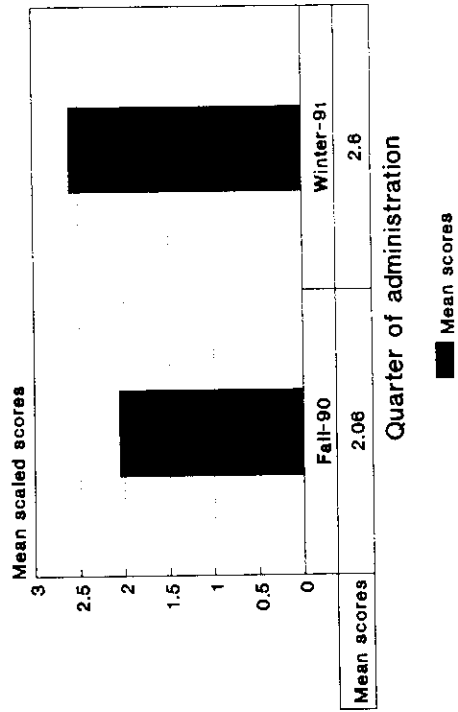
This finding was neither unexpected nor considered unusual. Students who take English 100 have already been determined as the population with the most difficulty in the discipline, so it is not particularly surprising that as a group they score lower than the general population. On the other hand, that these students have a respectable mean English 101 GPA of a B- is considered by the Composition Department to be an encouraging sign.

The mean English 101 grade for Group B students, those who took English 100 in the Fall Quarter and English 101 in the Spring Quarter, was 2.77. Again, the B- average was considered respectable; however, during the Spring Quarter the mean English 101 grade for the general population of students taking English 101 was 3.19. The difference between the two mean grade scores indicates that the Group B sample scored .42 points less than the general population of students, nearly a quarter point less than their Winter Quarter counterparts.

Students who took English 100 in the Fall Quarter, then took English 101 in the Winter had better CAAP scores, as well as scored better English 101 scores relative to the general population of English 101 students than students who took English 100 in the Fall Quarter and waited until Spring Quarter to take English 101. (See Figure 8.)

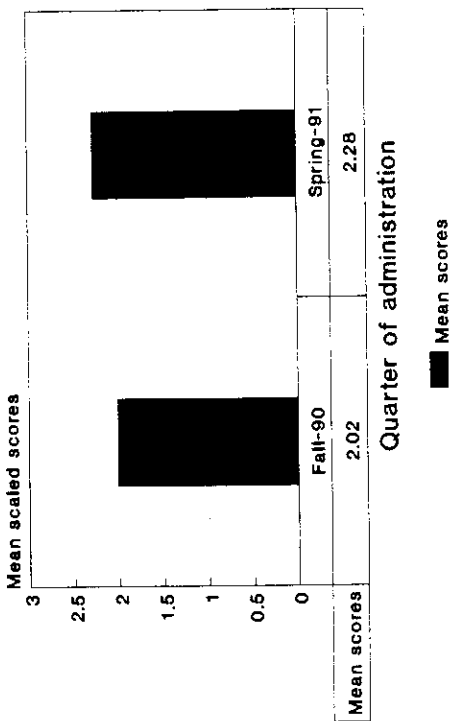
This particular analysis of data is interesting for more than just the fact that English 100 students score below the general population GPA when they subsequently take English 101. Again, that these students score in the B- area is considered quite respectable. The purpose of the analysis was, in fact, to address the thesis that student writing improves not just with practice, but with sustained practice. According to the data gathered for this

FIGURE 7a - CAAP ESSAY TEST  
Repeat Testing Fall-90 & Winter-91



N=39

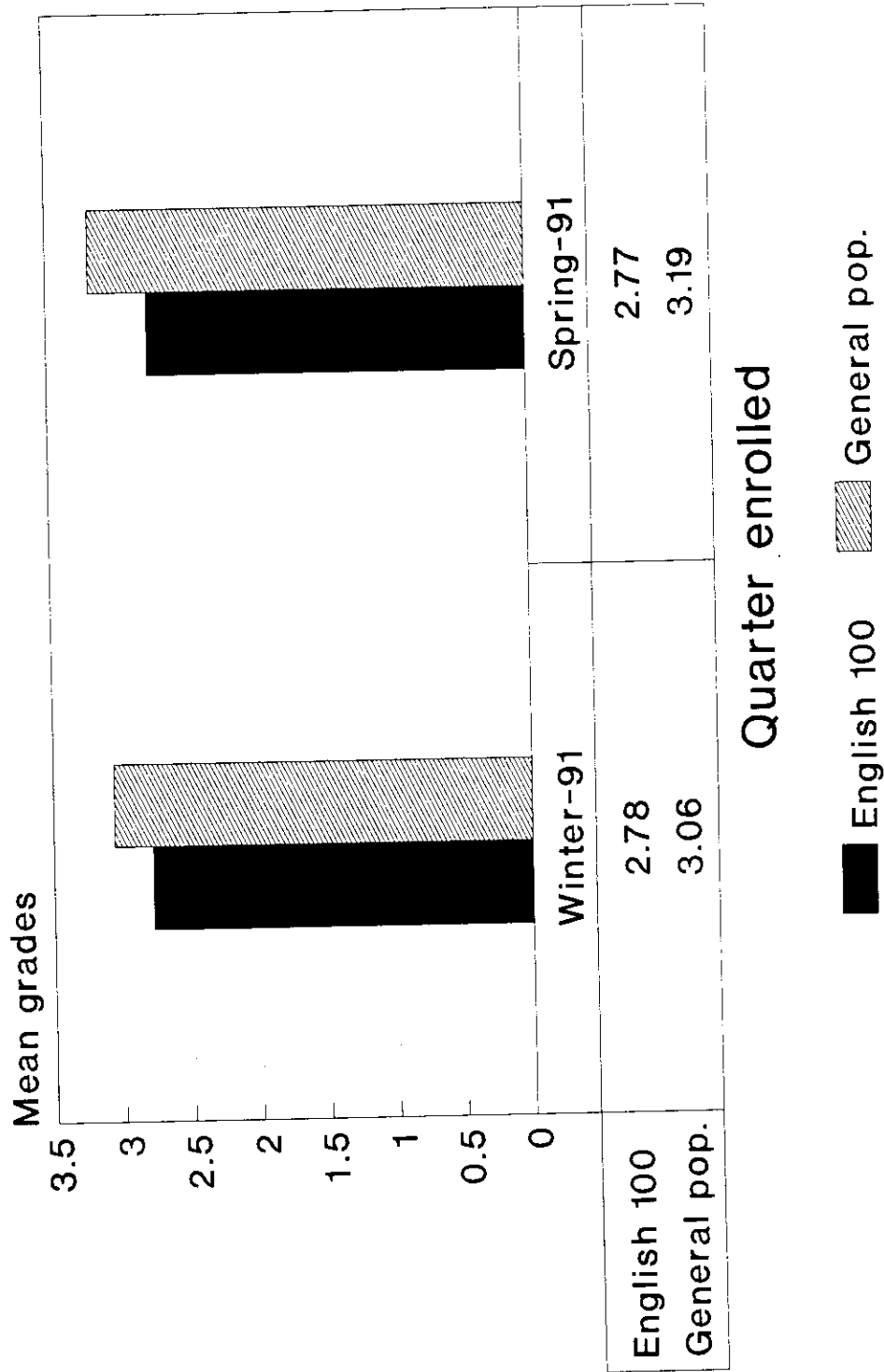
FIGURE 7b - CAAP ESSAY TEST  
repeat Testing Fall-90 & Spring-91



N=16



**FIGURE 8 - GRADES ENGLISH 101**  
**Fall Sample & General Population**



report, this indeed seems to be the case.

### Discussion

At its most basic level, administering the CAAP Writing (Essay) Test quantified what most instructors who deal with student writing already know: that in-coming student writers do not write well in the analytic mode. By following a select group of students (English 100 in the Fall Quarter of 1990), another intuited thesis--that student writing improves with sustained usage--was also quantified, at least partially, by use of the CAAP test.

As well, the CAAP Writing Skills Test had another initial usefulness, that as an assistance to one of the most difficult mandates the English Composition Department has: developing as uniform and fair a grading system for English 101 as possible, a task with factors peculiar to the course.

For one, the English 101 teaching staff is nearly exclusively graduate teaching assistants. For another, this constantly changing staff teaches a course that in the best of circumstances is often interpreted by students as being wholly subjective. There is no true and false, nor multiple choice grading to simplify quantifying a student's performance, only the interpretation by an instructor of what has been written.

As a result, gathering information about students and assessing their progress during and after English 101 is crucial not only for the future development of the writing program but also for the development of Western's writing teachers. At Western in-service staff development is especially important because 95% of the Freshmen English sections offered by the English Department *are* taught by graduate teaching assistants. To assist in this task, the Director of the English Composition Program used the 1990-91 CAAP samples to help TA's gain confidence in assigning grades.

By comparing the results of local (WWU's English Composition staff) evaluations of the CAAP essays with those of national evaluators, there was, and is a real basis for on-going discussion about what constitutes quality in student writing. In fact, it was discovered that local evaluations of student papers were initially at odds with those of the national evaluators, although local evaluations did improve as TA's gained teaching experience and confidence. By the end of the academic year (1990-91) local and national evaluations had become fairly close.

The CAAP essays became (and could continue to be part of) the basis of staff development and a way of directing attention to the larger, rhetorical concerns of Western's students' writing. TA's benefit from knowing that their impressions of a paper are not

idiosyncratic, but reflective of the views of other professional writing teachers across the country.

Together with techniques already utilized--carry-over papers as examples from one year to the next, the compilation and quantifying of grading criteria discussed at length in weekly English 101 instructor's meetings--grading of English 101 papers can continue to improve. And with improvement in grading, so does the level of teaching effectiveness. Probably the singular greatest concern of English 101 students is why they are being graded the way they are. To answer their concerns fully, there needs to be as much study of and training in the process itself as possible. Only that way can these instructors get the kind of support they need to answer students' concerns authoritatively.

Even in its initial administration, then, the CAAP has already provided the Composition Program with much needed information. As the program rethinks the direction of the 200-level writing courses and the sequencing of them with 100-level courses, such information should become more valuable.

These direct and immediate results, however, are only part of what could be accomplished with a writing sample. If, for instance, a pre-enrollment sample was taken, the CAAP or other instrument would address the issue of more properly placing a student in his or her first-term, or first-ever-at-Western, English course.

Also, as a forecaster of student ability, especially in the light of the fact that Western has been in the enviable position of being more "choosy" about its freshmen (i.e.: high school GPA's and pre-college test scores are up), such data could be of immeasurable assistance in the process of up- or down-grading English 101 syllabi.

If, for instance, high school GPA's and pre-college test scores continued to increase, and the CAAP or another such instrument showed trends that in-coming freshmen were getting stronger in the analytic mode of writing, English 101 curricula may need to change. Maybe only one personal response paper would be needed before moving into summary and analysis, with the last paper introducing the concept of writing across the university curricula. If the reverse happened, if scores on the CAAP or equivalent test fell (whether or not overall pre-college test scores did likewise), then English 101 might best serve at the skill level it is currently teaching at, or even need to down-grade.

Such information is vital to a state university such as Western which must respond to what its student population needs, and where the curricula should neither overtax nor understimulate the model student profile. As an institution supported by tax dollars and required to respond to at least two demands--high academic standards and responsibility to state needs--such information as could be gleaned from a substantive writing sample could assist academics and administrators alike invaluablely.

## Recommendations

It is here suggested that it would be a positive step to encourage English 100 students to take English 101 in the ensuing quarter by making available to them reserved spots in English 101. A question is also here posed that if sustained practice does improve writing significantly, what would offering other such incentives into writing classes such as English 201 do to facilitate better writing skills among Western students? To go one step further: how advantageous might it be to encourage sustained writing skills practice vertically through a student's academic career? Would it be feasible to have writing intensive courses required at each academic level--sophomore, junior, senior?

It is next suggested that Western take a pre-enrollment writing sample. Not only would it be a most desired tool for the English Composition Department, in the current climate of ultra-concern for the level of student writing, it would serve as a positive tool for many other academic and administrative departments. And it could be accomplished rather painlessly, both in terms of financial and personnel resources.

First, a surcharge of approximately five dollars would be added to student fees. This fee would not only pay for the instrument itself, but for the grading as well, and would probably leave a modest reserve fund that could be used for freshmen scholarships, etc. At an appropriate time (Summer Start, Freshmen Orientation, or maybe both), a writing sample instrument would be administered utilizing those programs' current logistic techniques and personnel. Once the samples had been taken, a grading team would be assembled and chaired appropriately (by the Director of Composition, for example, or the Chair of the Writing Committee).

Team members would be paid one dollar per paper graded, and would probably fare rather well remuneratively for what would constitute not much more than one day's work, although the money itself would probably only induce people already concerned about writing skills at Western. The grading team, it is felt, would be doubly motivated, and thus that much more effective. Moreover, such grade evaluation would provide a forum for discussing student writing at the entry level.

The grading itself would proceed with proven methodologies for such endeavors; in particular, it would use utilize holistic procedures developed by ETS. Students admitted late, or in later quarters, would have writing samples taken as they entered through the auspices of the Composition Program.

Finally, it is here suggested that it might be a bold and positive move to incorporate into Western's complete writing evaluation process a connection between a pre-enrollment sample, the Junior Writing Exam, and a Senior Exit writing sample. One way to accomplish this might be a writing portfolio. There are, of course, many logistic concerns when considering a writing portfolio, much more than can be talked about here; however, it is one

of the strongest programs available for assessing student writing over time, as well as being one of the most flexible.

## Appendix A

Applebee, Arthur N., Judith A. Langer, and Ina Mullis. The Writing Report Card: Writing Achievement in American Schools. Princeton, N.J.: NAEP, ETS, 1986.

Applebee, Arthur. Writing in the Secondary Schools. NCTE, 1981.