The First-Year Composition Assessment of Argumentation Skills: Results for the Spring 2007 Semester

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Executive Summary

As part of its ongoing efforts to assess the effectiveness of writing instruction at Salem State College, the English faculty evaluated argument essays submitted by students who were randomly selected from fifty-six sections of ENG 102 Composition II. Ninety-eight essays were evaluated, a total that constitutes a thirteen percent sample of the student population enrolled in ENG 102 for the Spring 2007 semester. Each essay was rated as either “Satisfactory” or “Unsatisfactory” for eight argumentation skills.

For five of the eight skills evaluated, students' performance met or exceeded the expectations of the Coordinator of First-Year Composition, with 69% or more of the assessed essays rated as “Satisfactory.” Particularly significant were the high rates of satisfactory performance attained for two argumentation skills that composition instructors consider fundamental: 91% of the assessed essays demonstrated the ability to state a thesis on an issue about which reasonable people may disagree, and 83% of the essays provided adequate support for a thesis. In 69% of the essays, students quoted or paraphrased credible sources that provided specific evidence to support the thesis. Acceptably high rates of satisfactory performance also were attained for two formal skills: 93% of the essays provided evidence of the students’ ability to write in a style that is appropriate for an audience of educated adults, and 72% of the essays provided evidence of the students’ ability to organize an argument effectively.

The most conspicuous shortcoming in the assessed essays was that the essays did not devote sufficient attention to alternative positions on issues about which reasonable people may disagree. Fewer than half of the essays achieved “Satisfactory” ratings for three criteria that measured students' ability to consider alternatives to the students’ own positions. Only 48% of the assessed essays received a “Satisfactory” rating for the ability to summarize an opposing position, and only 21% of the essays demonstrated the students' ability to cite a credible source that provided evidence for an opposing position. Only 39% of the assessed essays included adequate analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of alternative positions.

Taken in total, the results of the Spring 2007 assessment indicated that ENG 102 students are more proficient in argumentation than previous assessments indicated. Unlike the earlier assessments, which contained only one question concerning argumentation, the Spring 2007 assessment was able to document students’ ability to state and support their own positions in argument essays whose formal properties are appropriate for an educated audience. However, the results also raised questions about whether students are able to consider the merits of alternative positions on complex issues. There is some evidence that the low percentage of students demonstrating this ability was caused in part by instructors devoting insufficient attention to it, so it is possible that better results will be obtained if instructors devote more attention to designing lessons and
assignments that encourage students to consider alternative positions. It also is possible that results will improve if students are given better instruction in research methods for locating credible sources that provide evidence on disputable topics.

The Coordinator of First-Year Composition should ascertain how argumentation is being taught in all sections of ENG 102. The primary purpose of this review should be to identify the instructional strategies that composition instructors are using and the types of assignments that students are completing. After conducting this review, the Coordinator of First-Year Composition should offer workshops that help instructors improve how they teach specific argumentation skills. However, given that argumentation and assignment design have been considered in several workshops throughout the past two years, it seems probable that the ability to consider alternative positions is a particularly difficult skill for students to master. This suggests that the skill should be taught throughout the college curriculum and that future efforts to assess students’ ability should be conducted later in the students’ college careers. One possibility worth considering is to assess this skill in the college’s upper-level “W” courses instead of the first-year composition classes.
Background

In 1996 the English Department initiated the English Composition Assessment Project, a long-term study of the writing abilities of students enrolled in first-year composition classes. In the project’s first phase (from 1996 to 2002), the English faculty assessed the writing abilities of students in selected sections of ENG 101 Composition I and ENG 102 Composition II. Based on the results of these assessments, the faculty determined that the curricula for both courses should be revised to provide more extensive training in academic writing. This phase of the project was completed during the Spring 2002 semester, when the English faculty approved a new first-year composition curriculum with consistent instructional practices and objectives for all sections of ENG 101 and 102.

In the assessment project’s next phase (from 2003 to 2006), the English faculty implemented its new curriculum and assessed the results. During the 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 academic years, the faculty evaluated 190 writing portfolios assembled by students enrolled in ENG 102 Composition II. Each portfolio was rated as either “Satisfactory” or “Unsatisfactory” for ten essential skills identified in the course guidelines for all sections of ENG 102. In all three semesters that this assessment was conducted, student performance met or exceeded the expectations of the Coordinator of First-Year Composition for eight of the ten skills evaluated. The highest rates of satisfactory performance were attained for four basic skills—organization, mechanics, style, and the ability to state and develop a thesis—with at least 82% of the assessed portfolios for each semester providing evidence of these skills. The percentage of portfolios rated as “Satisfactory” was also acceptably high for four other skills, with at least 64% of the portfolios for each semester providing evidence of students’ ability to improve an essay by revising it, conduct research to find appropriate resources, and meet standards for fair usage in citing quotations and paraphrases. Lower rates of satisfactory performance were attained for two skills: documentation format and argumentation. For documentation format, the “Satisfactory” rate ranged from a low of 43% in Fall 2005 to a high of 61% in Spring 2006. For argumentation, the “Satisfactory” rate ranged from a low of 43% in Spring 2005 to a high of 64% in Spring 2006. Although the greatest improvement in student performance occurred in these two categories, they also ranked as the two weakest skills in the assessments for all three semesters. (For detailed information concerning these assessments, see First-Year Composition Assessment: Results for the 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 Academic Years, a report submitted on June 21, 2006.)

The consistency of the results obtained in 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 indicated that there was no immediate need for additional assessment of the eight skills for which acceptably high percentages of students achieved “Satisfactory” ratings. However, the results did indicate a need for more research concerning students’ abilities to produce formal documentation and to construct effective arguments. Deeming the latter skill particularly important, the English faculty decided to begin the assessment project’s second decade by focusing on argumentation.
Purpose

The purpose of the 2006-2007 assessment was to determine the percentage of ENG 102 students who met eight argumentation objectives that were derived from “General Principles for the Design of ENG 102 Classes,” a document that was approved by the English faculty in 2002. (See Appendix A for excerpts from this document.) Focusing exclusively on argumentation, the 2006-2007 assessment was designed to augment the data available from the more general assessments that were conducted in 2004-2005 and 2005-2006. To obtain more accurate information about students’ argumentation skills, the Coordinator of First-Year Composition solicited a representative sample of argument essays by students enrolled in ENG 102 classes for the Spring 2007 semester. Because the assessment measured the argumentation skills of students who were nearing completion of the first-year composition sequence, the assessment serves as a useful indicator of issues to consider as the English Department continues its efforts to improve writing instruction. It also provides information that may help faculty members to form realistic expectations and to develop an appropriate curriculum for the upper-level writing requirement that was implemented in 2006.
Procedures

For the Spring 2007 assessment of argumentation skills, the Composition Committee used procedures that it developed, tested, and modified during the Fall 2006 semester. These procedures are described below.

Population. To assess the argumentation skills of students who were nearing completion of the first-year composition curriculum, the Coordinator of First-Year Composition identified a representative sample from the 748 students enrolled in ENG 102 for the Spring 2007 semester. Two students were selected at random from each of fifty-six sections of ENG 102, and argument essays were requested from these students. Of the 112 essays requested, ninety-eight were received. Results were calculated based on the obtained sample of ninety-eight essays (thirteen percent of the total ENG 102 population).

Procedures for Obtaining Essays. During the eleventh week of the semester, ENG 102 instructors received the names of the students who were selected to submit essays. During the twelfth week, instructors notified the students, gave them a two-page handout titled “Information for Students Selected to Participate in an Assessment of Argumentation Skills” (see Appendix B), and set up appointments to meet with the students during the fourteenth week of the semester. At the meetings during the fourteenth week, instructors gave students written instructions (see Appendix C) and offered suggestions concerning which essay to submit. Students were instructed to submit essays in folders with completed cover sheets (see Appendix D) no later than the last day of final exams for the semester.

Because the purpose of the assessment was to evaluate the effectiveness of the first-year composition program and not the success of individual students or instructors, students were instructed to remove their names and the names of their instructors from their essays.

Procedures for Evaluating Essays. All essays were evaluated by ENG 102 instructors and by members of the Composition Committee. Before evaluating the essays, ENG 102 instructors either attended a one-hour training session or were contacted individually by the Coordinator of First-Year Composition to ensure that they understood the assessment procedures. The instructors then conducted their evaluations independently before submitting essays to the English Department secretary. Members of the Composition Committee evaluated essays at two seven-hour grading sessions on May 16 and 17, 2007. Both of these sessions began with the committee members evaluating example essays to calibrate grading standards.

All evaluators used an evaluation form (see Appendix E) and a seven-page evaluation guide containing detailed guidelines for assessing eight skills (see
Appendix F). Using these tools, evaluators rated each essay as either “Satisfactory” or “Unsatisfactory” in the following areas:

- Thesis
- Support
- Consideration of Alternative Positions: Summary
- Consideration of Alternative Positions: Response
- Use of Sources as Evidence: Supporting
- Use of Sources as Evidence: Opposing
- Organization
- Style

Each essay was evaluated by no fewer than two and no more than three evaluators. The first evaluator for each essay was the ENG 102 instructor who taught the section for which the student was registered. The second evaluator was one of eight members of the Composition Committee. For any skill on which the first two evaluators disagreed in their assessment, a third evaluation was provided by another member of the Composition Committee.

**Statistical Analysis Methods.** Results were calculated for a confidence index of 95%. A margin of error (M) was calculated for the obtained sample (N) by using the formula $M = \frac{1}{\sqrt{N}}$. This calculation produced a margin of error of 10.1 for the results.

The confidence interval (CI) for each reported result is the reported percentage (p) plus or minus the margin of error (CI = p ±M).

For example: in the Spring 2007 assessment, 72% of the obtained sample received “Satisfactory” ratings for “Organization.” If the entire population of students were evaluated instead of just a sample, and if the evaluation were conducted one hundred times, the statistical model predicts that in ninety-five out of the one hundred evaluations the percentage rated as “Satisfactory” would be in the range extending 10.1 points above and 10.1 points below the reported percentage for the sample studied in the actual assessment—i.e., in the range from 61.9% to 82.1%.
Results

The following information is included below for each of the eight skills that were assessed:

- **A brief description of the assessed skill.** These descriptions are adapted from major objectives included in the course guidelines for all sections of ENG 102, and the wording corresponds to that used in the evaluation sheets that were completed by evaluators. (See Appendix E for the evaluation sheet.)

- **A description of the traits required for a “Satisfactory” score.** These descriptions are adapted from the scoring guide that was provided to all evaluators. (See Appendix F for more detailed information concerning the evaluation criteria.)

- **A table showing results for the obtained sample.** This table lists the percentage and number of the ninety-eight essays that received ratings of “Satisfactory” or “Unsatisfactory” for the assessed skill.
Thesis

The writer’s ability to convey a clear thesis that offers a position on an issue about which reasonable people may disagree

To receive a rating of “Satisfactory” for this skill, an essay was expected to exhibit all of the following traits:

- A thesis—stated or implied—that is clear,
- The thesis offers a position on an issue,
- The issue is one about which reasonable people may disagree.

Results

Satisfactory: 91% (89 essays)
Unsatisfactory: 9% (9 essays)
Support

The writer’s ability to provide well-reasoned and sufficient support for the thesis

To receive a rating of “Satisfactory” for this skill, an essay was expected to exhibit both of the following traits:

- At least one well-reasoned point—and usually two or more well-reasoned points—providing sufficient support for the thesis,
- Clear and sufficient explanation of *how* the points support the thesis.

Results

Satisfactory: 83% (81 essays)
Unsatisfactory: 17% (17 essays)
Consideration of Alternative Positions: Summary

- The writer’s ability to summarize accurately one or more of the common arguments (both claim and support) offered by reasonable people who do not share the writer’s position

To receive a rating of “Satisfactory” for this skill, an essay was expected to exhibit both of the following traits:

- An accurate summary of at least one of the common arguments (i.e., a claim and the support for it) offered by reasonable people who do not share the writer’s position,

- Clear and sufficient explanation of the claim and support so that readers can understand the argument(s) for an alternative position.

Results

Satisfactory: 48% (47 essays)
Unsatisfactory: 52% (51 essays)
Consideration of Alternative Positions: Response

- The writer’s ability to offer well-reasoned responses to one or more of the common arguments offered by reasonable people who do not share the writer’s position

To receive a rating of “Satisfactory” for this skill, an essay was expected to exhibit the following trait:

- Fair consideration of one of the common arguments offered by reasonable people who do not share the writer’s position (or fair consideration of the majority of the arguments, if the writer discusses more than one argument), demonstrated by well-reasoned evaluation of the merits of the argument(s).

Results

![Bar chart showing the distribution of Satisfactory and Unsatisfactory ratings.]

- Satisfactory: 39% (38 essays)
- Unsatisfactory: 61% (60 essays)
Use of Sources as Evidence: Supporting

The writer's ability to provide relevant evidence from one or more credible sources that support the writer's position.

To receive a rating of “Satisfactory” for this skill, an essay was expected to exhibit the following trait:

- Relevant quotations or paraphrases from at least one credible source that supports the writer’s position.

Results

![Bar chart showing Satisfactory and Unsatisfactory ratings]

Satisfactory: 69% (68 essays)
Unsatisfactory: 31% (30 essays)
Use of Sources as Evidence: Opposing

► The writer's ability to provide relevant evidence from one or more credible sources that disagree with the writer's position

To receive a rating of “Satisfactory” for this skill, an essay was expected to exhibit the follow trait:

- Relevant quotations or paraphrases from at least one credible source that disagrees with the writer’s position.

Results

Satisfactory: 21% (21 essays)
Unsatisfactory: 79% (77 essays)
Organization

► The writer’s ability to organize an argument effectively

To receive a rating of “Satisfactory” for this skill, an essay was expected to exhibit both of the following traits:

- An overall organizing scheme appropriate for an essay designed to support a position on an issue,
- Arrangement into paragraphs that are well focused.

Results

Satisfactory: 72% (71 essays)
Unsatisfactory: 28% (27 essays)
Style

The writer’s ability to write in a style that is appropriate for an audience of well-educated adults who may not share the writer’s position.

To receive a rating of “Satisfactory” for this skill, an essay was expected to exhibit both of the following traits:

- Phrasing that is clear and appropriate for an audience of well-educated adults,
- Phrasing that conveys respect for reasonable people who disagree with the writer’s position.

Results

Satisfactory: 93% (91 essays)
Unsatisfactory: 7% (7 essays)
Analysis

Although the Spring 2007 assessment included discrete evaluations of eight skills, these skills can be grouped into three categories that make the results easier to interpret. The results of the assessment are analyzed in the sections below.

**Thesis, Support, and Supporting Evidence.** The argumentation skills that most instructors consider fundamental are (1) the ability to construct a thesis that offers a position on an issue about which reasonable people may disagree, and (2) the ability to offer well-reasoned and sufficient support for the thesis. The results of the Spring 2007 assessment indicate that most ENG 102 students possess both of these skills, with 91% of the assessed essays containing an appropriate thesis and 83% containing appropriate support for the thesis.

Although some theses can be supported adequately without using sources, academic essays often contain quotations or paraphrases from credible sources that support the writer’s position. In the Spring 2007 assessment, students could receive a “Satisfactory” rating for “Support” by relying exclusively on sound reasoning; however, the assessment included a separate category—“Use of Evidence: Supporting”—in which students were evaluated on their ability to cite credible sources that supported their position. A respectable 69% of the assessed essays demonstrated this additional skill.

The results for the “Thesis” and “Support” categories are particularly revealing when compared to the results of the Spring 2006 assessment. In that earlier assessment, the ability to state a thesis and the ability to support a thesis were grouped together as a single assessment item (called “Thesis/Development”), and students could demonstrate satisfactory ability by submitting either an argument essay or an expository essay (i.e., an essay that explained a topic without supporting a disputable position). In the Spring 2007 assessment, students could not receive a “Satisfactory” rating for an expository essay, so the Spring 2007 assessment provided fewer options for students to demonstrate their ability to state and develop a thesis. Nevertheless, the results for the two semesters (as shown in the table below) were similar.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>Spring 2006 (% Satisfactory)</strong></th>
<th><strong>Spring 2007 (% Satisfactory)</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thesis/Development</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thesis</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

It is worth noting that the differences in performance for the two semesters fall within the confidence intervals for the two assessments. Also worth noting is that the percentage of Spring 2007 essays rated “Satisfactory” for “Support” rises to 88% if nine literary analysis essays are excluded from the sample. (These essays could have received “Satisfactory” ratings in Spring 2006 but not in Spring 2007.)
These results support the following conclusions:

1. ENG 102 students are equally successful in constructing a thesis for an argument essay and constructing a thesis for other types of essays. A large majority of students can construct an adequate thesis for an argument essay.

2. ENG 102 students are almost as successful in supporting an argumentative thesis as they are in developing a thesis for other types of essays. A large majority of students can provide well-reasoned and sufficient support for an argumentative thesis.

The results for “Thesis” and “Support” merit particular attention because they stand in sharp contrast to the results obtained for “Argumentation” in previous assessments. In all of the assessments conducted from 2005 to 2006, “Argumentation” ranked as one of the weakest areas, with “Satisfactory” ratings ranging from a low of 43% (in Spring 2005) to a high of 64% (in Spring 2006). However, these assessments required that students demonstrate a broad array of argumentation skills in order to receive a “Satisfactory” rating in a single “Argumentation” category. The single rating obscured an important fact that the most recent assessment reveals: most ENG 102 students are able to state and support a thesis on a disputable topic.

**Consideration of Alternative Positions: Summary, Response, and Opposing Evidence.** The most conspicuous failing of the essays assessed in Spring 2007 was that the essays did not devote sufficient attention to alternative positions on issues about which reasonable people may disagree. Although ENG 102 students are proficient in stating their own position and providing adequate support for it, the majority of the students did not demonstrate the ability to summarize a position that they do not share, the ability to cite evidence supporting someone else’s position, and the ability to offer well-reasoned analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of alternative positions.

Only 48% of the assessed essays received a “Satisfactory” rating for the ability to summarize an opposing position, and only 21% of the essays received a “Satisfactory” rating for citing specific credible sources who held opposing positions. It is worth noting that students could receive a “Satisfactory” rating for “Summary” even if they did not quote from a source that disagreed with them. For this assessment category, students merely needed to acknowledge a commonly held alternative to their own preferences or beliefs concerning an issue about which reasonable people may disagree. The students could use a generic attribution such as “some people believe” instead of attributing the position to a specific source. Nevertheless, most students failed to meet this minimal standard for considering alternative positions. The results were significantly worse in the
“Use of Opposing Evidence” assessment because a “Satisfactory” rating in this category required specific citations from credible sources.

Only 39% of the assessed essays included adequate analysis of an alternative position. This result is not surprising: given that most of the essays did not include any mention of alternative positions, the essays could not receive “Satisfactory” ratings for evaluating alternative positions. However, the poor results for this skill reflect two significantly different problems. Although many essays were rated “Unsatisfactory” because they did not consider alternative positions at all, other essays did consider alternative positions but were rated “Unsatisfactory” for “Response to Alternative Positions” because the students used poor reasoning in their analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of alternative positions. Although the Spring 2007 assessment was not designed to distinguish between these two causes for “Unsatisfactory” ratings, the two causes are worth noting.

In all three of the assessment categories that dealt with alternative positions, there were significant differences between the ratings given by instructors and those given by the assessors from the Composition Committee. For skills about which the instructor and the committee assessors disagreed in their evaluations, the instructor usually rated the essay as “Satisfactory” and the committee members usually rated the essay as “Unsatisfactory.” In the table below, this disparity is evident in the percentages of “Satisfactory” ratings in the combined (i.e., consensus or majority) evaluations and the instructors’ evaluations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Combined Evaluation (% Satisfactory)</th>
<th>Instructors’ Evaluation (% Satisfactory)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Alternative Positions</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to Alternative Positions</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Opposing Evidence</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>43%</td>
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Given that the committee assessors completed calibration exercises before grading and the instructors did not, it is probable that the combined ratings (which include the ratings from committee assessors) are more accurate than the instructors’ ratings. Although the differences in the “Summary” and “Response” categories fall within the confidence interval for the assessment, even these differences are large enough to raise concerns about whether some instructors are holding students to a sufficiently rigorous standard for considering alternative positions.

It should be noted that the results improve when nine literary analysis essays are excluded from the sample. It was evident to the committee assessors that these nine essays were written to fulfill literary “explication” assignments that were inconsistent with the goals of the argumentation assessment. For the remaining essays (i.e., those that contain an argumentative thesis instead of an expository thesis), the “Satisfactory” rate for “Summary” was 53% and the “Satisfactory” rate
for “Response” was 43%. In the “Use of Opposing Evidence” category, the “Satisfactory” rate was 24%. The table below shows how these results compare to those obtained for the complete sample.

<table>
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<th>Complete Sample (% Satisfactory)</th>
<th>Non-Literary Sample (% Satisfactory)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Summary of Alternative Positions</strong></td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Response to Alternative Positions</strong></td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Use of Opposing Evidence</strong></td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results in these categories suggest that a higher percentage of students would have demonstrated satisfactory ability in these skills if all instructors had designed appropriate assignments. It is probable that other essays (in addition to the nine literary essays) were written in response to assignment guidelines that did not require students to demonstrate some of the skills that the argumentation assessment attempted to measure. Nevertheless, the results in these categories provide evidence that many ENG 102 students are “monological” rather than “dialogical” in their argumentation strategies. These students can state and support a position on a disputable issue, but they seem unable or unwilling to consider alternative positions.

An additional issue worth mentioning is the connection between research and argumentation in ENG 102 assignments. Although the guidelines for ENG 102 require that both of these skills be taught in every section of ENG 102, some instructors handle argumentation and research in separate assignments while other instructors combine the skills in a single assignment. In classes that treat the two skills separately, the instructor may provide articles that offer alternative positions on a disputable topic. On the other hand, in classes that combine argumentation and research in one assignment, the instructor is likely to require that students find their own source materials to use as evidence in an argument. It is evident that these variables figure in students’ decisions about how (or whether) to consider alternative positions, but measuring the effects of these variables was beyond the scope of the Spring 2007 assessment.

**Style and Organization.** In the Spring 2007 assessment, 93% of the essays demonstrated that students were able to write in a style that is appropriate for an audience of well-educated adults who may not share the writer’s position. Acceptable results also were attained in the “Organization” category: 72% of the students demonstrated the ability to organize an argument effectively.

Although “Style” and “Organization” also were categories in the assessments conducted in 2005 and 2006, in those earlier assessments students were able to achieve a “Satisfactory” rating by submitting either an expository essay or an argument essay. Students participating in the Spring 2007 assessment did not have the option of submitting an expository essay, so a “Satisfactory” rating in this
most recent assessment indicates that the students’ abilities extend to a more difficult genre of writing. It is instructive, then, to compare the results attained in the assessments for Spring 2006 and Spring 2007.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Spring 2006 (% Satisfactory)</th>
<th>Spring 2007 (% Satisfactory)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>72%</td>
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The results suggest that students who master an academic style are able to apply it almost equally well as they progress from writing expository essays to writing argument essays. On the other hand, the ability to organize an essay may be specific to particular genres, with argument essays posing more organizational problems than other genres of essays. Although an acceptably high percentage of the essays demonstrated that students could organize an argument effectively, instructors should bear in mind that students may need additional instruction in organizing strategies as the students shift from exposition to argumentation.
Recommendations

Taken in total, the results for the Spring 2007 assessment are reassuring. The results indicate that most ENG 102 students possess five of the eight argumentation skills that were measured in the assessment. However, the results also suggest additional actions that should be taken to improve the teaching of argumentation in all sections of ENG 102. These additional actions are detailed in the following recommendations. Also included are recommendations concerning issues that were discussed in First-Year Composition Assessment: Results for the 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 Academic Years, the assessment report that the Coordinator of First-Year Composition submitted last year.

1. The Coordinator of First-Year Composition should ascertain how argumentation is being taught in all sections of ENG 102. The primary purpose of this review should be to identify the instructional strategies that composition instructors are using and the types of assignments that students are completing. Particular attention should be devoted to determining whether the instructional strategies enable students to consider the merits of alternative positions on issues about which reasonable people disagree. Attention should also be devoted to determining whether the assignments in ENG 102 enable students to demonstrate their ability to consider alternative positions.

After evaluating all of the essays submitted for the Spring 2007 assessment, the evaluators from the Composition Committee concluded that some ENG 102 instructors are teaching argumentation without requiring students to consider alternative positions. Other instructors may be teaching students to consider alternative positions but not requiring that the students do so in their argument essays. To ensure that students are being taught the essential argumentation skills and being given the opportunity to demonstrate these skills in their writing assignments, the Coordinator of First-Year Composition needs more information about how argumentation is being taught in every section of ENG 102.

It has been five years since the Coordinator of First-Year Composition last reviewed syllabi for all sections of ENG 102. That review, completed in 2002, led to a major revision of the first-year composition curriculum. A new review of syllabi may not lead to such sweeping reform, but it could suggest ways that the English Department can improve the teaching of argumentation. Another possibility (in lieu of reviewing syllabi) is to survey composition instructors concerning how they are teaching argumentation. Other techniques for obtaining information also could be considered. What matters most is that the Coordinator of First-Year Composition must ensure that appropriate instruction is being provided in all sections.
It should be noted that the Coordinator of First-Year Composition does not have the authority to evaluate faculty members. The faculty contract grants this authority to the department chairperson. Past efforts to determine how composition is being taught have led instructors to file grievances on the grounds that such research constitutes incidental evaluation of a faculty member. This issue must be resolved before the Coordinator of First-Year Composition conducts the inquiry described above.

2. The Coordinator of First-Year Composition should evaluate the relative importance of argumentation and research in the ENG 102 curriculum. Particular attention should be devoted to determining whether both of these skills can be taught effectively in a one-semester course.

Although past assessments indicated that a large majority of ENG 102 students have satisfactory research skills, the Composition Committee has not been able to reach a consensus concerning whether the current standards for research are appropriate. (This issue is discussed in the assessment report that the Coordinator of First-Year Composition submitted last year.) The Spring 2007 assessment revealed a new dimension to the issue by introducing the question of how research figures in students’ ability to construct arguments that consider alternative positions. In addition to reviewing how argumentation is taught in ENG 102, the Coordinator of First-Year Composition should evaluate the relative importance of the research and argumentation components of the ENG 102 curriculum. In considering this issue, the Coordinator should explore whether research should play an important role in argument assignments. This inquiry may be conducted as part of the project described in Recommendation #1, or it may be conducted as a separate project at a later date.

3. The Coordinator of First-Year Composition should continue working with the English faculty to improve how argumentation is taught. This work should focus on improving how students are taught to summarize and evaluate alternative positions. Particular attention should be devoted to helping instructors design assignments that accurately represent students’ abilities to consider the merits of opposing positions.

Evidence suggests that workshops for composition instructors contributed to a significant increase in the percentage of students rated “Satisfactory” for argumentation in 2005-2006. (See the assessment report that was submitted last year.) Workshops are likely to play an important role in further efforts to improve the teaching of argumentation. The Coordinator of First-Year Composition should develop more specialized workshops that all composition instructors should attend. These workshops should focus specifically on strategies for teaching students to consider the merits of alternative positions. Instructors also should receive assistance in designing assignments that allow students to demonstrate their skill in considering alternative positions. In addition to offering workshops, the Coordinator of First-Year Composition
should continue to be available for individual consultation with composition instructors.

4. **If it is not possible to implement recommendations 1, 2, and 3 in the 2007-2008 academic year, the interim Coordinator of First-Year Composition should focus instead on improving documentation skills.**

   Although recommendations 1, 2, and 3 are important, it may not be possible to implement them in the 2007-2008 academic year. Considerable planning will be required before some of the recommendations can be implemented, and some of the proposed activities will require faculty cooperation that may be difficult to obtain. During the 2007-2008 academic year, Paul Jude Beauvais, the Coordinator of First-Year Composition, will be on sabbatical leave. His duties will be assumed by Tom West, who will serve as interim Coordinator. If Dr. West determines that one year is not sufficient to make substantial progress on the argumentation initiatives, he should focus instead on working to improve how formal documentation is taught in ENG 101 and ENG 102.

   As was noted in last year’s assessment report, most ENG 102 students understand the essential principles for fair usage of sources. However, students have trouble mastering the minutiae of academic style sheets and the intricacies of documenting Internet sources. In these regards the students are similar to professional writers, few of whom are familiar with all of the constantly evolving guidelines for formal documentation. However, most professional writers understand the importance of consulting a style manual or using documentation software to ensure that their documentation conforms to the standards for a discipline, while many students neglect the resources available for producing appropriate documentation.

   Because the English faculty considers formal documentation an important feature of academic and professional writing, the interim Coordinator of First-Year Composition could work with composition instructors to develop better strategies for teaching formal documentation. Particular attention should be devoted to making effective use of resources such as style manuals and documentation software.

5. **If additional assessments of argumentation skills are conducted, these assessments should focus specifically on students’ ability to consider alternative positions concerning issues about which reasonable people may disagree. Before conducting this research in ENG 102 classes, the Composition Committee should consider whether the research should instead be conducted in upper-level classes.**

   The Spring 2007 assessment established that most ENG 102 students possess a broad array of argumentation skills. Previous assessments also provided evidence of some of these skills. There is no pressing need to
conduct additional assessments of the skills that have been documented in the past three years.

The only argumentation skills that a majority of students did not demonstrate were the abilities to summarize alternative positions, provide evidence from credible sources that support these positions, and offer well-reasoned analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of alternative positions. Although these are important skills, they are skills that many students find particularly difficult to master. The possibility exists that, regardless of the best efforts of the English faculty, some students will not master these skills by the time the students complete the first-year composition sequence.

Because argumentation skills are so important, teaching and assessing them should be the concern of the entire faculty, not just the English faculty. Given that argumentation skills should be taught throughout the curriculum, it is worth considering whether these skills should be assessed later in students' undergraduate years. The college now has an upper-level writing requirement for all undergraduate students, so some consideration should be given to conducting future assessments of argumentation skills in the classes that fulfill the “W” requirement. It is possible that some students who cannot demonstrate these skills during their first year of study will be able to do so during their junior or senior year.
Appendix A

General Principles for ENG 102 Classes
[Excerpts from the Course Guidelines]

Goals

Students in ENG 102 will learn how to contribute to ongoing conversations in an academic community. In doing so, students will learn techniques for drafting and revising analytic and persuasive essays based on critical reading of nonfiction prose. Students will also learn methods for conducting library research and the details of at least one system of formal documentation.

Objectives

Students in ENG 102 will develop the following knowledge and skills:

1. The ability to use flexible composing processes that are well suited to the types of writing produced by professionals in academic fields,

2. An understanding of how the rhetorical relationships among writer, audience, and message should influence their writing,

3. The ability to use writing to sharpen their own analytic and critical-thinking skills,

4. The ability to participate in the written exchanges of a community of writers who share some common concerns, and, more specifically,
   a. The ability to draw on their reading and first-hand experiences in order to verify, critique, and extend the arguments offered by other members of the community,
   b. The ability to critique and refine their own ideas in light of new knowledge that they develop through their reading and other experiences in the course,
   c. The ability to construct reasonable and persuasive defenses of their positions when these positions are critiqued by advocates of other positions.

5. The ability to analyze the writing conventions of common genres and to produce texts that conform to those conventions, including
   a. The grammar, spelling, and punctuation conventions of standard American English,
   b. The conventions of unity, organization, and support that are common in analytic writing and academic research.
Appendix B

Information for Students Selected to Participate in an Assessment of Argumentation Skills

Students: if your instructor notifies you that you have been selected to participate in the first-year composition program’s assessment of argumentation skills, the instructor will talk with you about what you need to do. However, below you’ll find answers to many of the questions that students ask about the assessment. Please read this information carefully.

How was I selected to participate in the first-year composition assessment?

You were selected at random by the coordinator of first-year composition. You were not chosen because of any personal characteristics such as age, gender, or ethnicity. You were not chosen because of the quality of your work in ENG 102. Your name was drawn in a random selection of students from your section of ENG 102.

What is the purpose of the assessment?

The purpose of the first-year composition assessment is to determine how well the first-year composition program is succeeding in teaching argumentation skills. To do this, the Composition Committee and English instructors evaluate essays written by a random sample of students who are enrolled in ENG 102. This evaluation helps the English faculty to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the composition program.

Because the purpose of the assessment is to evaluate the overall performance of the program, not the performance of individual students or instructors, you will not receive a grade for your work. You will submit your work anonymously, and the results of the assessment will not contain any reference to individual students. Instead, the results will report the percentage of students who demonstrate specific argumentation skills that are taught in the first-year composition program. These percentages will show how well the program is succeeding—they will not show how well individual students or instructors are succeeding.

How will my confidentiality be protected?

You will submit an essay anonymously. Neither your name nor your instructor’s name will appear on the essay. You will remove these names and any references to your section number before you submit your work.

Other people also will work to ensure that you remain anonymous. Your instructor will remove your name and his or her own if you forget to do so, and members of the Composition Committee will cross out these names if they slip by your instructor and you. No names will appear on any of the evaluation forms. As was noted above, the purpose of this assessment is to evaluate the program, not the individual students or instructors participating in the program.
Will I need to do work not required of other students in my ENG 102 class?

You will not need to complete any writing assignments other than those required of all the students in your section of ENG 102. The only extra task required of you is that you will need to select one essay that you wrote in ENG 102, and you will need to submit an unmarked copy of the essay to your instructor.

How should I select an essay to submit?

From the essays that you wrote for ENG 102, you should select the one essay that best proves you possess the following abilities:

- The ability to state a clear thesis that offers a position on an issue about which reasonable people may disagree,
- The ability to provide well-reasoned and sufficient support for the thesis,
- The ability to summarize accurately one or more of the common arguments offered by reasonable people who do not share your position,
- The ability to offer well-reasoned responses to one or more of the common arguments offered by reasonable people who do not share your position,
- The ability to provide relevant evidence from credible sources that support your position and relevant evidence from credible sources that disagree with your position,
- The ability to organize an argument effectively,
- The ability to write in a style that is appropriate for an audience of well-educated adults who may not share your position.

If you have not written an essay that proves you possess all of these abilities, select the one essay that best proves you possess most of these abilities.

How and when should I submit my essay?

Please submit an unmarked copy of your essay in the folder that your instructor will provide. **Give the folder to your instructor no later than the last day of final exams.**

Will my essay be returned to me, and will I receive the results of the assessment?

No. Because students’ names will not appear on essays, it will be impossible to return essays or report results for individual students. **If you submit an essay that you want to keep, please make a copy of the essay before you submit it.**

What should I do if I have questions?

Talk to your instructor. He or she should be able to answer most of your questions.
Appendix C

Instructions for Students:
How to Select and Submit Your Argument Essay

Students: complete the form that is stapled to front of this folder, and use the folder to submit an argument essay to your ENG 102 instructor on or before the due date that your instructor has chosen.

The essay that you submit should demonstrate that you possess the following skills:

- The ability to state a clear thesis that offers a position on an issue about which reasonable people may disagree,
- The ability to provide well-reasoned and sufficient support for the thesis,
- The ability to summarize accurately one or more of the common arguments offered by reasonable people who do not share your position,
- The ability to offer well-reasoned responses to one or more of the common arguments offered by reasonable people who do not share your position,
- The ability to provide relevant evidence from credible sources that support your position and relevant evidence from credible sources that disagree with your position,
- The ability to organize an argument effectively,
- The ability to write in a style that is appropriate for an audience of well-educated adults who may not share your position.

If you have not written an essay that proves you possess all of these abilities, select the one essay that best proves you possess most of these abilities.

Please submit a clean copy of your essay—no instructor’s comments or grade should appear on it. Also, please black out all references to your name, your instructor’s name, and the section number of your ENG 102 class.
Appendix D

Information Sheet

Students: use this folder to submit an argument essay to your ENG 102 instructor.

Before submitting this folder, please provide all of the information that is requested below.

1. Write the date that you are submitting the folder: _________________________

2. Provide the title* of the essay contained in the folder:

__________________________________________

* If the essay doesn’t have a title, list it as “Untitled” and provide information that will enable the evaluators to identify it—for example, a five-to-ten word description of the essay’s topic.

3. “Write “yes” on the line to confirm that you have examined your essay and blacked out all references to your name, your instructor’s name, and the section number of your ENG 102 class: ______________

Instructors: before submitting the evaluated essay to Elaine Cruddas or Paul Beauvais, please provide all of the information that is requested below:

4. Write “yes” on the line to confirm that you have examined the essay and blacked out any remaining references to your name, the student’s name, and the section number of your ENG 102 class: ______________

5. Write “yes” on the line to confirm that you have enclosed a completed “Instructor’s Evaluation” form: ______________

Instructors should submit folders to either Elaine Cruddas in Meier Hall 249 (the English Department office) or Paul Beauvais in Library 03 no later than Monday, May 14, 2007.
**Appendix E**

**Evaluation Form**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer each question by checking either &quot;Yes&quot; or &quot;No&quot;:</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thesis</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the essay demonstrate the writer’s ability to convey a clear thesis that offers a position on an issue about which reasonable people may disagree?</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the essay demonstrate the writer’s ability to provide well-reasoned and sufficient support for the thesis?</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consideration of Alternative Positions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Does the essay demonstrate the writer’s ability to summarize accurately one or more of the common arguments (both claim and support) offered by reasonable people who do not share the writer’s position?</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Does the essay demonstrate the writer’s ability to offer well-reasoned responses to one or more of the common arguments offered by reasonable people who do not share the writer’s position?</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Use of Sources as Evidence</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Does the essay demonstrate the writer's ability to provide relevant evidence from one or more credible sources that support the writer’s position?</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Does the essay demonstrate the writer's ability to provide relevant evidence from one or more credible sources that disagree with the writer’s position?</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the essay demonstrate the writer’s ability to organize an argument effectively?</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Style</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the essay demonstrate the writer’s ability to write in a style that is appropriate for an audience of well-educated adults who may not share the writer’s position?</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F

Evaluation Guidelines

To evaluate an essay, each evaluator will complete a form that contains eight yes/no questions concerning specific writing skills. In evaluating each skill, the evaluator will check “Yes” if the essay provides evidence that the writer’s ability level is satisfactory. The evaluator will check “No” if the essay provides evidence that the writer’s ability level is unsatisfactory.

Thesis

Does the essay demonstrate the writer’s ability to convey a clear thesis that offers a position on an issue about which reasonable people may disagree?

A satisfactory essay will exhibit all of the following traits:

- A thesis—stated or implied—that is clear,
- The thesis offers a position on an issue,
- The issue is one about which reasonable people may disagree.

An unsatisfactory essay will exhibit at least one of the following traits:

- Neither a stated nor an implied thesis,
- A thesis so poorly conveyed that the reader is unable to discern the point of the essay or the writer’s position about an issue,
- A thesis that doesn’t convey a position concerning an issue about which reasonable people may disagree,
- A thesis that is merely a statement of a preference that reasonable people wouldn’t bother disputing (because they consider it inconsequential or trivial).
Support

► Does the essay demonstrate the writer's ability to provide well-reasoned and sufficient support for the thesis?

A **satisfactory** essay will exhibit **both** of the following traits:

- At least one well-reasoned point—and usually two or more well-reasoned points—providing sufficient support for the thesis,

- Clear and sufficient explanation of *how* the points support the thesis.

An **unsatisfactory** essay will exhibit **at least one** of the following traits:

- Insufficient support for the thesis,

- Poor reasoning in supporting the thesis,

- Unclear or Insufficient explanation of how the points support the thesis.

Some additional issues to consider:

- It is difficult to quantify how much support is enough. However, in most cases an appropriate thesis for a college-level argument essay will require more than one point to support it.

- If an argument does contain multiple points to support it, the evaluator should consider whether the supporting points, viewed collectively, indicate that the student is able to provide satisfactory support for the thesis. If most of the supporting points are satisfactory, then the student may receive a “satisfactory” evaluation even if one or more of the supporting points are flawed.

- Forms of support may vary, with students using well-reasoned explanations, real or hypothetical examples, evidence from sources, and other techniques to support the thesis. Use of evidence from sources is an important skill—so important that it is a separate category in this evaluation. However, students may receive a rating of “satisfactory” for the “Support” category even if their supporting points do not contain quotations or paraphrases from sources.
Consideration of Alternative Positions

▶ Does the essay demonstrate the writer’s ability to summarize accurately one or more of the common arguments (both claim and support) offered by reasonable people who do not share the writer’s position?

A satisfactory essay will exhibit both of the following traits:

- An accurate summary of at least one of the common arguments (i.e., a claim and the support for it) offered by reasonable people who do not share the writer’s position,

- Clear and sufficient explanation of the claim and support so that readers can understand the argument(s) for an alternative position.

An unsatisfactory essay will exhibit at least one of the following traits:

- No summary of any of the common arguments offered by reasonable people who do not share the writer’s position,

- Unclear or insufficient explanation of the argument(s) for an alternative position.

▶ Does the essay demonstrate the writer’s ability to offer well-reasoned responses to one or more of the common arguments offered by reasonable people who do not share the writer’s position?

A satisfactory essay will exhibit the following trait:

- Fair consideration of one of the common arguments offered by reasonable people who do not share the writer’s position (or fair consideration of the majority of the arguments, if the writer discusses more than one argument), demonstrated by well-reasoned evaluation of the merits of the argument(s).

An unsatisfactory essay will exhibit at least one of the following traits:

- No evaluation of the merits of any of the most common arguments for an alternative position,

- Unclear or insufficient responses to arguments,

- Biased or illogical responses to arguments,

- Responses only to atypical or unrepresentative arguments that do not reflect positions commonly held by reasonable people.
Some additional issues to consider:

- It is difficult to quantify how much attention a writer should devote to considering alternative positions. Evaluators should not penalize students for considering only one argument for an alternative position; however, evaluators may have a higher tolerance for flaws when students consider two or more arguments.

- Students may receive a “satisfactory” evaluation for summarizing alternative positions even if the students do not quote or paraphrase any specific sources. It is acceptable for students to offer their own explanations of alternative positions, prefacing these explanations with phrases such as “Opponents of my position note” or “A common argument against my position is,” as long as the explanation really does represent a view held by reasonable people who disagree with the writer. (Use of evidence from opposing sources is an important skill; however, it is a separate category in this evaluation.)

- In evaluating summaries of alternative positions, evaluators will need to consider whether all of the summaries, viewed collectively, indicate that the student is able to summarize others’ positions fairly. If the student offers adequate summaries of most of the arguments, then the student may receive a rating of “satisfactory” even if the summaries of some arguments are flawed.

- In evaluating responses to arguments, evaluators will need to consider whether all of the responses, viewed collectively, indicate that the student is able to evaluate others’ positions fairly. If the student offers adequate responses to multiple arguments, then the student may receive a rating of “satisfactory” even if the responses to some arguments are flawed.
Use of Sources as Evidence

Does the essay demonstrate the writer's ability to provide relevant evidence from one or more credible sources that support the writer's position?

A satisfactory essay will exhibit the following trait:

- Relevant quotations or paraphrases from at least one credible source that supports the writer's position.

An unsatisfactory essay will exhibit the following trait:

- Failure to include any relevant quotations or paraphrases from at least one credible source that supports the writer's position.

Does the essay demonstrate the writer's ability to provide relevant evidence from one or more credible sources that disagree with the writer's position?

A satisfactory essay will exhibit the following trait:

- Relevant quotations or paraphrases from at least one credible source that disagrees with the writer's position.

An unsatisfactory essay will exhibit the following trait:

- Failure to include any relevant quotations or paraphrases from at least one credible source that disagrees with the writer's position.

Some additional issues to consider:

- Although the ability to document sources is an important skill, it is not a primary consideration in this evaluation of students' use of sources. A student may receive a satisfactory grade for use of sources as evidence even if the student does not observe MLA, APA, or CMS conventions for formal documentation. However, the documentation must be sufficient to enable the evaluator to identify the source. (If the evaluator cannot determine who is being quoted or paraphrased, then the instructor should rate the essay as “unsatisfactory” on the grounds that it is impossible to assess the credibility of the source.)

- To earn a satisfactory rating for this criterion, the essay must cite specific sources. Although it is appropriate for students to summarize some common arguments without attributing them to a specific source (e.g., prefacing the summary with a phrase such as “Many people claim”), these “general” sources are not sufficient for an essay to receive a satisfactory rating for the use of source as evidence.
Organization

Does the essay demonstrate the writer's ability to organize an argument effectively?

A **satisfactory** essay will exhibit **both** of the following traits:

- An overall organizing scheme appropriate for an essay designed to support a position on an issue,
- Arrangement into paragraphs that are well focused.

An **unsatisfactory** essay will exhibit **at least one** of the following traits:

- No sense (or an insufficient sense) of an overall organizing scheme appropriate for an essay designed to support a position on an issue,
- Paragraphs that are insufficiently focused.

It is conventional for an argument essay to contain point-by-point organization with each paragraph exploring a particular topic whose relevance to the argument is clear. However, other modes of organization are acceptable if they clearly convey that the writer is offering and supporting a position on an issue about which reasonable people may disagree.
Style

► Does the essay demonstrate the writer’s ability to write in a style that is appropriate for an audience of well-educated adults who may not share the writer’s position?

A **satisfactory** essay will exhibit **all** of the following traits:

- Phrasing that is clear and appropriate for an audience of well-educated adults,
- Phrasing that conveys respect for reasonable people who disagree with the writer’s position.

An **unsatisfactory** essay will exhibit **at least one** of the following traits:

- Phrasing whose vagueness, ambiguity, or complexity makes the writer’s meaning very difficult for the reader to understand,
- Phrasing that a well-educated reader would consider immature or inappropriate for the writer’s purpose,
- Phrasing that conveys disrespect for reasonable people who disagree with the writer’s position.

Occasional lapses in style should not prevent an essay from receiving a satisfactory rating in this category. However, if the essay contains stylistic flaws that are sufficiently severe to undermine the writer’s purpose for writing, then the essay should receive a rating of “unsatisfactory” for this category.
Acknowledgments

Thank you to all of the Composition Committee members who helped design the assessment procedures and spent long days evaluating essays during the 2006-2007 academic year: Rick Branscomb, Susan Butterworth, Jan Lindholm, Deborah Melnick, Jay Spina, Charles F. Warren, Tom West, and Julie Whitlow.

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A special thank you to all of the dedicated instructors who taught ENG 102 during the 2006-2007 academic year.