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## Action Project

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**Institution:** Seward County  
Community College

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### Timeline:

Planned project kickoff date: 10-01-2007

Target completion date: 08-31-2008

Actual completion date: --

A. Give this Action Project a short title in 10 words or fewer:

Compare and Realign Writing Skills and Transfer Composition Curricula.

B. Describe this Action Project's goal in 100 words or fewer:

Following the reuniting of Developmental Writing and English within a single division, the next step is to work towards closing the gaps identified in the prior Action Project that exist between the two programs. This new project will track the core skills and outcomes defining mastery at the gateway course level back through the developmental courses to identify the core skills and outcomes necessary for success at each level. Each course will then be evaluated and realigned to address those skills and outcomes.

C. Identify the single AQIP Category which the Action Project will most affect or impact:

Primary Category: Helping Students Learn

D. Describe briefly your institution's reasons for taking on this Action Project now -- why the project and its goals are high among your current priorities:

The increasing number of underprepared students entering Writing Skills and English courses makes even more important the discovery of specific causes and remedies for the current unsatisfactory success rate of SCCC students in gateway classes. Of new first time freshmen, 64.9% test into at least one developmental writing and/or reading class. Of the AQIP cohort (first time, full time, first generation students) that percentage increases to 70.7%. (this data is from 2005 and 2006 fall cohorts). Only 43% of Writing Skills IV students successfully complete (grade: A, B, or C) Composition I; if the student earns less than an A in Writing Skills IV, that rate decreases to 38%. SCCC students can choose to waive placement recommendations. Thirty-six percent of students who waive Writing Skills placements successfully complete Composition I. Both administration and faculty agree that these rates of student success are unsatisfactory and can and will be significantly improved as a result of this new Action Project.

E. List the organizational areas - -institutional departments, programs, divisions, or units -- most affected by or involved in this Action Project:

English Department Academic Affairs Council: Developmental Education & General Education  
Information Technology: Data collection

F. Name and describe briefly the key organizational process(es) that you expect this Action

Project to change or improve:

Curriculum sequencing Data collection Placement and Advising Assessment of student learning Enrollment process

G. Explain the rationale for the length of time planned for this Action Project (from kickoff to target completion):

The Action Project will be conducted largely by the five Writing Skills and English instructors. At the end of the 07-08 academic year, the retiring chair of the Humanities and Social Sciences Division will have to be replaced, as will at least one full-time English instructor. Completing the Project by the start of the 08-09 academic year will allow the process of closing the previously identified gaps to begin and plans for any new course and/or curricular realignment to be in place at the time new administrative and instructional personnel join the division. Also, the time allotted for completion will allow Project participants to investigate similar projects at other AQIP institutions, as suggested in the recently completed Action Project Review.

H. Describe how you plan to monitor how successfully your efforts on this Action Project are progressing:

Progress will be reported at the monthly AQIP Steering Committee meeting. Bill McGlothing, English, (co-leader with Frances Brown, Developmental Writing) is also a Steering Committee member. A collection calendar and data requirement schedule will be developed with the data collector. Results will be reviewed at the end of each semester to monitor changes and/or progress.

I. Describe the overall "outcome" measures or indicators that will tell you whether this Action Project has been a success or failure in achieving its goals:

Syllabi will be coordinated and sequenced, and course mastery levels will be defined.

J. Other information (e.g., publicity, sponsor or champion, etc.):

Bill McGlothing, English Frances Brown, Developmental Writing Todd Carter, AQIP Steering Committee Member, Mathematics and Science Division Chair

K. Project Leader and contact person:

Contact Name: Bill McGlothing, English Instructor

Email: bill.mcglathing@sccc.edu

Phone: Ext.

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### **Annual Update: 2008-09-12**

A. Describe the past year's accomplishments and the current status of this Action Project.

The Developmental Writing Action Project committee (the five Seward County Community College full-time writing instructors and two Steering Committee members) met approximately every two weeks throughout the Spring 2008 semester. At the first meeting in January, instructors laid out their objectives and teaching approaches in the four Writing Skills (WS) courses and Composition I. Writing Skills instructors described changes in their courses and their teaching in response to the prior Action Project, which identified gaps in developmental students' preparation for and success in English Composition I. From these conversations emerged two realizations. First, the graduated content of the four Writing Skills courses was

delaying immersion in the essay writing process for students placed in the lower levels; second, student advancement to the next course level was based on grade weighting that did not sufficiently emphasize essay writing, and the absence of exit assessment made advancement almost automatic. Instructors agreed that writing assignments requiring essays should be the focus of all WS levels, not just III and IV. Instructors also agreed that the Composition I syllabus and the WS syllabi were not aligned. Syllabus revision began with a listing of core skill essay components that would be the basis for reconfiguring the WS syllabi to emphasize essay writing at all levels, instead of the sentence-to-paragraph-to-essay graduated track of the four-tier system, while still allowing for concentration at all levels on specific areas of grammar and mechanics. Writing Skills instructors then conformed each of the four WS syllabi to align with the Composition I syllabus. As the group began to review the revised WS syllabi, the conversation turned to the structure of the WS program and the expectations of the English and Developmental departments in terms of the skills levels necessary for success in Composition I. The following question arose: Which is in the students' best interest: 1.) a "seamless" progression through graduated levels of basic skills instruction (any level of which can currently be waived at the student's discretion) with students incorporating these skills elements into a whole essay only at the WS III and IV levels, or 2.) a much more concentrated core of WS classes which, while recognizing the need for as many as 64% of our entering students to remediate skills deficiencies, would begin immediately with emphasis on college-level writing skills? Proceeding from the understanding that according to the data the current four-tier WS sequence is not meeting the needs of some students in terms of preparing them for success in transfer classes, the group agreed that a restructuring was needed. In a pilot study to begin in Fall 2008, Writing Skills III and IV will be taught as essentially the same writing-intensive Developmental exit course. The committee agreed to establish exit standards and assessments in both the grammar and writing areas, with heavy emphasis on the latter as measurement of students' preparedness for Composition I. The pilot study will involve the following exit assessment possibilities: the COMPASS Test used as a trial pre/post measurement of student competency in grammar/mechanics, the COMPASS e-Write (an electronic writing assessment), and a writing artifact team composed of WS and Composition instructors scoring an exit essay to be used for placement/advancement. Writing Skills I and II will be taught as the same WS II class, leading to skills mastery for advancement to the exit course. The essay will be emphasized from the start. Both WS levels will continue to emphasize grammar instruction. Instructors considered the possibility of encouraging students below a certain skills level to seek out courses for personal development/improvement rather than transfer credit track remediation. The committee agreed that there might now be a gap at the entry point of the Developmental sequence, affecting students placed in Adult Basic Education (ABE), English as Second Language (ESL), and Writing Skills I courses. Data shows that between Fall 2004 and Fall 2007 1% of students attempting both Writing Skills and Composition I began in ABE, ESL or WS I. None of these students successfully completed the gateway course.

**Review ():**

**B. Describe how the institution involved people in work on this Action Project.**

The primary participants were the three English instructors and two Writing Skills instructors. Two other members of the Steering Committee were involved, one to act as liaison with the Mathematics Developmental project and one to provide data and statistical support. The recent incorporation of the Writing Skills Program into the Humanities and Social Sciences Division

brought English and Writing Skills instructors together for the first time in over a decade. Instructors were energized by the opportunity to collaborate on projects identifying student needs and improving student learning. During the semester, the Steering Committee was informed of progress with the Action Project in monthly meetings. The Academic Affairs Council was made aware of the Project's findings and pilot study proposals in a May meeting. The full faculty learned of the completed Action Project and the plan for the coming year in a Fall 08 in-service session.

**Review ():**

**C. Describe your planned next steps for this Action Project.**

The plan is to run the pilot study in two levels of Writing Skills beginning with the fall semester, experiment with various exit vehicles, collect data, finalize the course sequence, and prepare for Academic Affairs Council approval and inclusion in the Fall 2009 schedule of classes. Although this Action Project is completed with the launch of the Writing Skills pilot study, instructors will continue to work together to monitor the results of the changes in the new courses.

**Review ():**

**D. Describe any "effective practice(s)" that resulted from your work on this Action Project.**

The predominant effective practice was the commitment of five writing instructors who previously had little communication or interaction to meet and become resolved to radically reconfigure a long-standing system that simply wasn't working to the maximum benefit of the students in SCCC writing classes. To achieve that goal, instructors had to agree that no personal or departmental agendas or territorialities would interfere with progress towards the common goal of student success. The process by which the restructuring of Writing Skills courses was accomplished might be of interest to other institutions. Here is an overview:

- o Initial data gathered revealed that only 43% of WS IV students successfully completed Composition I, and of students who waived Writing Skills placement, the success rate in Comp I was 38%. Unless the final grade in WS III or IV was A or B, there was little chance of students succeeding in the gateway course. Chances for success significantly decreased for students placed in WS II, WS I, and ABE/ESL courses.
- o Grade-weighting in Writing Skills classes emphasized attendance and informal written journals, along with completion of computer lessons, and no particular writing/grammar exit benchmarks were in place to determine qualification to advance to the next level (the TABE test was administered and results used as a recommendation).
- o Identification of gaps led to examination of all writing course syllabi as representative of course content, competencies, and objectives. The competencies section in the Composition I syllabus was determined to be more a grading rubric than an accurate reflection of the expectations of the new English/Developmental coalition. Reconfiguration and realignment of all writing course syllabi was deemed necessary, starting with the gateway course and working downward through the four levels of Writing Skills.
- o The focus for syllabi revision became the SCCC Writing Rubric developed by the English department. A generic version of the rubric is used for annual assessment of SCCC's Institutional Writing Outcome. The five writing course syllabi were revised to reflect the rubric components measuring expectations in essay Structure, Correctness, and Content/Audience.
- o The emphasis in Writing Skills was redirected to the essay writing process, rather than the sentence-to-paragraph-to essay progression previously followed from WS I through IV. This redirection in turn suggested that essay immersion from the beginning would be more effective if not spread out across four course levels and two academic years. The

decision to move towards a two-level WS progression was made. o At the same time exit benchmarks were proposed, based on three possible measurement tools: COMPASS e-Write, the COMPASS Test (used for placement) retaken as an exit test, and a team scoring of writing artifacts using the rubric benchmark of 3-2-2 in the lower level and 3-3-3 in the upper as determinant for advancement to the next level (3 designates writing that Meets Expectations in all three rubric categories). o To investigate this new direction, a pilot study was designed for the coming academic year, bridging the gap between the existing four level course plan by combining WS I and II (not changing designation but essentially teaching both courses the same in terms of content and emphasis) as the entry course and WS III and IV as the exit. o This plan then will be evaluated for at least two semesters, with student success rate data collected and subsequent placement recommendations and placement waivers examined, paying particular attention to the performance of students from the reconfigured WS classes in the gateway course, at which time instructors will decide upon one method of exit writing assessment and will recommend that the new WS course sequence be adopted.

**Review ():**

E. What challenges, if any, are you still facing in regards to this Action Project?

Challenges remain: achieving faculty buy-in, ensuring that there are some “teeth” in the new course sequence, even if mandatory placement is not a likelihood, and selling students and advisors on the accuracy of available data “predicting” their chances of success in subsequent classes based on their placement recommendations and/or their performance in the previous class. Synchronizing the timing of the WS writing assessments to impact placement in and advancement to the next level course will also be a challenge, since early registration occurs weeks before the end of a semester. Addressing the needs of the ABE, ESL, and WS I contingent may well require a new Action Project in the future. However, the current priority will remain meeting the challenge of administering and monitoring the Writing Skills pilot study.

**Review ():**

F. If you would like to discuss the possibility of AQIP providing you help to stimulate progress on this action project, explain your need(s) here and tell us who to contact and when?

**Review ():**