

2016 – 2017
College of Behavioral and Social Sciences
Assessment of the Written Communication Student Learning Outcome

Introduction:

In 2016 – 2017, the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences (BSS) began a College-wide assessment strategy to evaluate BSS majors' mastery of the written communication student learning outcome (SLO). The written communication SLO was selected because WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) encourages students to acquire and develop higher-order intellectual skills and written communication is considered a [core competency](#).

Why a College-wide assessment?:

In the past, each program within BSS designed and conducted its own SLO assessment. Most often, programs chose to assess content specific SLOs, which would be material covered in only one discipline (e.g., Criminal Justice majors can demonstrate knowledge of policing, courts, corrections, and theories of crime and justice or Geography and Planning majors can demonstrate technological capabilities related to geographic data interpretation and their spatial representation). These content specific SLOs, while useful and worthy of assessment, are not considered core competencies by WSCUC.

Additionally, at times, many programs' assessment strategies had flaws, which minimized the value of the final data reported. Some of these problems included, but were not limited to: not informing the students their work was being used for assessment, not using a rubric, or if a rubric was used, not providing the students the rubric in advance, and not having the assessors normed.

Occasionally, different programs would select the same SLO to assess. When the same SLO was assessed, different rubrics would be used to evaluate the students' work, so the results were not comparable. Due to these inconsistencies, the College was unable to evaluate the students' proficiency of the WSCUC core competencies at or near the point of graduation.

What is good direct assessment?:

Countless books articulately and thoroughly discuss and explain quality assessment practices (see Appendix 1). This report will not belabor or dwell on the qualities of good assessment techniques. A very few of the main requisites for proper assessment include:

1. A clear and measurable SLO;
2. The SLO, the assignment, the rubric and how all three relate to each other are clearly communicated to the students before the assignment is due;
3. The assessors are normed or calibrated prior to their assessment work taking place;
4. The assessors have reasonable inter-rater reliability, and;
5. The assessment leads to actionable results that are shared with the faculty.

How did BSS design and conduct its assessment?:

The following steps were utilized to design and assess the written communication SLO:

1. A draft rubric was created, which could also be modified to compare BSS written communication to the General Education (GE) written communication assessment;
2. There were two meetings held during spring 2017 to discuss, refine, modify, and finally agree to the written communication rubric (see Appendix 2);
3. Each BSS assessment program facilitator worked with his/her department chair and the appropriate faculty to select a course “at or near the point of degree completion” to provide the student work (see Appendix 3);
4. The rubric was circulated to the faculty whose courses were providing the student work;
5. Due to the number of the faculty participating in the assessment, two norming sessions were held and the facilitators and their teams attended one of the two norming sessions, and;
6. The facilitators and their teams assessed the student work during the summer or fall of 2017 and submitted their reports during fall 2017.

Results:

Table 1

	Below Expectations (1)		Needs Improvement (2)		Meets Expectations (3)		Exceeds Expectations (4)		Median	Mode
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%		
Content	18	2	230	25	481	52	189	21	3	3
Organization [^]	17	2	242	28	521	57	138	15	3	3
Sources & Evidence* [^]	71	9	256	32	334	42	128	16	3	3
Grammar & Style	20	2	294	32	483	53	121	13	3	3
Total/Average	126	4	1,022	29	1,819	51	576	16	3	3

[^] Rounding errors

* One class assignment did not require this category

The evaluation of BSS majors’ writing abilities (N = 365) revealed 67 percent or two-thirds of students “met or exceeded expectations” across all four categories (please see Table 1). Conversely, 34 percent or one-third of students fell “below expectations” or “needed improvement” across all four categories. Students’ scores for content, organization, and grammar were all at or above 66 percent (73, 72, and 66 respectively). The category with the lowest

scoring was “sources and evidence” (58 percent). It should be noted the median and mode scores for all four categories was three or “meets expectations.” With regard to the reliability of the data, it is important to note that of the 15 programs participating in the assessment, seven programs provided data to compile an inter-rater reliability of the assessors, which was averaged at 55% (75% the highest and 38% the lowest).

Comparison to the General Education written communication SLO:

GE at CSU, Chico also assessed the written communication SLO. As previously mentioned, the BSS rubric was designed to be comparable to the GE rubric (See Appendix 4). The main difference between the two rubrics is BSS has four scoring categories (1 – 4), while the GE rubric has three scoring categories (1 – 3). The BSS rubric has four scoring categories to provide a more nuanced assessment of the student writing and using four scoring categories is considered best practice. The difference between the two rubrics is minimized because the two lowest scoring categories in the BSS rubric (1 – 2) can be collapsed as both scores fall below “meets expectations” or the equivalent “competent” in the GE rubric. In short, the BSS and GE assessment results are comparable to each other (See Table 2).

Table 2:

	College of Behavioral & Social Sciences						General Education					
	Below Expectations and Needs Improvement/ Beginning (1)		Meets Expectations/ Competent (2)		Exceeds Expectations/ Accomplished (3)		Below Expectations and Needs Improvement/ Beginning (1)		Meets Expectations/ Competent (2)		Exceeds Expectations/ Accomplished (3)	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Content	248	27	481	52	189	21	71	21	183	54	85	25
Organization	259	28	521	57	138	15	96	28	163	48	80	24
Sources & Evidence^{^*}	327	41	334	42	128	16	123	36	142	42	74	22
Grammar & Style[^]	314	34	483	53	121	13	100	29	171	50	68	20
Total/Average	1,148	32	1,819	51	576	16	394	29	654	48	308	23

[^] Rounding errors

* One class assignment did not require this category

Overall, the results of the GE writing assessment are very similar to the BSS results. About two-thirds of the students (71 percent) were “competent” or “accomplished” (“met or exceeded

expectations”) and about one-third of students (29 percent) were “beginning” (or “needed improvement or below expectations”). Much like the BSS results, the median and mode for the GE results was “competent” or “met expectations.” The findings indicate the two weakest categories for GE and BSS students’ were both sources and evidence and grammar and style. One major difference between the sample populations was the BSS population was almost exclusively seniors, whereas the GE population was more evenly split between juniors and seniors with some sophomores as well.

Before the assessment results were tabulated, the hypothesis was the assessment of BSS student writing would be higher than the GE student writing for three reasons:

1. The vast majority of BSS students sampled were seniors in a capstone or writing proficiency course. As these students were close to graduating, it was assumed the BSS student writing abilities would be higher compared to the sample of GE students who were combined mix of sophomores, juniors, and seniors;
2. At times, students are less excited by their upper-division GE courses compared to their major courses, particularly major courses towards the end of the program. It was assumed the BSS majors would be more interested in the subject of the writing assignment and devote more energy to the assignment, and;
3. In general, students are more competent in their major disciplinary area compared to GE courses. As students have more expertise in their major area, it was assumed the content of their writing would be stronger compared to students in GE courses.

Discussion:

With regard to median and mode scores, it appears that the majority of BSS student writing samples “met or exceeded expectations” across all four categories. It is also clear that too many students are writing at levels below expectations. Achieving and maintaining competency in written communication, however, is very challenging. As previously mentioned, both the BSS and GE assessment scores are the lowest for sources and evidence and grammar and style and these findings should be discussed in greater depth. As these results are understood and disseminated, BSS will implement the following strategies:

1. Ensure the results are distributed College-wide;
2. Discuss the results with chairs and faculty;
3. Encourage faculty to analyze their program’s results and discuss methods to build written communication into courses and develop best practices to increase students’ writing competencies, and;
4. Continue to provide College-wide support individually to each program and through the BSS Student Success Center.

Experts agree it is important to be critical of the significance of one assessment result. This report is a snapshot in time and creates a baseline for BSS majors’ competency in written

communication. These results are a place for BSS to begin the conversation about written communication in the College and how to help its students achieve competency.

Weaknesses:

The results of this assessment report should be tempered for several reasons:

1. As the first College-wide assessment attempt, no one had experience to help guide the group and there was some degree of “flying without a net;”
2. College-wide, there is some resistance towards assessment and about what role assessment should play at CSU, Chico. As such, some program facilitators had problems finding courses to provide student work or finding other faculty to participate in the assessment process, and;
3. At times, there was a lack of communication from program facilitators to their faculty regarding the required steps of the assessment process. In some programs, there were some gaps in the proper assessment process that need to be addressed.

Moving forward:

For this academic year, BSS will assess the oral communication SLO. The BSS assessment coordinator will attempt to improve on last year’s assessment process to create a more refined and impactful assessment.

Contact:

For questions or concerns regarding this report, please contact Associate Dean Ryan Patten at rpatten@csuchico.edu or 898-6171.

APPENDIX 1

- Allen, M. J. (2004). *Assessing academic programs in higher education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Allen, M. J. (2006). *Assessing general education programs*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Banta, T. W., & Associates. (2002). *Building a scholarship of assessment*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bresciani, M. J. (2006). *Outcomes-based academic and co-curricular program review*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Driscoll, A., & Wood, S. (2007). *Outcomes-based assessment for learner-centered education*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Kuh, G. D., Ikenberry, S. O., Jankowski, N. A., Cain, T. R., Ewell, P., Hutchings, P., and Kinzie, J. (2014). *Using Student Evidence to Improve Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Suskie, L. (2nd edition; 2009). *Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

APPENDIX 2

	Below expectations 1	Needs Improvement 2	Meets Expectations 3	Exceeds Expectations 4
Content	Shows minimal engagement with the topic, failing to recognize multiple dimensions/perspectives; lacking even basic observations	Shows some engagement with the topic without elaboration; offers basic observations but rarely original insight	Demonstrates engagement with the topic, recognizing multiple dimensions and/or perspectives; offers some insight	Demonstrates engagement with the topic, recognizing multiple dimensions and/or perspectives with elaboration and depth; offers considerable insight
Organization	Organization is missing both overall and within paragraphs. Introduction and conclusion may be lacking or illogical.	Organization, overall and/or within paragraphs, is formulaic or occasionally lacking in coherence; few evident transitions. Introduction and conclusion may lack logic.	Few organizational problems on any of the 3 levels (overall, paragraph, transitions). Introduction and conclusion are effectively related to the whole.	Organization is logical and appropriate to assignment; paragraphs are well-developed and appropriately divided; ideas linked with smooth and effective transitions. Introduction and conclusion are effectively related to the whole.
Sources and Evidence	Demonstrates an attempt to use sources to support ideas in the writing. Little to no evidence is supplied.	Demonstrates an attempt to use credible and/or relevant sources to support ideas. Some evidence is provided, but not enough to develop argument in unified way.	Demonstrates consistent use of credible, relevant sources to support ideas. Evidence is accurate, well documented, and relevant, but not complete.	Demonstrates skillful use of high quality, credible, relevant sources to develop ideas. Evidence is relevant, accurate, complete, well integrated, well documented, and appropriate
Grammar and Style	Multiple and serious errors of sentence structure; frequent errors in spelling and capitalization; intrusive and/or inaccurate punctuation such that communication is hindered. Proofreading not evident.	Sentences show errors of structure and little or no variety; many errors of punctuation, spelling and/or capitalization. Errors interfere with meaning in places. Careful proofreading not evident.	Effective and varied sentences; some errors in sentence construction; only occasional punctuation, spelling and/or capitalization errors.	Each sentence structured effectively, powerfully; rich, well-chosen variety of sentence styles and length; virtually free of punctuation, spelling, capitalization errors.

APPENDIX 3

BSS Courses Providing Student Written Communication Assignments			
Name of Program	Course Number	Title of Course	Students Assessed
Anthropology	435	Medical Anthropology	13
Child Development	495	Senior Seminar in Child Development*	30
Economics	495	Capstone in Economics*	18
Geography and Planning	390	Foundations of Geographical Analysis and Writing [^]	15
Health and Community Services -- Health Administration	530	Health Services Administration Capstone Seminar*	43
Health and Community Services -- Health Education	425	Research and Evaluation in Health [^]	22
Multicultural and Gender Studies	495	Senior Seminar in Multicultural and Gender Studies*	20
Criminal Justice	459D	Senior Seminar in Criminal Justice*	12
Legal Studies	401	Sexual Minorities Law and Politics**	11
International Relations	417	Politics of Post-Industrial Societies	13
General Political Science	473	Congress	12
Public Administration	XX	Not Participating	0
Psychology	401	Capstone in Psychology*	62
Sociology	441	Public Sociology	34
Social Science	495	Capstone Seminar in Social Science*	30
Social Work	445	Social Work Methods [^]	30

* Capstone course
[^] Writing proficiency course
** General Education Writing Intensive Course

APPENDIX 4
General Education Scoring Guide for Writing

Scoring Level	Content	Organization & Argumentation	Sources & Evidence	Grammar & Other Surface Features
3 - Accomplished	In addition to meeting the requirements for a “2,” the writing shows evidence of deep engagement with intellectual material of course/discipline, imagination, and creativity. Few or no errors of fact or interpretation. Writing could be used as a model of how to fulfill the assignment.	In addition to meeting the requirements for a “2,” writing flows smoothly from one idea to another. The reader can easily follow the claims and examples used to support the ideas expressed. The writer’s decisions about focus and organization facilitate reading.	Sources used to support argument are appropriate to the topic being explored, assignment and disciplinary conventions. Citation style clear and consistently applied.	In addition to meeting the requirements for a “2,” the writing is essentially error-free in terms of mechanics and shows considerable evidence of proofreading and editing. Models the style and formatting appropriate to the assignment.
2 - Competent	Content of text fulfills the assignment. Writing demonstrates engagement with intellectual and/or creative material of the course/discipline. Few errors of fact or interpretation.	Sequencing of ideas and transitions makes the writer’s points accessible. Examples are adequately developed and claims supported in most cases. The purpose and focus of the writing are clear to the reader, and the organization and tone achieve the purpose of the assignment and communicate effectively.	Most sources used to support argument are appropriate to the topic being explored, the assignment and disciplinary conventions. Demonstrates competence in documenting sources; the reader would have little difficulty referring back to cited sources.	While there may be minor errors, the paper follows normal conventions of spelling and grammar throughout. Appropriate conventions for style and format are used consistently throughout the writing sample.
1 – Beginning	Requirements of the assignment have not been fulfilled. Little/no evidence of engagement with material of the course/discipline. The paper reveals numerous errors of fact or interpretation.	Writing lacks transitions and/or sequencing of ideas, making reading and understanding difficult. Examples and/or claims are weak or missing in many cases. The writer’s decisions about focus and organization interfere with communication.	Sources are unclear or inappropriate to topic being investigated, assignment or disciplinary conventions. Writing does not consistently follow appropriate style and/or format. Source documentation is incomplete. It may be unclear which references are direct quotes and which are paraphrased.	Writing contains numerous errors in spelling, grammar (such as subject/verb agreements and tense), sentence structure and/or other writing conventions that interfere with comprehension.

DEFINITIONS

Style: an author’s choices about vocabulary, tone, clarity, and connotation that project her sense of purpose and audience.

Formatting: conventional visual and layout elements (such as bulleted lists, graphs, and pictures) that writers use to organize a document.

Focus: the purpose, theme, or overall argument in a text—and the way that other features in a text point toward this focus.

Organization: the arrangement of ideas or points in a text according to the writer’s purpose and knowledge of disciplinary conventions.