# A Review of UCSD Writing Programs:

# Visions of Assessment

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## BACKGROUND

At the invitation of UCSD Senior Vice Chancellor Marsha Chandler and Associate Vice Chancellor Mark Appelbaum, four outside faculty with extensive experience in writing instruction and the administration of writing programs visited UCSD on June 23, 24, and 25:

***John Briggs (UCR):***

Teaching experience: Composition and related fields (27 years) Renaissance Literature, Lincoln, Composition Pedagogy, History of Rhetoric

Administrative experience: UC writing programs (22 years), UC Test Development Committees (22 years), Writing Project Director (10 years)

Other Background: Various publications in the history of rhetoric, the theory of composition, pedagogy, and literary studies (Shakespeare, Chapman, Bacon)

***Jonathan Monroe (Cornell):***

Teaching Experience: Comparative Literature (18 years), cross-listed courses in English, French, German, and Spanish

Administrative Experience: Associate Dean and Director of Writing Programs (3 years); Director of the John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines and Knight Writing Program (10 years)

Other Background: Publications in romantic, modern, and contemporary poetry, the prose poem, cross-genre writing, writing and disciplinarity, writing theory and pedagogy, verse and prose poems

***Ed White (University of Arizona):***

Teaching Experience: Composition, literature, and related fields (43 years) Post-retirement visiting professor in Ph. D. program in composition and rhetoric (5 years)

Administrative Experience: Writing Program Administrator (30 years), English Department Chair (9 years), Statewide CSU administrator of writing assessment in CA (7 years)

Other Background:
National Council of Writing Program Administrators:
Executive Committee and Director of Consultant-Evaluator Program (14 years)
MLA Committees on Teaching and on Publications
Council on College Composition and Communication:
Executive Committee 1976-78 and 1992-95
Nine books and 75 articles and book chapters on college writing and writing assessment

***Muriel Zimmerman (UCSB):***

Teaching Experience: Scientific and engineering writing; writing for the computer industry; business writing (20 years)

Administrative Experience: Director of UCSB Interdisciplinary Writing Program (4 years) and of UCSB Writing Program (7 years)

Other Background: Extensive career as technical writer in industry (20 years); ongoing visiting appointment at MIT to teach engineering writing (since 1983) Publications include *The MIT Guide to Science and Engineering Communication* (co-author) and articles, book chapters, and conference papers about sci/tech writing and design of writing programs and writing instruction.

The visitors' charge was to meet with campus representatives and develop recommendations for evaluating UCSD's writing programs. In the course of seventeen meetings with UCSD faculty, we met with campus administrators, several college provosts, representatives from the Senate, and administrators of all six college writing programs, as well as directors of ESL and Subject A. We consulted with one another extensively to assemble the following report.

## INTRODUCTION

It is clear from our conversations with UCSD faculty and administrators that there are high expectations for the campus writing programs. One of the chief goals of writing instruction is to enable students to reach the highest possible level of academic achievement throughout their undergraduate years and beyond. Much the same might be said of all instruction at UCSD.

What necessarily distinguishes such a goal from other educational goals in a university is the crucial role writing instruction plays across the curriculum. Much like numeracy – the skills and subject matter of mathematical reasoning -- writing and academic literacy serve as the learner's instruments at all levels of the curriculum. Academic literacy is more than an introductory subject; it has to do with forms of

knowledge and skill that inform almost all kinds of academic work We agree with UCSD's view that the higher the expectation that students will accomplish progressively demanding intellectual tasks, the more ambitious the goals for academic literacy must be.

UCSD's ambitions for effective and appropriate writing instruction are therefore appropriate for its first-year writing programs as well as its departments, at all levels of instruction. Without this dual focus on writing's importance to introductory and advanced instruction, the campus – and particularly its first-year writing programs -- would confront an impossible task. The most powerful introductory courses would have to be considered failures if they were solely responsible for the work of preparing students to write to the best of their abilities.

The visiting committee observed that UCSD's diversity of writing programs, based in separate colleges, was generally a source of strength in meeting these expectations. We saw that a good deal of dedicated work was being done, that various programs had their own internal methods of evaluating their effectiveness, and that innovative ideas were being tested. We saw that different notions of excellence could coexist and in some cases challenge each other. On the other hand, we came to the understanding that the campus could do better, and that one of the chief barriers to improvement is the lack of a general strategy or set of goals for academic literacy for the entire UCSD undergraduate program. Until there is a more comprehensive approach to academic literacy for UCSD undergraduates, the applicability of our recommendations regarding forms of evaluation of UCSD's existing writing programs will be seriously limited.

Another limitation, one that is relatively easy to overcome, is the lack of systematic information about the preparedness of UCSD's entering freshmen. Any evaluation of the effectiveness of writing programs needs to take account of possible variations in those cohorts from year to year, since such variations could strongly influence academic performance at the college level.

The goal of our report is three-fold: to sketch the nature of the evaluative problem, to offer some suggestions for immediate action, and to begin the process of considering how to make systemic improvements over the long term.

## OBSERVATIONS ON CURRENT PROGRAMS

From among the wide variety of possible university writing programs, UCSD has so far selected two different models for its first-year curriculum. (Sixth College is setting a different path and we will return to that below.) The first model is based on the lecture/section format, in which a faculty member or team lectures to large groups of students on a particular content area of importance, with graduate students later holding small section meetings so that students may discuss the lectures and their concomitant readings; student writing is assigned in these sections and the graduate student leaders respond to the writing and focus to some degree on writing instruction. The second model takes place entirely in small sections and the content of the course is writing itself, based often on rhetorical models of argument with roots in Aristotle as developed by modern rhetoricians such as Toulmin. Student writing is the center of such a model and the graduate students teaching the sections are trained to focus on writing instruction. Without attempting to evaluate the use of these models in particular programs at UCSD, we can say that each of these models has strengths and weaknesses, and that those who

direct such programs tend to have strong feelings about the strengths of their model, with less attention to its weaknesses.

The lecture/section format has deep roots at UCSD and has precedents in many universities in the United States in the 20th century, such as the University of Chicago. Its strengths lie in the power of great lecturers dealing with great ideas and readings; it is often defended on the grounds of the importance of its content and the value of its readings. It puts first-year students into a kind of relationship to the senior faculty lecturing, and the graduate student section leaders are often dedicated to the content and are themselves excellent teachers. The weakness of the format is that issues with student writing are often overshadowed by the power of the lectures and the readings and the section leaders are often much more interested in discussing the readings with their students than in helping them understand how to write. In one sense, this model assumes that first-year students already have learned the rhetorical skills they need to analyze reading and develop sound arguments and what the students need most is to practice those skills on great ideas. That may or may not be true of the first-year students at UCSD.

The small section writing courses now in place at Muir and Warren colleges exemplify a quite different format, based on the assumption that entering students need to learn the rhetorical skills that will foster successful writing throughout the university. This format puts its energy into a coherent writing curriculum and teacher training. While the course may well have great readings on important topics, the center of the course is student writing and revision. This format also has roots in early 20th century American university writing programs, particularly those developed at Harvard and the University of Michigan, though its roots are traceable through ancient Greece.

The strengths of this format lie in the focused attention to student writing as the central matter of the course. Its weaknesses lie in the lack of strong linkages to other subject matter or to senior faculty and in its dependence on the graduate student teachers who may or may not be well trained in rhetoric and writing instruction and who may be less interested in the subject matter of writing than in other content areas of the university.

Any assessment design for the first-year writing program must take into account the very different assumptions and goals of these two prevailing patterns. Although there is some agreement in theory among all the college courses on goals (students will learn how to use sources appropriately, students will learn how to construct arguments, students will learn the academic conventions, and so on), in practice these goals may well turn out to be quite different depending on the format of instruction. Unless a clear agreement can be reached by those directing the courses on common goals, there will be no way to conduct a common assessment of student performance.

Meanwhile, in what strikes our visiting team as a creative move, sixth college has developed a plan for its course that rejects both prevailing models in favor of a curriculum that integrates writing into the university and the community in quite new ways. While the program has not yet begun, it seems clear to us that an assessment design for the two prevailing patterns would be likely to miss some of the important goals that sixth college is proposing for its first-year students. It is also clear that the innovative nature of this plan highlights the rather conventional nature of the two

prevailing models and suggests that a full reconsideration of all of the UCSD writing programs may be in order.

## PHILOSOPHICAL AND EMPIRICAL BASES OF ASSESSMENT

Both during and after its visit to the UCSD campus, the visiting team's deliberations were preoccupied by one question more than any other: Given the diversity of practices and absence of a philosophically cogent, consistent approach to the teaching of first-year writing across the UCSD curriculum, how should the committee respond to its charge to recommend in effect a value-free model of assessment for the existing approaches? In attempting to negotiate this charge, the visiting team could not help but engage the unresolved philosophical and practical considerations of the current state of writing instruction at UCSD that have prompted the university to solicit assistance in evaluating the effectiveness of its college-based first-year writing programs. The team's deliberations about how to proceed have brought to the surface a number of fundamentally prior philosophical questions that the range of available approaches at UCSD invites the university itself to engage:

- What are the aims of writing instruction within the university curriculum?
- What is the relationship of first-year writing to writing in upper-division courses?
- What is "good writing" and how do we know it when we see it?
- Who decides what counts as effective writing instruction?
- Should the evaluation of what counts as "good" or effective writing be considered the exclusive or primary domain of writing "specialists" with professional credentials in English, rhetoric, and composition, or of faculty across the disciplines?
- Is effective writing something that can be taught "in general," once and for all, in a first-year course of whatever design, with or without specific linkage to particular disciplinary writing practices, or is writing an integral concern of the entire university requiring faculty attention at all levels of the curriculum?
- What is the relationship between the field-specific research and writing in which faculty are engaged and the kinds of writing students are asked to do in their first-year courses and beyond?
- What role do graduate student teachers play in the teaching of writing and how does their teaching contribute to their own professional development in their chosen fields?
- Do faculty and graduate students engaged in the teaching of writing understand their work to be a detour from what otherwise concerns them in their respective disciplines?
- Is writing important enough to the university faculty for them to consider it a part of their own responsibility?
- If so, how might the university encourage a sense of the teaching of writing as a shared enterprise across all departments and disciplines?

While the visiting team recognizes that posing these and related questions sooner rather than later may have the effect of complicating or postponing the implementation of

a more ostensibly value-neutral approach to assessment, it is our shared conviction that the questions themselves cannot ultimately be elided if the university is to develop philosophically coherent grounds for evaluating what counts as effective writing instruction and what does not. Since any meaningful assessment of the teaching of writing must be attuned to the curricular goals of the university, and since the university's curricular goals are distributed across the disciplines, the varying approaches currently in place at UCSD raise a number of additional, closely related questions:

- What curricular assumptions and goals are embedded in the central administration's decision to locate the university's wide range of approaches to the teaching of writing in the colleges rather than in the disciplines among which students will choose their respective majors?
- Given that the trajectory of student learning carries students toward greater degrees of sophistication in field-specific writing practices of their majors in their junior and senior years, how should the effectiveness of first-year writing courses be evaluated, and by whom?
- Given the specificity and diversity of writing practices across the disciplines, can UCSD faculty representing a broad range of fields agree on what counts as effective writing, or will the criteria of effectiveness vary, perhaps significantly, not only across but even within particular disciplines and from diverse disciplinary practices?
- How transferable are the writing practices of one field to another?
- What adjustments are needed—e.g. in class size, amounts and kinds of writing and reading assigned--to allow time for faculty and graduate students teaching first-year writing and upper-division writing-intensive courses to help students develop their abilities to write effectively across different subject areas?
- What kinds of incentives can the university administration make available to ensure meaningful participation by faculty and graduate students representing a wide range of departmental and disciplinary affiliations across the university?
- How can such participation be linked most effectively to the varying traditions and missions of the various colleges, and vice-versa?
- How much writing is currently being assigned, and what kinds of writing practices are students engaged in across the disciplines in individual courses beyond the freshman year?
- How much does concern about writing and actual faculty attention to writing vary by department?
- How much is said about the writing assignments in individual classes?
- How happy are TAs with their roles in writing instruction at UCSD and how integrated do they feel their work in these courses to be in relation to their apprenticeships in their chosen fields?

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The problem of assessment for the UCSD writing programs, as always, is not solely a measurement problem nor is it simply one of selecting this or that assessment device. It is integrally entwined with the writing curricula, and, in turn, with the assumptions about students and the kinds of writing instruction that will be most of value to them. Thus one solution to this problem would be to ask each program to design (or to continue, since several of them now conduct assessments) an assessment in tune with the assumptions and goals of the particular program. But that would not meet the charge of our visiting team. A better solution would be to step back and reconsider all of the writing programs in terms of common goals and common assumptions, preferably in clear enough terms to be measurable. If and when that occurs it may be possible to devise a means of assessment that will move across particular instructional formats and strategies to measure their success at achieving these goals.

Thus our first recommendation is to discover and implement ways to come up with a goals statement that will cover all the UCSD first-year writing courses. Since there is some history of hostility among these programs, such a consensus does not strike some of the writing directors as possible. But, as the "Outcomes Statement" for the first-year course devised by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (see Appendix 1) demonstrates, it is perfectly possible for very different programs to agree on common goals. It is important to distinguish between common goals (such as ensuring that students learn how to use source material appropriately) and the many different ways in which programs can attain those goals. That is, common goals by no means require or even imply a common curriculum or common approaches to assignments. One of our interviewees suggested that the assistant program directors would have an easier time coming to agreement on common goals than would the directors. But it must be obvious that no measurement can take place until there is agreement on what is to be measured and at what point in the student's progress to the degree that measurement is to take place.

As part of the effort to develop meaningful goals, we also suggest involving the graduate students who have served as TAs in the UCSD writing programs. They will have valuable contributions to make in regard to the quality of their training to teach writing and the impact of their own teaching on their own communication skills. In addition, surveys of upper-division students can provide valuable information on their perceptions of the value of the first-year course for their more advanced work.

Once the university has developed a goals statement, it will be time to speak of the technologies available for measuring progress to attaining those goals. For instance, some goals (such as reading comprehension or organizational ability) might well be able to be measured by giving a common examination to students completing the course; other goals (such as understanding how to revise and improve one's work) may only be evaluated by the development of a portfolio assessment system at the end of the course. Numbers of campuses have decided that a mid-career assessment, often by means of portfolios, as students move to the junior year (as Eleanor Roosevelt College seems to use), offers the best means of gathering the information they require. And still other goals may require an assessment at the senior level, perhaps by means of a common portfolio requirement for capstone courses. Some goals may even require such strategies as in-depth interviews of a sample of alumni.

Since assessment includes many methods of gathering information beyond evaluation of student work, UCSD might well consider implementing a set of activities that would increase the connections between the lower-division writing instruction and upper-division work in the major—and thereby possibly improve the freshman writing curriculum and also lead to a meaningful upper-division writing requirement. Such activities are not limited to, but could include a department-by-department inventory of writing assignments in major courses; workshops with directors and assistant directors of the various writing programs to consider issues of transferability; college-wide, department-wide, or division-wide workshops to help faculty consider ways to include more writing assignments in upper-division courses; workshops for TAs in regular upper division courses to help them to become better responders to student writing, and so on. A well-considered university writing program affects more than the students undergoing instruction. It should have noticeable impact as well on the teachers in the program, major requirements for capstone courses, the kinds of assignments and research opportunities in the major, and the tone of the university as a whole.

We regret that we cannot offer a simple answer to the charge we have been given. We are sure the university administration would be happier if we could recommend giving all students completing the various first-year writing courses a particular examination. But the failures of previous assessments of the programs, we are convinced, are traceable to that conceptual error. The wide-ranging approaches to a subject as ancient as the rhetorical education of excellent university students are testimony to the complexity of the assessment task. We are convinced that the reductionism inherent in much writing assessment technology would be particularly inappropriate at UCSD, where so much effort and creativity have gone into a program which is, nonetheless, under-theorized and insufficiently integrated into the entire university program. Creative assessment should not be used to cover up these problems but rather to uncover and deal with them, creatively.

## SUMMARY

The variety of UCSD's writing programs and the campus's apparent lack of agreement concerning the general goals of instruction require that an evaluation of those programs proceed in stages. First, there should be a discussion of what those general goals are, and a willingness to consider them in relation to the rest of the curriculum. Participants should have access to extensive information about the academic literacy of entering students. The proceedings should develop principles and assumptions that lend themselves to evaluative efforts. The discussion should be informed by the principle that *various means may be appropriate to achieve these general goals.*

We have offered a number of suggestions regarding the sort of questions that might be asked at various stages of these discussions. There should be consideration of campus-wide studies as well as evaluations that programs design for themselves. As these various instruments are developed, the campus as well as individual writing programs should consider our questions and suggestions about *the purposes of evaluation,* and the opportunities for making use of these efforts to improve undergraduate and graduate curricula.

# APPENDIX

## WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition

Adopted by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA), April 2000

For further information about the development of the Outcomes Statement, please see:

http://www.mwsc.edu/~outcomes/

For further information about the Council of Writing Program Administrators, please see http://www.cas.ilstu.edu/english/hesse/wpawelcome.htm

A version of this statement was published in
WPA: Writing Program Administration 23.1/2 (fall/winter 1999): 59-66

### Introduction

This statement describes the common knowledge, skills, and attitudes sought by first-year composition programs in American postsecondary education. To some extent, we seek to regularize what can be expected to be taught in first-year composition; to this end the document is not merely a compilation or summary of what currently takes place. Rather, the following statement articulates what composition teachers nationwide have learned from practice, research, and theory. This document intentionally defines only "outcomes," or types of results, and not "standards," or precise levels of achievement. The setting of standards should be left to specific institutions or specific groups of institutions.

Learning to write is a complex process, both individual and social, that takes place over time with continued practice and informed guidance. Therefore, it is important that teachers, administrators, and a concerned public do not imagine that these outcomes can be taught in reduced or simple ways. Helping students demonstrate these outcomes requires expert understanding of how students actually learn to write. For this reason we expect the primary audience for this document to be well-prepared college writing teachers and college writing program administrators. In some places, we have chosen to write in their professional language. Among such readers, terms such as "rhetorical" and "genre" convey a rich meaning that is not easily simplified. While we have also aimed at writing a document that the general public can understand, in limited cases we have aimed first at communicating effectively with expert writing teachers and writing program administrators.

These statements describe only what we expect to find at the end of first-year composition, at most schools a required general education course or sequence of courses. As writers move beyond first-year composition, their writing abilities do not merely

improve. Rather, students' abilities not only diversify along disciplinary and professional lines but also move into whole new levels where expected outcomes expand, multiply, and diverge. For this reason, each statement of outcomes for first-year composition is followed by suggestions for further work that builds on these outcomes.

**Rhetorical Knowledge**

By the end of first year composition, students should

Focus on a purpose
Respond to the needs of different audiences
Respond appropriately to different kinds of rhetorical situations
Use conventions of format and structure appropriate to the rhetorical situation
Adopt appropriate voice, tone, and level of formality
Understand how genres shape reading and writing
Write in several genres

Faculty in all programs and departments can build on this preparation by helping students learn

The main features of writing in their fields
The main uses of writing in their fields
The expectations of readers in their fields

**Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing**

By the end of first year composition, students should

Use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating
Understand a writing assignment as a series of tasks, including finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate
primary and secondary sources
Integrate their own ideas with those of others
Understand the relationships among language, knowledge, and power

Faculty in all programs and departments can build on this preparation by helping students learn

The uses of writing as a critical thinking method
The interactions among critical thinking, critical reading, and writing
The relationships among language, knowledge, and power in their fields

**Processes**

By the end of first year composition, students should

Be aware that it usually takes multiple drafts to create and complete a successful text
Develop flexible strategies for generating, revising, editing, and proof-reading
Understand writing as an open process that permits writers to use later invention and re-thinking to revise their work
Understand the collaborative and social aspects of writing processes
Learn to critique their own and others' works
Learn to balance the advantages of relying on others with the responsibility of doing their part
Use a variety of technologies to address a range of audiences

Faculty in all programs and departments can build on this preparation by helping students learn

To build final results in stages
To review work-in-progress in collaborative peer groups for purposes other than editing
To save extensive editing for later parts of the writing process
To apply the technologies commonly used to research and communicate within their fields

**Knowledge of Conventions**

By the end of first year composition, students should

Learn common formats for different kinds of texts
Develop knowledge of genre conventions ranging from structure and paragraphing to tone and mechanics
Practice appropriate means of documenting their work
Control such surface features as syntax, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Faculty in all programs and departments can build on this preparation by helping students learn

The conventions of usage, specialized vocabulary, format, and documentation in their fields
Strategies through which better control of conventions can be achieved