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

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Report 1991-08: Analysis of Student Essay Writing Skills in Entry-Level English Composition Courses at Western Washington University

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.