

Joint Authorship

Faculty Members from Six Institutions Collaborate to Measure Writing Competence

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Two years ago, Bridgewater State College in Massachusetts adopted a new core curriculum that defines several learning outcomes for the entire undergraduate population, including writing, speaking, mathematical and quantitative reasoning, logical reasoning and information literacy. The college implemented the new core in the fall of 2006 and developed a strategy for assessment. Assessing freshman-level skills appeared relatively straightforward: give a pre-test, teach the course and compare students' performance at the end of the course with their pre-test scores. But assessing students' intellectual growth over their entire college careers is complicated by the fact that nearly half of Bridgewater seniors transferred from another institution, where they completed most of their core curriculum.

Given that only a little more than half the college's seniors are "native" students, what does that imply for general education assessment? Perhaps the college could assess only those seniors who completed their core requirements at Bridgewater and ignore transfers. But shouldn't every graduate be held to the same standards,

regardless of their school of origin? The solution to this dilemma was to attempt to align Bridgewater's core curricula with its three main feeder community colleges through a novel collaboration.

Regional Collaboration

Southeastern Massachusetts is home to six public institutions of higher education. In 2003, at the invitation of Bridgewater President Dana Mohler-Faria, five of them joined together to form a regional collaborative called CONNECT. (The original members were Bridgewater State College, Bristol, Cape Cod and Massasoit community colleges and the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. The sixth, Massachusetts Maritime Academy, joined in 2007.) The collaborative's goals are to improve the institutions' services and increase their efficiency by combining resources. The organizing principle is meetings of counterparts—chief executive officers, chief financial officers, human resource directors and so on—who share ideas and identify collective projects.

From their first meeting, the CONNECT chief academic officers

identified the group's top priority as smoothing the process of student transfers among the institutions. They agreed that students faced two types of challenges in the transfer process: administrative challenges and academic challenges. To reduce administrative challenges, the four-year institutions agreed to create "transfer coordinator" positions to help transfer students navigate their new campuses. To reduce academic challenges, the institutions sought to ensure that community college students would master the same basic skills and knowledge, cover similar foundational work in their disciplines, and experience equivalent academic expectations as in a bachelor's curriculum. The chief academic officers decided that these issues of curriculum and evaluation standards could be best addressed through faculty dialogue around course goals, syllabi and evaluation methods.

The Writing Project

The chief academic officers chose to begin the faculty dialogue with the institutions' first-year writing courses. They reasoned that writing is the bedrock skill in any general education program and that writing instructors

were already practicing assessment (as distinct from grading) through the placement process. They invited two faculty members from each institution to meet monthly for a year and granted them one course release per semester. The charge to the group was three-fold: identify common outcomes for the first-year writing/composition courses, develop a common evaluation scheme, and disseminate this common framework to writing instructors at all the campuses.

When the Writing Project members first met in the summer of 2003, they took turns making speeches that highlighted their wariness: *Community college students are a different population—we have to face many challenges that instructors in four year schools don't face. ... We tried a collaboration in the 1970s and it never went anywhere. ... Are we doing this for political reasons or because we really think it will help our students? ... My department worked for two years to develop a set of learning outcomes, and they won't want to discuss it any more. ... Then they got down to work.*

The first step was to compare their institutions' existing course outcomes, leading to the immediate realization that their course goals overlapped substantially. They identified six learning outcomes shared by all their campuses: *Writing; Critical Reading; Audience, Purpose, and Voice; Thesis; Organization; and Research Documentation*. But they also discovered critical curricular differences among the campuses. The community colleges typically teach writing in the first semester and a combined writing and literature course in the second semester, whereas the four-year institutions teach two semesters of writing and a separate literature course. After wrestling with this difference, the group agreed that although the curricula at the institutions may vary, the six core writing outcomes would remain constant. Thus, they agreed on a set of common learning outcomes while reserving the right of individual campuses and instructors to add outcomes and content to the writing courses.

The Writing Project faculty then moved on to the evaluation process. After examining a number of alternatives, the group settled on a rubric, using the labels *Novice, Practitioner,* and *Expert* to describe three levels of competence in student writing. This resulted in an 18-cell grid of the specific qualities that would prompt an evaluator to rate a piece of writing as Novice, Practitioner or Expert on each of the six writing outcomes. The group engaged in many spirited discussions of wording and concepts, the record probably going to a 45-minute round on whether to use the term “argument” or “position” in the rubric. Throughout the discussion, the Writing Project faculty conscientiously avoided jargon by reminding themselves that the primary purpose of the rubric would be to communicate instructors' expectations to students.

Spreading the News

Because the 10 initial faculty members of the Writing Project represented a tiny minority of the hundreds of instructors who teach writing at the CONNECT campuses, their next challenge was to build consensus around using the common outcomes. The Writing Project members initiated discussions among their full-time faculty colleagues but soon realized that their main target had to be the army of adjunct faculty members and teaching assistants who staff most composition sections.

The group initiated an annual Composition Conference bringing together 80 to 100 full- and part-time writing instructors from all the campuses to share learning outcomes, evaluation standards and pedagogical practices.

At the first Composition Conference, participants demonstrated the convergence among individual evaluation standards through “norming” sessions. Attendees were placed in small groups, mixed as to institution and full- or part-time status, and asked to evaluate three short pieces of student writing based on the Novice/Practitioner/Expert rubric. When the small groups compared their ratings, they discovered that each group had independently

arrived at identical ratings of each student paper. This showed the faculty members that they belonged to a community of writing instructors with shared understandings of good writing, regardless of institutional location or position.

The Writing Project members realized that an annual conference, while important for generating excitement and community-building, was of limited use for writing instructors struggling on a daily basis with developing new course materials and pedagogy. They decided to publish an online resource guide for all CONNECT writing faculty. This drew the attention of the Calderwood Writing Initiative, which supported the work of gathering resource material and constructing a web site accessible to CONNECT faculty and anyone else interested in writing resources. The foundation, which supports expository writing in New England, intends the site, www.CONNECTsemass.org/writing, to inspire other regional collaborations between community colleges and four-year institutions.

When the Writing Project members present their work at conferences, an audience member inevitably asks: “How do you get the faculty from a university, a state college and three community colleges to collaborate on something as sacred as course content and evaluation practices? Is there something in the water there?” The initiative is indeed beginning to change the nature of faculty interaction at participating campuses. Intercampus conversations have spread from writing to math and other areas of the curriculum.

The Writing Project experience points to several ingredients for a successful and lasting collaboration among different types of institutions.

First, peer-to-peer interaction with others in the discipline is a powerful tool for faculty collaboration, reducing barriers between two- and four-year institutions and between adjuncts and full-time faculty.

Second, a focus on common student learning outcomes and successful pedagogy allows all instructors

to address a common goal: creating a good teaching and learning environment.

Finally, leadership must come from the top, with the blessing and financial support of presidents, provosts and deans.

CONNECT chief academic officers are confident that faculty

collaborations will help community college students succeed in four-year colleges. They look forward to assessments that show all our graduating seniors are on a level playing field, regardless of where they completed their general education program. And they take pride in the spirit of unity being

created among the institutions' diverse faculties.

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E X C E R P T S

COLLEGE AND THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

A Big Liability for Edwards

From "Poison Ivy," freelancer Steven Stark's Aug. 1, 2007 Boston Phoenix column on "what's dooming John Edwards's campaign to be the Democratic nominee" ...

Edwards's problem is different, and it's not even about his politics. It's about a piece of paper that hangs—or doesn't hang—on the wall of his office. Edwards, you see, didn't go to Harvard or Yale.

In the Democratic landscape of 2007, that doesn't seem as if it should be a problem. But you'd have to go back to 1984 to find a Democratic nominee (Walter Mondale) who didn't attend one of those elite universities for either college or graduate school. Before that, a number of Democratic also-rans, including Gary Hart, Paul Tsongas, and Jerry Brown, were also graduates of either Harvard or Yale. And the pattern will continue in 2008 if either Hillary Clinton (Yale Law) or Barack Obama (Harvard Law) wins the nomination.

It's a trend that harkens back to the old country, where it's assumed all leaders belonged to the same debating club at Oxford. Even other Ivy League schools—such as Columbia, Princeton and Penn—don't seem to be good enough for the Democrats, much less the Atlantic Coast Conference schools of Clemson, North Carolina State and the University of North Carolina, at which Edwards received his education. ...

The Democrats used to be "the party of the people," and still aspire to that title. But fundraising (particularly now that all serious candidates spurn public funding) and primary politics have been taken over by the well-educated elites for whom Harvard and Yale are the Holy Grails.

These voters and donors all dream of having their kids attend the best Ivies, especially now that the upward path to mobility in America is no longer membership in a labor union—once the backbone of Democratic politics—but is admission to a selective college.

Meanwhile, the elite press is now dominated by former classmates of the candidates. That's a marked change from a generation or two ago, when the best reporters often didn't finish college, but instead worked their way up from the police to the political beat.

To these people, Edwards doesn't pass muster. It's not that he's not smart—he clearly has an impressive intellect. It's much more subtle and insidious: if there's one unstated lesson these select schools teach you, regardless of how much money your family actually has, it's how to act like a member of the upper class. ...

Barack's Lesson in Empathy

From Barack Obama's commencement speech this past spring at Southern New Hampshire University ...

I have learned a few lessons here and there about growing up... the first lesson came during my first year in college. Back then I had a tendency, in my mother's words, to act a bit casual about my future. I rebelled, angry in the way that many young men in general, and young black men in particular, are angry, thinking that responsibility and hard work were old-fashioned conventions that didn't apply to me. I partied a little too much and studied just enough to get by.

And once, after a particularly long night of partying, we had spilled a little too much beer, broke a few too many bottles, and trashed a little too much of the dorm. And the next day, the mess was so bad that when one of the cleaning ladies saw it, she began to tear up. And when a girlfriend of mine heard about this, she said to me, "That woman could've been my grandmother, Barack. She spent her days cleaning up after somebody else's mess."

Which drove home for me the first lesson of growing up: The world doesn't just revolve around you.

There's a lot of talk in this country about the federal deficit. But I think we should talk more about our empathy deficit—the ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes; to see the world through those who are different from us—the child who's hungry, the laid-off steelworker, the immigrant woman cleaning your dorm room.

As you go on in life, cultivating this quality of empathy will become harder, not easier. There's no community service requirement in the real world; no one forcing you to care. You'll be free to live in neighborhoods with people who are exactly like yourself, and send your kids to the same schools, and narrow your concerns to what's going on in your own little circle.