

Dundalk Summer

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On June 7, 8, and 9 at the Dundalk campus, a few MWP members joined several of the faculty from the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) campuses to participate in the English 101 Learning Outcomes Assessment Project (LOAP).

The goal of LOAP was to measure the changes in student performance as a result of completing English 101 at CCBC. According to Margy McCampbell, Chair of the LOAP committee and English faculty member at CCBC-Catonsville, the English assessment project was initiated as part of the chancellor's plan to measure student achievement system-wide. The chancellor's goal is to complete an assessment for all general education courses. This year's assessment was the first one for English and there is a follow up planned in two years. The program, funded by the CCBC administration, has no official results yet.

The program started the planning process in 2002 and McCampbell joined the committee a year later. She explained that the committee had several objectives. Overall, the members wanted full participation, which meant collecting writing samples from all English 101 sections at all three campuses, two off campus training centers and their online program. There were approximately 200 students involved. The committee wanted to ensure uniform administration of the assessment across sections and campuses. And they wanted participation from the CCBC English faculty in scoring the student samples.

All of the objectives were met except for getting enough scorers from their own English faculty to participate in the summer scoring program. McCampbell asked fellow faculty for ideas of how to get more participants. Annemarie Chiarini, A T-C in the English department at CCBC Dundalk, contacted Barbara Bass at the Maryland writing Project with a request for help. With a promise of \$35/hour and daily snacks, McCampbell got the additional help she needed. Beth Edelstein, Barbara Steele, and Daniel Rozmiarek of the Towson University faculty participated in scoring student papers.

Prior to the three-day scoring project, the LOAP committee had created the assessment with the scoring rubric, conducted a pilot project, and administered the test to collect the student samples. McCampbell expressed her belief that creating the scoring rubric was the hardest part of the project. The committee spent numerous hours over eighteen months editing the rubric. They conducted the pilot project in Fall 2003 with 34 sections of English 101 because they needed to test the administration of the test and work out any problems. As a result of the pilot, they changed the test because one of the reading prompts was confusing to some students.

The actual assessment was conducted during the Spring 2004 semester. The test consisted of two reading prompts, of which the student chose one. The student was instructed to read the topic question and then read two articles, each taking an opposing view of a current topic. The student was to form a thesis and support it with evidence, details, and reasoning using personal knowledge to supplement the evidence from the articles. The students wrote a draft during one class period and completed the final 500-word essay during the following class. Each student in English 101 wrote one essay at the beginning of the semester and another at the end of the semester.

The LOAP committee brought the set of approximately 4000 student essays to the scoring project in a meeting room of the

Dundalk campus. The scoring participants were greeted with coffee, tea, and juice to go with bagels, muffins, and fresh fruit. It was a spread worthy of an MWP mini-conference.

The first two hours were spent training the scorers how to use the rubric. The scoring rubric had seven criteria: A) a clear thesis; B) relevant assertions; C) clear language; D) coherent organization; E) correct grammar; F) correct punctuation; and G) referenced sources. Each criterion was measured on a six-point scale. For example, the score for relevant assertions would get a 1 if "the paper makes many assertions that have no support." The paper would be scored a 4 if "most assertions in the paper are adequately supported, but a few are supported less than adequately." A 6 is reserved for a paper in which "all assertions in the paper are supported adequately, and some are supported in a way that demonstrates the writer's ability to think originally, perceptively, or creatively about the issue." What the committee members discovered was that, among the scorers, terms such as "adequate support," "relevant assertions, and "creatively," are highly subjective. During the discussion, the scoring of the thesis received much attention. In the end, the committee decided to eliminate half the scores for that criterion and score a thesis as only a 1, 3, or 5. Those numbers pertained to the more broad categories of "Does Not Meet Requirements," "Meets Requirements," and "Exceeds Requirements," respectively. While the other six criteria received nearly as much attention, all six scoring levels were retained, although the committee made many editions to the rubric as a result of suggestions from the scorers. In particular, "errors with apostrophes" was removed as an example of a major punctuation error.

The members of the scoring committee practiced on two sample papers as a way to measure the consistency of scoring among the raters. One sample, supporting the recording industry's right to sue copyright infringers, was particularly well written:

The music industry today is faced with a unique challenge. Technology has reached a point where it allows people to easily access music on the Internet. Much of this material is copyrighted. It is illegal to download copyrighted music. The record industry must take steps to protect themselves from those who would steal copyrighted material. The record industry is justified in seeking legal action against those who infringe on their copyrighted material."

The other sample essay, supporting California's three strikes law, was rather poorly written:

Whether the crime committed is robbery, rape, or murder, the fact of the matter at hand is that it's still considered a crime; no matter how it's labeled. The law has been, if you do the crime then you should do the time. Each time a crime is committed be it big or small to some, there's always a possibility that criminal's initial plan, is, and can be quickly altered. With this posing as a threat, someone is bound to get hurt or even killed. So the real situation here is that the criminal has no grounds to violate another person's rights regardless.

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For the well-written paper, the scorers had the most agreement for criteria E, F, and G, grammar, punctuation, and citations, respectively. The criterion with the least agreement was D, or effective organization. Half the group scored it as meeting requirements and half scored it as exceeding requirements. Overall, there was more scoring agreement for the well-written paper.

The poorly written paper received a wider range of scores. Two of the seventeen scorers rated the thesis a 2, for “Does Not Meet Requirements.” Eleven of the seventeen rated the thesis a 3 or 4, for “Meets Requirements,” and four scorers gave the thesis a 5 or 6, for “Exceeds Requirements.” There was similar distribution when scoring the paper for its use of supporting details.

These scores from the writing samples revealed the range of expectations among writing instructors. Some teachers were more lenient and were willing to give the students the benefit of the doubt when the text was not precisely clear, but there was evidence of a good effort from a struggling writer. Other teachers were stricter in following the rubric precisely. This variation prompted an explanation from the committee managing the scoring project that the scorers were to view the sample papers as data to be scored, and not as students to be evaluated. There was no need for leniency as it might be applied in the classroom with a real student who needed encouragement from an understanding instructor. Of paramount importance was the need for uniform scoring among the raters to ensure the reliability of the results. It was necessary that any given paper receive a similar score regardless of who scored the paper.

So, after the initial training and clarification of several issues, all of the scorers paired off, took a stack of student essays, and got to work. The plan was for each scorer to work independently, but on every fifth paper, trade papers with a partner and double score those papers. Then the partners would compare the results and discuss any disagreements as a way to maintain conformity. After two hours of scoring, the finished papers were turned in and each of the raters was given another sample paper to score at home for homework.

The second day was conducted much as the first was, with more questions, and more snacks. While there was less variability

of scores on the homework sample paper, there were still some issues that needed to be addressed. That paper received two scores of 2, for “Does Not Meet Minimum Requirement for Citing Sources,” while the same paper received three scores of 5 for “Exceeds Minimum Requirement” for the same criterion. During the discussion of citations, one rater asked, “What score does the paper receive when it is unclear if the ideas in the paper are from another source and are not cited or whether they are simply unsupported claims?” The scoring project challenged the understanding of good writing by the many raters, all experienced writing instructors.

McC Campbell expressed the frustration of the LOAP committee members that, although English 101 instructors



Barbara Steele (Left) and Beth Edelstein (Right)

have the same course objectives, it is hard to get uniform grading from the many instructors. The CCBC system has a document titled, “Standards for a “C” Paper,” which was created and later revised by the English faculty in the 1990s. Among the many criteria in four categories, a “C” paper fulfills the assignment, reflects awareness of audience and purpose, uses adequate evidence, has focus and a logical order of paragraphs, uses transitions, has correct sentence structure, follows the conventions of standard written English

and is substantially free of errors. While every instructor has these standards, there is still great variability in grading. McC Campbell acknowledged that not all instructors follow the standards.

Since many CCBC students move on to Towson University, McC Campbell especially appreciated that Towson faculty helped CCBC instructors better understand the expectations placed on their students at the university.

As of August, there were no official results from the scoring project. The assessment office at CCBC will be analyzing those scores during fall semester. The LOAP committee plans to share the official results with the English across all three CCBC campuses. These results will identify problem areas and prescribe steps for improvement. For example, findings may indicate that English 101 does well teaching a student how to include citations in a paper, but makes little difference in a student’s understanding of how to form a thesis. In that case, the English faculty would be instructed to adjust their teaching emphasis accordingly.