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## **Fairway Community College's English Basic Skills Departmental Exam : Mastery Test Madness**

Kelly Alanna Keane

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FAIREWAY COMMUNITY COLLEGE'S  
ENGLISH BASIC SKILLS MASTER EXAM: MASTERY TEST MADNESS

The developmental English departmental mastery exam that all students who were placed into remedial English must pass before they can move to College English is problematic because of questionable reliability and validity. Additionally, it has unintended consequences for the courses that comprise the developmental English program at Fairway Community College. These consequences include though are not limited to: decreasing pass rates from developmental English to College English, curriculum that is negatively impacted by this assessment, and a complete disconnect between practice and theory in the classroom. After working through current assessment theories combined with best practices in basic writing, I recommend that Fairway adopt an epistemic rhetorical stance and clearly articulate it in order to create a more productive assessment measure to determine readiness for College English which, in turn, will positively impact curriculum.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY  
/ FAIRWAY COMMUNITY COLLEGE'S  
ENGLISH BASIC SKILLS DEPARTMENTAL EXAM: MASTERY TEST MADNESS

by

Kelly Alanna Keane

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Masters of Arts English

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The College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of English

  
Certified by Dr. Marietta Morrissey, Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences

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FAIRWAY COMMUNITY COLLEGE'S  
ENGLISH BASIC SKILLS DEPARTMENTAL EXAM: MASTERY TEST MADNESS

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Masters of Arts English

by

KELLY ALANNA KEANE

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

August 2010

I have come to learn so many things through the process of writing this thesis. The first of which is that if I really care about change, and I do, then I cannot do it alone. I do my best work when I stand among professors, colleagues and friends who care deeply about the work that we do. This work reflects what I have learned from listening carefully, though I do not hold them accountable for my interpretation. Instead, this document serves as my entrance to a field that is already in full bloom.

I would like to thank Dr. Jessica Restaino and Dr. Emily Isaacs for all of their time and patience and for helping me get the critical distance that I needed to create a project that is so near and dear to my heart. Without your unending support, this paper – and perhaps change – would not be possible. I would also like to thank Marty for giving me the space and encouragement to do this work and Brendan and Miles for understanding when I had to head off to the library Friday nights, all day Saturday, and too many Sunday mornings. You guys are truly the greatest! And a special thank you to George. Thank you for always hanging out with me while I write.

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## Chapter 1: Ineffective Assessment Measures and Their Unintended Consequences

“To challenge the doctrine of the divine right of kings, one has to imagine a world without kings. To challenge any set of accepted beliefs, one must imagine alternatives and their consequences” (Hillocks 204).

“Successful remedial programs set high standards, are focused on inquiry and problem-solving in a substantial curriculum, use a pedagogy that is supportive and interactive, draw on a variety of techniques and approaches, are in line with students’ goals, and provide credit for course work” (Rose, “Re-Mediating”).

“I have yet to see any problem, however complicated, which, when you looked at it the right way, did not become more complicated” (Arendt).

WYTIWYG: What you test is what you get (Underwood 36).

At community colleges across the country, as well as at other institutions of higher education, educators use a one-time exit exam to assess the writing of students who were placed in developmental English classes to determine readiness for college writing coursework. For those outside the field, this method of assessment may seem reasonable; however, for those educators and students on the ground and from the perspective of writing specialists and assessment experts, such assessment and placement practices have a wide variety of negative consequences. The ability of assessment tools to inform policy from the federal and state government to individual schools, impact curriculum, and to influence public perception regarding achievement has been widely cited but most prominently in “A Nation at Risk.” Ultimately, it seems problematic that assessment exams are often developed in isolation from disciplinary knowledge and practices in teaching writing, to say nothing of sound assessment research. In this thesis, I will explore the issue of end of program assessment or exit assessment at one community college in northern New Jersey, Fairway Community College.

At Fairway, students placed in developmental English have thus far had their end-of-program writing skills assessed solely in a high stakes situation by an exam with poor validity and reliability. Currently, retention rates are in decline and faculty are voicing their objections to the way the exit exam is presently functioning, making a review of this assessment necessary and crucial. There are many factors that may contribute to this falling retention rate such as increase in part-time faculty, unclear curricular goals, and economic difficulties; however, it may also be true that the growing prominence of assessment itself has played a more important role than previously imagined. For students to move from developmental English to freshman composition, they must pass a departmental exit exam that is a timed essay exam. This exam is written, administered, and scored by the faculty in the developmental English program and is based on a holistic model with rubrics, and it is not run in accordance with the current best practices in writing assessment (Huot). When asked at a departmental retreat noted the following difficulties with grading sessions: the ways in which the test was connected to the text that was chosen for the developmental classes as problematic, and the fact that had to privilege an essay form that they perhaps did not agree with, as real problems that as a department they needed to address.

There seems to be two narratives occurring within the same space at Fairway one overt, the possible inconsistency of the departmental exam, and one more covert, the connection, or disconnection of Fairway to the best practices in the fields of basic writing in terms of pedagogy and assessment. In order to understand what is occurring at Fairway, it is necessary to provide feedback grounded in current practice and theory.



## “Demographics at Fairway”

Fairway Community College, situated in northern New Jersey, enrolls approximately 15,000 students in various degree, certificate, and non-degree programs. Of these students, approximately 10,000 students are enrolled in non-credit courses. According to the Center for Institutional Effectiveness Data Book, of these students, approximately half attend college on a full-time basis and half attend college on a part-time basis. Students represent 114 countries with the following self-identified breakdown: 7.5% African American, .2% American Indian, 12.5% Asian, 26.6% Hispanic, and 53.2% white (“Bergen”). In the category of “white,” 919 identify themselves as Eastern European (“Bergen”).

## “English Remediation and Success Defined”

Of the 15,000 students who attend FCC, approximately 77% of them will need to take a developmental English and/or developmental math course before they start their college level courses as identified by the results on their Accuplacer<sup>i</sup> placement exams on English and math (“Bergen”). Accordingly, these Accuplacer scores will place approximately 4,200 students per semester into one of three developmental English course sequences before they move to their Writing 101 courses. These classes are: Developmental Skills one, two semesters of developmental English; English Skills, one semester of developmental English; and Directed Studies in Writing taken concurrently with College English. When students complete the developmental English program, according to the departmental mission statement, they will be prepared for the “demands

of college reading and writing” and have developed “critical thinking skills necessary for life-long learning” (“English Basic Skills Mission”)<sup>ii</sup>.

In addition to the goals found in the mission statement, there are two main program outcomes that the developmental English department uses to assess student success: success in freshman composition and success in the students’ general education courses, both measured by retention and grade distribution. In a recent study conducted by Fairway’s Center for Institutional Effectiveness, the success rates (defined as the percentages of students who received a “D” grade or better), for academic years 2005 – 2009 for students who completed their requirements in developmental English and then in Writing 101 remained at 67%, dipping a few percentage points before coming back to 67% (“Remedial Success Rates”). In terms of how students retain and apply the knowledge and skills they were exposed to in their developmental English classes as compared with students who did not test into developmental English and went straight to Writing 101, according to survey results “most students who complete the developmental English program do better in freshman composition than students who test directly into freshman composition,” (“EBS Study”).

#### “Cause for Concern: the Developmental English Program and the Mastery Exam”

While the aforementioned numbers seem to suggest a stable program with consistent results, one must look closer to the way these numbers are calculated and the way they are interpreted by the current FCC administration. In terms of the numbers, the success rates reflect all students who pass *any* course in developmental English, which is an important concern; however, more importantly, the number of students who pass out of

the program must be calculated. To do this, two categories of students must be created and studied: Early Exit and Regular Exit. The Early Exit group should contain students who originally placed into a two-course sequence but who earned an “A” grade in the course and were thus allowed to cut short their sequence and take the exit exam a semester early. The Regular Exit group would then contain students who completed their two-semester sequence and who have taken the exit exam. Thus, success would then be defined as the compilation of Early Exit and Regular Exit students in terms of grade distribution and retention. Additionally, a longitudinal study must also include performance in freshman composition courses and other general education courses, since these are the stated goals of the developmental English program<sup>iii</sup>.

If these numbers were re-calculated to reflect the percentage of students who exit the developmental English program by moving to freshman English, the data shows the following: for the Regular Exit group, pass rates from academic years 2002-2008 rose nine percentage points in one semester and then ultimately dropped ten percent over the remaining twelve semesters ending in the spring 2008 (“Bergen”). For the Early Exit cohort, pass rates from the same years have dropped ten percent except for a blip during one semester in 2007 also through spring 2008 (“Bergen”).

I believe that the faculty and administration are using the wrong numbers to assess the efficacy of the developmental English program. Instead of measuring the pass rates for all of the developmental English courses, a better way to determine the success of this program is to measure the percentage of students who successfully complete the program

and juxtapose these numbers with the data from the subsequent performance study in freshman English and a general education course<sup>iv</sup>.

#### “Mastery Exam as Main Target”

There are many reasons for which why these numbers may be falling such as: an increase in student population without adding appropriate services, an increase of adjunct faculty as compared with full-time tenure-track faculty, an increase of under prepared students as a result of the emphasis on testing from No Child Left Behind and focus on the HSPA, the recent death of an iconic program director, a decrease in teaching effectiveness, or they may be connected to our end of course assessment practices. These are all important concerns that must be addressed in some way; however, the comments from a departmental retreat SWOT analysis (strength, weaknesses, obstacles, and threats) worksheets demonstrate that the faculty in the developmental English program views the departmental mastery exam as a weakness that rates first among other concerns in terms of actionable items.

Faculty concerns, the decline in passing rates, recent pressure from the administration and newspaper articles that frame remedial courses as “roadblocks” and characterizes students as “stuck in” these courses (Carroll L2) make it crucial to interrogate assessment practices at Fairway. We must consider how these assessment practices not only relate to movement from developmental English to Freshman Composition, but also how they may stop students before they can ever achieve their goals. One can look at the data from the “2008-2009 Factbook,” regarding enrollment and graduation rates at Fairway for the academic years 2004-2008 to see if students are moving through their studies. In 2008,

of the 13,389 students who were in a degree program, only 1,433 actually earned a degree. This is about a 10% graduation rate and is fairly consistent across all four years (see tables 1 and 2). The mastery exam many not account entirely for Fairway's low graduation rate. It is quite plausible to assume that a portion of students who did not go onto graduate simply moved onto another school. However, I argue that a large majority of these students are negatively affected by many factors such as the number of remedial courses they need to take, financial aid considerations, and assessment measures that act as barriers to college-level work. Ultimately, the impact of the assessment on curriculum may shape what is being taught in the class and perhaps negatively influence student readiness for college-level work.

Table 1: Student population for degree programs from 2004-2005

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
<b>Transfer Programs</b>	8,407	8,976	9,286	9,856	10,513
<b>Degree Programs</b>	3,459	3,467	3,191	3,073	2,876
<b>Total Degree</b>	11,866	12,443	12,475	12,929	13,389
<b>Total Non Degree</b>	2,459	2,319	2,133	2,128	1,894
<b>Total</b>	14,325	14,762	14,608	15,057	15,283

Table 2: Diplomas and/or certificates awarded from 2004-2005

Degree	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008

<b>Program</b>					
A.A Degree	221	287	297	300\	336
A.S Degree	419	494	476	523	577
<b>Total Transfer Programs</b>	<b>640</b>	<b>781</b>	<b>773</b>	<b>823</b>	<b>913</b>
A.A.S Degrees	402	447	491	501	465
Certificates	79	55	59	76	55
Total Career Programs	481	502	550	577	520
<b>Total Degrees Awarded</b>	<b>1,121</b>	<b>1,283</b>	<b>1,323</b>	<b>1,400</b>	<b>1,433</b>

Fairway's 10% graduation is not just a "Fairway problem." Students attending community colleges seem to be getting stuck before completing their intended degrees. In a study of 19 NJ community colleges, some rural some urban, Sussex Community College has the highest graduation rate at 28% ("NJ Public College and University Data"). Fairway's 10% graduation rate is close to the bottom of the list. Ten other community colleges join Fairway at around the 10% figure ("NJ Public College and University Data"). If more than half of NJ's community colleges have graduation rates that suggest that less than 1 in 10 students are eligible for graduation, then studying what might be acting as a barrier seems crucial. Across all of the aforementioned community colleges, participation in remedial programs is high. According to Eric Bettinger and Bridget Terry Long's "The Role and Effect of Remedial Education in Two Year Colleges," 60% all incoming students in community colleges must take at least one remedial course (1). Fairway's 77% enrollment in remediation is well above the national

average, and their graduation is well below their local average making their gap between enrollment rates and degrees conferred feel insurmountable. It is for this reason that we must begin to interrogate any and all practices that may be barriers. Fairway's mastery exam falls squarely into this category.

“How We Got Here - An Historical Stance: Assessment, Placement and Basic Writing”

In 1980, the Statewide Plan for Education proclaimed that the growing deficiencies of entering college freshman in colleges and universities in New Jersey needed a decisive response. Of the group tested in 1979, approximately 40% of incoming freshman indicated deficiencies in reading (Lopez-Isa). As a result, the report recommended that “New Jersey colleges have no alternative but to provide well-designed remedial programs for all admitted students who require such help. Such programs are necessary not only for the welfare of the individual students, but also for the continued academic integrity of the entire college curriculum” ( Lopez-Isa). Thus, remediation became more central in higher education in the state of NJ and continues to remain at the forefront today.

Prior to New Jersey's decision to rely on assessment for placement purposes, the linkages between assessment measures, developmental courses, race and class were already taking shape. Kay Halasek and Nels P. Highberg in “Introduction: Locality and Basic Writing,” suggest that while many historians of composition disagree about the start of basic writing programs – some citing Harvard's English A course while others believe that Wellesley developed the first course in basic writing – most would agree that the advent of remediating students in English studies developed in response to “the perceived declining discourse skills among entering freshman” by the creation of the

“Uniform Entrance Requirements and the Uniform Lists for the Study of Literature” in 1894(xi). The UER and ULSL were used to test the abilities of incoming freshman regarding their abilities, or lack thereof, to write about literature. Students who failed to meet standards were placed in a remedial English class for their freshman year. Many of these students who were placed in remedial English were the kinds of students who had heretofore not attended colleges: “immigrants, women of color, and-first generation college students” (Halasek and Highberg xiii).

From the 1950s to 1970, when the field of assessment was in its infancy and the field of basic writing was growing, assessment was typically aimed at placing students and measuring the movement from remedial courses to college-level courses (Yancey 133 ). The type of assessment used for placement was largely multiple choice “objective” tests that focused on “usage, vocabulary, and grammar” (Yancey 133). These specific measures were utilized because many educators felt as though they were seeing a new kind of student and were struggling to figure out where to put them (Yancey 133), typically not in college-level writing courses but in basic writing courses. Thus, sole reliance on high school grades for placement was abandoned by many colleges.

About a decade later in New York City, CUNY’s Open Admissions experiment ushered in a new age in terms of the development of basic writing as a field. In “The ‘Birth’ of ‘Basic Writing,’” Bruce Horner notes how basic writing emerged from within the larger field of composition studies in response to CUNY’s open enrollment. During this time, CUNY made a groundbreaking decision based on pressure from Black and Latino groups after tumultuous protests to grant admission to all New York City high school graduates and make other substantive changes regarding the cultural make up of



faculty and programs (Horner 6). According to James Traub in *City on a Hill: Testing the American Dream at City College*, prior to 1969, many cultural groups were marginalized and denied entry because “City’s rigorous standards had come to seem like a perpetuation of privilege for the well educated, rather than a commitment to egalitarianism” (10). Students marched, engaged in protest, claimed academic buildings because they felt that City College, which had served the largely European and Jewish immigrant populations so well, was, in fact, failing them (Traub 10).

As a result, scores of remedial courses were being offered as students continued to be perceived as lacking and unable to perform academically. Consequently, many professors felt overwhelmed and unable to work productively with their students. Mina Shaughnessy, who most consider to be one of the founders of basic writing, was hired in 1967 and soon became the director of the SEEK program helped to create order from this perceived chaos. She fought overwhelmingly racist attitudes as evidenced when an English professor, one who had no dealings with students in the SEEK program, proclaimed that Shaughnessy “brought the slums to my office” when a line of students in the basic writing program showed up to speak with a basic writing professor with whom he shared an office (Maher 94).

By fall 1970, admission rose 60% (Traub 69). And as a result, there became an accepted, though erroneous, monolithic identity for the basic writing student, those who were conceptualized as “barbarians” – “outsiders by virtue of their racial and/or ethnic identity and illiteracy who threatened the university – Western civilizations palace of rationality – whether by their mere presence and demands with ‘politicization,’ and/or simply by virtue of lacking the qualifications for university work” (Horner 14). Thus,

minority and lower-income students were equated with failure, and their failure translated into a moral deficiency.<sup>v</sup>

Throughout 1970-1980, the population at community colleges and other colleges that valued open access to education exploded, and the construction of a monolithic identity for students who test into remedial courses continued. As a result of this fertile growth period, several smaller fields spawned: basic writing, developmental math, assessment among others. These fields grew, disproportionately at times and often in response to one another as exemplified by the increase need for assessment as open access became possible. As the debate regarding open access raged on in four-year schools, community colleges, much like FCC, continued their business of accepting more and more students who were assessed at pre-college levels. In order for community colleges to determine when students in the developmental courses could move on to college-level courses, assessment in general became increasingly important, but end of program assessment became more crucial. Thus, the impact of assessment grew as it moved from simply a placement measure to a measure that many depended on to ensure that students taking college level courses were adequately prepared. While it might seem logical to assess students to ascertain their college readiness, the assessment measures delivered to students were not yet fully formed. Ultimately, they blocked – and continue to block - many students, mostly those “new students” of the 70s and 80s from fully participating in college.

“Conditions at Fairway Community College”

Much like CUNY, Fairway Community College created a developmental English program in 1968 designed to remediate students who were deemed to be below the minimum requirements of college English courses, about 10% of incoming freshman (Sircus 2). For placement purposes, students were assessed using the Nelson Denney for reading and a short essay for writing and a computation math exam scored locally by professors (Annese 27). Students were highly encouraged to take developmental courses if these tests showed that they were not performing on a college level (Annese 27). While students were able to self-select remediation, they were counseled by faculty members and strong encouraged to take these courses where applicable.

Similar to the larger field from 1970 – 1974, Fairway didn't have any exit assessment measures in place (Annese 80). Once students completed their coursework with a passing grade, they moved onto College English. This policy changed in 1974 as students were required to take the Nelson Denny Reading Test forms A and D. This information, as well as their coursework (essays, tests, and conferences), created an overall picture of the student and indicated whether a student would or would not move to college-level English.

All of this changed as the newly-formed Basic Skills Council took shape. In 1976, the council recommended that assessment expand from placement to include a systematized exit assessment as well. In response, FCC faculty considered this recommendation and felt that it was not practical but with continued discussing the possibility because of pressure from the Basic Skills Council. Gerald Sircus, director of the Center for Institutional Research, ensured the council that “they [faculty] are

considering it” (Sircus 24). In academic year 1983-1984, Educational Testing Services, ETS, began to train faculty to be holistic graders for a one-time impromptu one – paragraph essay exam also utilizing the Davis Reading Test for the reading section (Sircus 27). Since faculty received training, these essays were able to be scored on a local level by professors in the program. While it would take more time for faculty to accept these measure as routine, Gerald Sircus states that “Overall, we are meeting our goals in the testing and placement of entering students” (28). Thus, placement was privileged, though end of program assessment progressed through faculty discussion and commitment from administration.

In 1987, in a memo from Anthony D. Lutkus, the director of New Jersey Basic Skills Assessment from the Department of Higher Education, Lutkus wrote that he was unhappy with the ETS-based exit exam and felt that the process involving ETS was taking too long” (Lutkus). Additionally, Lutkus called for “local scoring,” though never defined what this would mean. This push to move to a local context was echoed by then Dean of Humanities Dr. Michael Redmond who questioned whether the exit exam was as rigorous as the placement exam. Dr. Redmond recommended end assessment but was also concerned that FCC was still “too focused on correcting skill deficiencies” and should be “more concerned with equipping underprepared students for survival in beginning level courses by focusing on whole language and discipline-based contexts” (Redmond wizard mail). His solution was to first identify the objectives that students were having difficulty with and then to design a reading and writing test to measure these difficulties (Redmond wizard mail). By the fall of 1991 in his Basic Skills Effectiveness Report, Dr. Redmond focused mainly on exit assessment and made the following

changes: professors would administer and score the exit exam, a program booklet with a rationale of the exit exam was created and disseminated to students and faculty, and professors could still exclude the exit exam grade if it was not consistent with the student's work in the course (Redmond "Effectiveness"). In a final report of his tenure, Dr. Redmond was concerned about the inefficacy of the end assessment, as it might unfairly target minority students, and may not be valid or test the "value added" benefit of the basic writing program at FCC. Ultimately, he hoped to change the test but was not able to during his term, or assessment still wasn't a high priority.

This was almost twenty years ago, and the number of incoming freshman who are now labeled as "deficient" or in need of remediation in grammar, reading comprehension, and/or essay writing skills has risen to approximately 77% in 2009 ("Bergen") and the end assessment has not changed significantly, though faculty are not able to entirely dismiss that master test score if it did not reflect students' abilities. Though Fairway has had some solid success at remediation as determined by an internal study in 2007 that concluded that the group of students who placed into Fairway's developmental English program outperformed freshmen in college level English than students who did not need any remediation at all ("Program Review"), the main issue seems to be that the number of students who get stuck and never progress from developmental English to freshman English is on the rise.

Students' failure to complete their remedial courses is a great concern on Fairway's campus and on a national level as well. Locally, Fairway administrators have begun to apply pressure to increase retention rates by threatening to create one developmental department that would combine developmental math and developmental

English. Area news organizations picked up on the tension found at Fairway and other area community colleges with recent headlines in the New York Times, "Push to End Need for Remedial Classes Before College." Nationally, scholar Mike Rose published "The Need to Remediate Remediation" in *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, and Melinda Gates' call, of the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation, to "improve or reduce remediation as the best way to improve the completion rates at community colleges, which hover at about 25 percent" (Armario) all create tremendous concern at Fairway. Faculty from the developmental English program responded to the current administration's initiatives to condense remedial math and English and these articles by mounting their defense in their classroom practices as proof of the good work that was indeed occurring. Faculty cited anecdotal report, pass rates, and the longitudinal study that demonstrated student success in college-level English; however, they failed to make connections to the current practices and trends in their field, though this may be in part due to an overreliance on practice over theory as is common in the community college setting (Dickson 8).

Consequently, the developmental English department decided to set aside one day to interrogate their mission and vision. During their summit, faculty met in small groups and in large groups, went for walks with one another, shared meals, got into heated debates, and, in the end, tried to craft a mission statement. The final act of the day was to compile the list of items to focus on for the upcoming year. Each faculty member had to rank each piece of the program and decide what needed the most attention. These lists were submitted anonymously. On each and every list the departmental exit exam, was among the top weaknesses that the faculty felt needed to be addressed so that they could

engage in the process of developing an appropriate assessment measure. By reviewing and possibly replacing their end assessment, faculty demonstrated that they were taking the administration's concerns seriously and that they would ground possible changes in current theory and practices.

### "Effective Assessment Measures"

Appropriate and effective end of program assessment measures are crucial for students, faculty and administrators. While all three groups are stakeholders, as defined by Edward White, in this discussion, students and faculty bear the brunt of the results. Students feel the oftentimes bone crunching reality of assessment measures when they are forced to re-take non-credit developmental courses after failing one-time timed impromptu exams, much like the one delivered at Fairway. On the faculty side, many complain of having to shape syllabi and devote large chunks of their semesters to make sure to teach to a high stakes test and to engage in day-long grading sessions that have begun to feel counterproductive. It is for these reasons and more that the departmental exit exam must connect with current definitions of assessment theory and procedures (Huot 105).

Originally the field of assessment has been described as "wave-like" by Kathleen Yancey for the way assessment measures moved from objective testing to holistically scored essays to "portfolio assessment and programmatic assessment" (131). Yancey theorizes that the movements of these assessment waves are not discreet but as "overlapping waves, with one wave feeding into another but without completely displacing the waves that came before" (131). Yancey's waves have now been replaced

by O'Neill, Moore, and Huot who imagine assessment to be more "web-like, with trends cycling in and back as a result of ongoing negotiations among various groups including educators, researchers, test designers, and legislators whose views reflect ... broader social and political pressures" (10). Further, the theorists asserted that assessment must be defined as a rhetorical act "involving the consideration of exigency, purpose, and audience" (O'Neill, Moore, and Huot 11). Adding context, consequence, outside agencies, purpose and audience is crucial to this work.

Fairway's exit exam can be located squarely in Yancey's second wave of assessment and far from the web of O'Neill, Moore and Huot. It is a holistically scored essay scored without the use of a rubric and is conceived and delivered without serious consideration to rhetorical context. Professors write the essay prompts individually and submit them to their department chair for a departmental vote. For the grading session, there is a one-time two hour norming session during the morning of the exam where full-time and part-time faculty read range finders and come to consensus regarding individual scores according to a six point scale. This session is led by the Testing Coordinator who is a professor from the developmental English and who has not been specifically trained for this work. In terms of scoring, it is important to make clear here that while there is a six-point scale, faculty aren't being guided by a rubric. Instead, through dialogue, faculty members determine what might look like a "1" or a "4." Ultimately, these grades are constructed by what faculty members, or those who are the most vocal of the group, *feel* about the writing. This is, incidentally, the only time during the semester that faculty come together to discuss criteria for grading. Each essay is scored twice, and the two scores are added together. For example if Reader A scores an essay a "4" and Reader B



scores an essay a “3,” then the essay will receive a “7.” If any essays have more than a two point differential, a third reader assesses the exam and assigns a score and replaces one score. When professors receive their students’ scores, they have the opportunity to make two decisions. If a student receives a marginal score of six, then the professor is able to pass them to WRT 101. If the student has a score of five or below, the professor has the ability to ask the student to take a re-test and repeat the process.

Fairway’s exit assessment policies fail in many ways. First, without stated core abilities and course outcomes they deviate from the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s position statement on assessment revised in March of 2009 that states:

when a student is assessed for proficiency when completing a course or a series of connected courses: the assessment should be informed by such things as the core abilities adopted by the institution, the course outcomes established for a program, and/or the stated outcomes of a single course or class. Assessments that do not address such outcomes lack validity in determining proficiency. (“Writing Assessment”)

The CCCC’s call for transparency is lacking at Fairway. Although the developmental English program is in the process of revising course objectives and has plans to develop the outcomes of their basic skill writing courses, currently without this crucial information, faculty will have a difficult time assessing students’ abilities to succeed in college-level writing courses.

Additionally, Fairway has trouble in terms of validity and reliability, or the “two twins” of assessment (Yancey 134). Heretofore, the focus for Fairway has been on reliability, which is again located firmly in Yancey’s second wave of assessment with holistically-scored impromptu exams and created largely to “produce reliable scores” (Huot 24). An early definition provided by White in “Holiticism,” suggests that reliability is a “technical term used to describe fairness, or simple consistency. Good testing practice aims for the highest reliability that can be reached” (22). Huot challenges White’s early inclusion of fairness in assessment and suggests that “translating ‘reliability’ into ‘fairness’ is not only inaccurate, it is dangerous, because it equates the statistical consistency of the judgments being made with their value” (88). Cherry and Moss also complicate White’s early work by suggesting that “[r]eliability refers [only] to how consistently a test measures whatever it measures” (qtd. in Huot 87). Therefore, an assessment measure can be reliable but not valid.

At Fairway, there is an over privileging of inter rater reliability. Reliability and validity have been conflated (Huot 99), and this is problematic for students. Many faculty members rely the aforementioned single norming session. For some, this training feels sufficient. By extension then, if the training feels sufficient, that is they can agree with their colleagues, then they have the ability to determine the “true ability” of a student’s abilities vis-à-vis their impromptu essay. Thus, reliability and validity become one, and a false sense of knowing has been constructed.

The situation at Fairway feels grim at the moment. Faculty and students feel worn down by assessment. Hope, though, is not lost. One only needs to look to Chris

Gallagher and his plan to reclaim assessment for help. Gallagher contends that in order to reclaim assessment and move away from “assessment despair,” and the “dehumanization of the [students] that they have vowed to teach” (55), faculty must study their own assessment measures in greater detail and begin to take control. Assessment measures when left unattended and unchecked can take on a life of their own, particularly when they are high stakes exams that contribute to passing and retention rates, which are the very things that faculty performance is evaluated on. At this moment in time, it is crucial to assess the assessment and connect with current research to develop a reliable and valid assessment measure. In this thesis, I scrutinize the exam and measure it against current research and practice, offer recommendations for change for holistically-scored end of program assessments and suggest new assessment possibilities to more accurately determine whether or not students should move into college-level English.

## Chapter 2: Power of Assessment

O'Neil, Moore, and Huot among others assert in *College Writing Assessment* that assessment measures do more than demonstrate student achievement or departmental success. Rather, assessment measures “have the power to influence curriculum and pedagogy, to categorize teachers and writers, and, ultimately, to define ‘good writing’” (2). Further, Deborah Brandt who is critical of exit exam testing or high stakes testing because they function as “‘literacy sponsors’ because they encourage and support the development of certain types of writing and writing abilities over others” while campus-wide assessment initiatives can “transform teaching and learning across university and the community” (qtd. in O'Neil, Moore, and Huot 2). Assessment measures when constructed with the input of stakeholders at the local level can, in fact, be positive forces. Primarily, assessment measures help faculty make responsible decisions about students, and secondarily, assessment becomes part of the scholarly work of faculty who use data to “improve learning” and “inform teaching” (O'Neil, Moore, and Huot 9). Eliminating assessment measures would stop all of this important work and hinder the development of students, faculty, and departments. Unfortunately, assessment measures that are ineffective and promote the types of writing that Brandt is critical of can be devastating for students.

The goal for Fairway and for other colleges and universities also struggling with assessment is to create assessment measures that yield valid results. According to Huot, assessments must be “meaning making and integral to the teaching and learning that happens in the program” (qtd. in O'Neill, Moore, and Huot 57). Further, these assessments must be built on the following principals: “site-based, locally controlled,

context-sensitive, rhetorically based, and consistent with current research, accessible and theories on language learning and literacy<sup>vi</sup>” (qtd. in O’Neill, Moore, and Huot 10 and 57). Additionally, those who administer assessment measures must also be transparent about how the results of any particular assessment will be utilized to make decisions about a student (O’Neill, Moore, and Huot 95). An assessment measure that comes out of this context is considered “tolerable” according to O’Neill, Moore, and Huot (95) and should produce valid results (qtd. in O’Neil, Moore, and Huot 58). What I strive to do then, is to help Fairway develop a more tolerable assessment measure.

George Hillocks in *The Testing Trap* looks very closely at test construction and scoring. He states that faculty and administration must also be concerned about specific variables within an assessment in order to “make sense of a test” (64, 52). These variables include: the type of questions asked, “what counts as a right answer,” what a “passable answer” looks like, how much time the test taker has, who scores, and how teachers and students receive feedback (52). His work centers on the premise that the aforementioned pieces of assessment must be made transparent in order for the scores that an assessment produces to be valid. The work I am engaging in at Fairway involves looking carefully at the current end of program assessment measure to see if it is in fact “tolerable” in terms of the aforementioned conditions and the ways in which it meets the requirements that Hillocks sets forth. In short, for me, the question becomes whether or not Fairway’s exam meets these conditions. In order to determine the efficacy of this particular assessment measure, it is important to look at Fairway’s stated approach to writing instruction, construction of the mastery exam, connection between the exam and curriculum, and finally, the scoring of the mastery exam.

### “Fairway’s Approach to Teaching Writing”

The mastery exam is delivered to all students at the end of their two semester developmental sequence, to students in their first course if they are achieving an “A” average, and to students who have received a single course placement. It is both a high stakes and gate keeping exam. Students who fail to pass this exam in their second developmental course and students who fail the exam at the end of their single course placement will fail the entire course and have to repeat the course the following semester. A great deal of time and energy is spent by professors teaching to this test as evidenced by its prominent placement in all of the syllabi for the developmental courses. (see appendix for descriptions)

The mastery exam is in the section on evaluation, so logically one would expect there to be a connection between the evaluation method and the course objectives that one would flow from the other. Looking across all three syllabi, critical thinking, reading, and work on the sentence, paragraph, and essay level are all valued by the department. Further, the writing process is listed in the course objectives, which indicates that students will use a process approach to develop their critical thinking, reading, writing and editing abilities. While the writing process isn’t specifically defined, the brand of writing process espoused by the departmental text by John Langan states that the writing process is a series of four steps:

1. Discovering a thesis – often through pre writing.
2. Developing solid support for thesis – often through more pre writing.
3. Organizing the thesis and supporting material and writing it out in a first draft.

4. Revising and editing carefully to ensure an effective error-free paper. (Langan 23)

Langan's coverage of the writing process is approximately twenty-eight pages long and includes activities, models, suggestions, and points for discussion and is returned to throughout the whole of his text. Since this is the required book for all adjuncts, is highly recommended for lecturers and tenure-track faculty, and the writing process appears in all course syllabi, suggests that most if not all faculty privilege and teach students using a writing-process approach<sup>vii</sup>. According to the syllabi and text, essay writing will occur through a series of stages and over a period of time. In this way, students will receive feedback and have opportunities to re-think, re-vise, and re-shape their work. At Fairway, many writing projects occur over a period of time and students work through several drafts before turning in a finished one. According to Hillocks, utilizing a writing process approach is important as it shifts the focus of students' writing from writing to be evaluated to writing to explore (29). Additionally, Hillocks asserts that the writing process, as he defines it, cuts against theories of "current traditional rhetoric" where the focus is on form instead of function. He believes it is ineffective to privilege form over "helping students learn the strategies and processes for writing" (29).

Returning for a moment to Brandt's idea of literacy sponsorship, it is useful to make explicit the "patterns of sponsorship" (Brandt 183) in writing instruction at Fairway. In "Sponsors of Literacy," Brandt defines literacy sponsors as any "agents, local or distant concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model as we as recruit, regulate, suppress or withhold literacy- and gain advantage by it in some way" (166). Brandt works through case studies that "link patterns of sponsorship to processes of

stratification, competition, and reappropriation” (183) in order to demonstrate that how influential sponsors really can be in people’s lives. To extend Brandt’s theory to curriculum and assessment, one can think of Fairway’s curriculum *and* assessment measures as literary sponsors in that teachers are acting as agents to promote a very specific type of literacy. Certainly in some educational settings, curriculum and assessment are aligned and created after careful consideration to all stakeholders and current theory. In this way, the literary sponsors support students as they develop and connect various literacies. If, however, the curriculum and assessment measures do not support the type of learning and assessing espoused by Huot, O’Neill, Moore, and Huot, and Hillocks, then there is value in understanding who might be profiting by the suppression of a very diverse student cohort<sup>viii</sup>.

#### “Mastery Test Structure: Connection or Disconnection”

In order to interrogate the connection between curriculum and assessment, I analyzed mastery exams from the semesters from 2001-2010. I collected mastery exams for each semester including re-tests and summer sessions and analyzed them based on the following conditions: length of answer (paragraph to multi-paragraph response), rhetorical mode found in prompt, time allotted for exam, type of support required (personal experience vs. text-based responses, and whether or not an exam was used in multiple years. In total, I studied 32 exams and found there was little consistency in terms of test directions, rhetorical mode, and little attention was paid to providing information for an intended audience.

#### “Administration”



Throughout the years, some similarities do occur. Students take the exam in class unless specific testing accommodations are supplied. Students use their “long class” to take the exam, typically defined as 80 minutes though this changed to 75 in the FA 2009 semester. There are typically three questions offered and students must select the one that they would like to respond to. Students create their handwritten responses in an exam booklet and are given scrap paper to make some notes. Students are allowed the use of a dictionary, but they are not allowed to ask for any clarification on any one of the prompts. Students are not allowed to receive feedback or to revise their work. These conditions remain consistent aside from two years, SU 2001 and SU 2004, where students were directed to write one paragraph and were given 60 minutes to complete it without opportunity for feedback and/or revision, much like the current test.

Looking at the test conditions alone, most of which did not change over the ten years, the end assessment is remarkably different from the work of the semester. The test is a one-time timed impromptu test: which means that students do not have the opportunity to utilize any of the strategies learned vis-à-vis the writing process. Revision is not possible and feedback is out of the question. Questions about the audience remain unanswered. Do students imagine kindly professors who are interested in their thoughts and opinions, or do they construct images of castrating scorers who look for misspellings and grammatical mistakes? Thus, the conditions and structure of this exam negate all of the work that a student has learned using a process approach for composing. The particular type of literacy that is being endorsed here looks more like speed writing than creating rich prose.

“Prompts”

When it comes to the mastery exam, the anti-process conditions for writing are not the only problem; in addition, the method for choosing prompts results in writing prompts that are out of sync with the kinds of assignments most typically assigned in developmental English classes. Faculty do not use a process approach when constructing the prompts for the exam. The prompts are written by professors from the developmental English department based on a variety of topics such as: current events, pop culture reference, an event happening locally on campus, or a literary reference, and are sent directly to the Testing Coordinator via email. The Testing Coordinator<sup>ix</sup> at Fairway compiles them and then emails the list back to the full-time faculty so that the faculty may rank them. All of this is handled via email without discussion regarding reviewing the prompts for clarity, coherence, or connection to students' lives or on coordinating the types of questions utilized. The Testing Coordinator edits the prompts making sure that the type of rhetorical mode being addressed is clear in the prompt itself, though these modes have not been discussed by the faculty at large. Typically, the word "describe" or "argue" are utilized to point to some essay structure that has yet to be defined, leading one to imagine that these rhetorical modes may be conflated. Once this process is complete, the top six questions are selected based on popularity via email. Three questions are earmarked for the mastery exam and three are saved for the re-test.

Without a process approach or a review of the end result of the mastery prompts that are selected, it is interesting to see what occurs. In terms of rhetorical modes: 39 prompts ask for an argumentative essay, 34 call for an explanatory essay, 21 are for a descriptive essay, and 8 are narrative-type essays (see Appendix B). Interestingly, the data collected doesn't indicate an overall pattern. For example, one might expect a

mastery exam to have: one argumentative prompt, one explanatory, and one narrative, since these were the basic rhetorical modes utilized, or perhaps every second year would contain a question that asks for a narrative. It would seem likely that a logical pattern would emerge to help to make testing more “predictable” as is the practice in many other end-of-program assessments (Hillocks 53). Instead, except for FA 2003 and FA 2004, all mastery exams contain two prompts in one rhetorical mode and one prompt in another. In the case where four questions were offered (SU I 2008, SU 2 2008, and SU 2 2009), two rhetorical modes are offered in two cases and three rhetorical modes are offered in the other two. For argumentation, the mode we most often use in our classes and the one that is most often used on the exam, there are seven semester mastery exams when it is not used at all.

Clearly, the only pattern that emerges from this data is that there is no pattern at all. What we do know is the following: students are given only 75 minutes to compose an essay that will determine their placement for their next class. They will not have the ability to receive feedback and revise it. Their one main strategy, the writing process, is unavailable to them. Additionally, scorers who are unfamiliar with the students’ writing will be assigning a score to this writing,<sup>x</sup> leaving the student to construct an intended audience which may or may not be positive. Further, students come to this course having been “trained” in test taking from high stake opportunities such as the HSPA, SAT, etc. where teachers routinely coach them on what the test looks like. Since the mastery exam is unpredictable and students do not have the feeling of certainty that they did on their aforementioned high stakes exams, this may be troubling and cause more stress on an already difficult day. It is interesting to note that the decision to be less predictable at

Fairway isn't articulated in any of the files and/or departmental meeting notes. One wonders if being less predictable was a choice at all. Perhaps, it is just an unfortunate consequence of the intersection of assessment and a faculty that may or may not feel connected to assessment theory.

#### “Prompts Impact Writing Curriculum”

In addition to issues of how the prompts are constructed and combined to create the mastery exam, one must think about the ways in which these prompts impact curriculum by narrowing it (Hillocks 53). For Hillocks and others, assessment and curriculum are inextricably linked. Professors take great care to cover the material in the mastery exam because of the dual pressure of helping as many students pass the assessment as possible and having their performance judged based on pass and retention rates. This means making difficult curricular choices, which is particularly meaningful in a course that spans fifteen weeks and works with students who have varied needs and learning styles and have been labeled in many negatives ways<sup>xi</sup>. In terms of constructing their semesters, professors would be right to gear their work towards exposition, argumentation, and narration<sup>xii</sup>. If exposition and description are combined, as they are quite frequently, then expository writing dominates our instruction, thus making exposition the main focus at Fairway in developmental English courses.

This thinking assumes that professors have clearly articulated how they label various rhetorical modes and how they might anticipate the dominant discourse type that students might utilize in responding the essay prompts (Hillocks 54). Hillocks calls such work the creation of an institution's or professors "rhetorical stance" (21). The rhetorical stance is important to study at any institution as it affects not only the "lived curriculum

that students experience” but “also the quality of student writing” (Hillocks 27). For Fairway to define their particular rhetorical stance (current traditional rhetoric (CTR), constructivist rhetoric, epistemic rhetoric, and expressivist rhetoric), they would need to analyze their objectives, assignments, and assessments and see how they align (Hillocks 22-25).

Thus far, the developmental English Department has not articulated their rhetorical stance, or stances. This means that such a determination can only be made from an outside perspective by looking at materials and then connecting them to one or more rhetorical stance(s). From the study that I performed, limited only to the mastery test prompts, I found a high percentage of prompts that ask for exposition-type writing. In expository writing, the writer is asked to simply explain something, something that is not problematized by their own subjectivity or subjectivities (Hillocks 21). This reliance on discovery and analysis is typically found in current-traditional rhetoric, or CTR. This rhetorical stance, according to Hillocks, assumes that “truth is objective and may be apprehended directly through observations of the world and [students’ experiences] of it” (Hillocks 21). Truth resides outside of students, and they simply need to discover it. If “truth is unproblematic,” then students simply need to learn the form in which to pour the content (Hillocks 25). If exposition leads the way in Fairway’s high takes assessment measure, then it is possible that their rhetorical stance could be classified as CTR. In terms of teaching methodology, “lecture and recitation” nearly always dominates student discussion and form over content is always privileged (Hillocks 22, 24). Further, CTR insists that argument is not necessary because the truth – one truth – is simply there and

all the writer needs to do is to explain it relegating investigating or the use of writing as a means of discovery to a corner (Hillocks 25).

Pre-dating Hillock's work on CTR is Sharon Crowley and George Redman's exploration of CTR in "Why Teach Writing." In their piece, they argue that privileging form over the development of the discourse between reader/writer leads to a learning environment where students "concentrate on a paper as an isolated entity, as a product with an end in itself – a one-shot deal – and not as an ongoing communication process" (280). What students are asked to sacrifice, according to Crowley and Redman, is the relationship between "writer, work, and audience" (281). Students lose out on the "solitary activity" of invention where they depend upon their "strong sense of identity" to "tell the world, clearly and forcefully, where he stands in relation to it" (Crowley and Redman 279). Instead, students can remain muted and tied to "dreary, formulaic, expository themes" (Crowley and Redman 280) that exclude any sense of their selves.

In this stance, all professors need to do is privilege form over content and students will write effectively. This type of pedagogy often leads to one of the most utilized and impoverished forms for expository writing, the five-paragraph theme<sup>xiii</sup>. At Fairway, many professors depend upon this format exclusively in the classroom and look for it specifically on the mastery exam, though this approach has been discounted by many compositionists such as White, Rose, Bartholomae and more. In terms of the effect of utilizing a current traditional rhetorical approach, Hillocks cites current research and concludes this stance to be "weak" and less responsive than other rhetorical stances such as the epistemic stance (27, 154).

The weaknesses and inconsistency of the assessment in respect to the curriculum thus cause problems for teaching, assessment, and curriculum. In addition, these problems also reveal a lack of transparency. O'Neil, Moore, and Huot state that assessment measure must be clear for all stakeholders. More specifically, "procedures, criteria, rationales, samples, and results must be available to all" and that this information must be "communicated in language that is accessible to the constituencies" (57). Currently, there is no systematized process in place. Professors may individually elect to share past mastery exams and past rangefinders demonstrating passing and failing writing with their students for training sessions, though one wonders if all professors, part-time and full-time alike, have access to this information. Additionally, specific testing protocol is in writing for professors, but this information is typically read aloud in class, and none of it has been translated into any other languages. With the tremendous diversity at Fairway, translating this information into many languages to accommodate different language users would be beneficial. This is the type of transparency that Hillocks and O'Neil, Moore, and Huot call for. Currently, there are no such examples or models in place at Fairway making the end assessment appear even further away from the curriculum taught in the classroom and less likely to produce valid results.

The implications of Hillocks' work for instruction and assessment at Fairway are significant. If it is true that assessment measures shape curriculum and if the prompts in the assessment favor current traditional rhetoric, then this is the rhetorical approach that will be found in many classrooms at Fairway. The notion that there is a single objective truth out there ready to be found and explained is dangerous in an institution that values diversity as Fairway does. Ultimately all of these conditions lead to a disconnection and

dislocation between students and the work that they are asked to undertake. If students are forced to think in terms of filling in boxes with answers that pre-exist them, then are they truly composing in the ways in which Crowley, Redman, Hillocks, Carter, Bartholomae and more define it? When students are positioned to put predetermined answers into predetermined boxes, then they are forced to write in ways that are conscripted and overdetermined. They lose the opportunity to ask themselves exactly how they feel about a specific topic, and they lose their ability to become fully involved in the invention process (Crowly and Redman 281). Thus, their mastery exams become no more valid a test of their writing and critical thinking abilities than a multiple choice test.

#### “Mastery Exam Reliability”

After students complete their exams, professors meet for an all-day grading session. They begin at 8:30 am for a “norming session” where a pre-selected group of essays are distributed to be graded by the group. Professors sit at round tables with no more than five to a table and assign grades to each of these papers in their rangefinders. After all professors are finished, the larger group comes together to discuss how they assigned grades and make notes of important traits that made them assign the paper one grade as opposed to another. This group typically discusses 8-10 essays before breaking up to grade at their own individual tables. Professors will remain at their tables and work with their colleagues to give each essay two reads. Each reader assigns a score on a scale between 1- 6. Both scores are tabulated to create one overall score. Scores can vary by one point, but more than a one point variation requires a third reader to decide a score. So scores of 2 and 4 need a third read to decide if it will receive a 4, 5, 7, etc . In



order to pass the mastery exam, a student's essay must earn a combined score of 7. There is one relief built into the system. If a student is in their second developmental course or is in the one-semester placement and they receive a 6, then it is up to the professor to determine, based on course performance, if the 6 represents a fail or a pass. It is crucial to note that professors are not utilizing a rubric to score these essays. Instead, professors are encouraged to look at the whole and decide whether or not the student seems competent to be successful in college English.

In a literature review on holistic scoring and the use of rubrics, I depend upon the writing of White, Diederich, Cherry and Meyer, Moss, Huot and others for the requirements or at least the best practices for holistic grading. White takes great care in "Holisticism," to develop procedures and practices to produce the most reliable results. They are: "controlled essay reading, scoring criteria guide [rubric], sample papers, checks on the reading progress, multiple independent scoring, and evaluation and record keeping" (24). For White, utilizing a rubric was second on his list. In "Reliability Issues in Holistic Assessment," Cherry and Meyer looked at the relationship between reliability and validity (30). For them, utilizing a rubric or "rating score" is assumed (Cherry and Meyer 29). Further, in "Toward a New Theory of Writing Assessment," Huot interrogates validity and works towards a new definition of this important concept. Implicit in his work, as he moves through a typical assessment, is the notion that scoring guidelines, or rubrics, do exist. Moving back to Edward White's article for a moment, a study conducted by Paul Diederich in 1974 showed that when raters were not given directions or *criteria* (italics mine), "all papers received all possible scores" (qtd. in White 21). To be fair, Diederich focused on two elements: directions and criteria, though

I am concerned mostly about the latter, and it is hard to tell if having clear directions would have positively impacted the results. I imagine they would have. What we can take from this study and from the work by White and Cherry and Meyer is their universal acceptance of rubrics as a matter of procedure in holistic scoring. Further, these articles were written in 1974, 1983, and 1993, seventeen full years ago if we are to go by the most recent article. This means that this commonly accepted practice of utilizing rubrics predates Fairway's practices by many years. How this work escaped the attention of the faculty and administration at Fairway is a mystery. As such, the reliability of Fairway's mastery exam is certainly called into question.

#### "Hope"

Though the situation seems quite grim, there are positive elements to the story at Fairway. The mastery exam is locally controlled as faculty members create it, score it, and enforce the results. While there is some pressure from the administration to assess students at the end of the developmental English program, faculty have the ability to create and implement the assessment. The department chair also has the freedom to interpret the results in order to make decisions about students and teaching.

After spending the past ten years as part of the developmental English program, I can attest to the fact that this is not an uncaring or uninvolved group. All one needs to do is to walk down the hallway at Fairway to see professors meeting with students regarding their work, or to stand for just a few minutes in the departmental office and witness professors asking the department chair and dean for special consideration for their students. Professors are doing as much as possible to keep students moving through the program and through their entire course of studies. In fact, since students spend more

time with their developmental English professors than any other professor during their semester, close bonds often form and professors are often called up on to help with difficulties students experience with other classes.

With the ability to change the assessment measure and with a mostly engaged and interested faculty, one wonders how the mastery exam went awry. One reason may be that for some professors there is a gap between theory and practice. Actually, this gap occurs on two levels: one between community college professors' theory and practice and the second between assessment theory and practice. In the first case, Howard B. Tinberg in *Border Talk: Writing and Knowing in the Two-Year College* discusses the post-modern identities of community college professors who "possess no single identity, but rather have shifting and blurred identities" (x). Their blurred identities evolve from serving students who come to the community college for a multitude of reasons: job training, transfer, degrees, etc. Adding to the mix, community college professors can also expect to have adults, young adults, and, now with the new push to have juniors and seniors begin college earlier, young adolescents in their classrooms. Professors must be prepared to meet all of the needs of the students in all of their classes, which can be overwhelming at times. Additionally, the teaching load at community colleges is typically far greater than that at four-year colleges. The result is an overwhelmed and overburdened faculty working with students who are most in need. For some, these conditions leave little time for engaging in work that isn't perceived as making crucial differences in the classroom.

In addition to workload, there is also an issue of identity for community college professors. Tinberg uses his idea of the post-modern community college professor as a springboard into a discussion about whether professors view themselves as practitioners

or theorists (ix). He cites several surveys where many professors report that they see themselves more as teachers and less as researchers, but quickly discounts the validity of the results citing problems with the questions. Tinberg's struggle to close the gap at his own college and to cross his own constructed border speaks to real issues in community colleges. Some professors do use their classroom as text as opposed to others who feel deeply entrenched in theory. Tinberg relates his own experience when he was mocked by others asserting that he thought he was "too good" for his college and that he would soon "move on" (xi). To counter this, Tinberg creates situations where he can open up space where both theory and practice can exist. At Fairway, there have been some very recent efforts<sup>xiv</sup> to open up such spaces to help professors work through theory and apply it to their practices, but these initiatives, much like Tinberg suggests, can be difficult to navigate at times and are in their infancy.

To the second point regarding the disconnect between assessment practice and theory, Brian Huot remarks that assessment theory has yet, as of the writing of his book in 2002, been claimed for the teaching of writing (*(Re) Articulating* xi). He theorizes that one reason why professors have yet to fully incorporate assessment theory into practice is that for many years assessments were created by testing companies outside of the local context of teachers (Huot, *(Re) Articulating* 8). While much has changed from 2002, there is still resistance from faculty regarding developing assessment measures. While Fairway does construct the end assessment measure, they do not do so fully in terms of connecting with best practices. Perhaps this is more about feeling ambivalent towards an area that they do not feel competent enough to engage in. It is possible that the professors at the community college feel twice removed: once because they are constantly

negotiating being viewed as “too good” for students and biding their time until they move to a four-year school or too rooted in classroom practices, and secondly because the larger field is just beginning to come to the idea that assessment practice is integral to good teaching. These hurdles may be part of Fairway’s resistance to engage in blurring the lines between their current practices and current assessment theory.

In addition to the aforementioned theories about the climate of assessment at Fairway, one cannot ignore the fact that the developmental English program has possibly fallen victim to the inability to or unwillingness to disrupt the iconic discourse, as defined by Jeannne Gunner in “Iconic Discourse: the Troubling Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy,” after the sudden death of their much beloved program director who led the developmental English program for many years. Prior to his death, the program director was charged with developing the assessment measure. He worked in conjunction with ETS regarding holistic scoring and appeared to support the process that is still currently in place, though there is some question about whether or not he fully supported this measure<sup>xv</sup>.

In a recent paper delivered at the spring 2010 CCCC conference, I, along with my colleague Dr. Leigh Jonaitis, utilized Gunner’s work to outline the tenets of “iconic” discourse, which “reproduces the field according to certain laws, always in relation to the iconic text and figure,” while noting that critical discourse “is transgressive, challenging the laws and the icon, and so is received with hostility by the traditional Basic Writing community” (27)<sup>xvi</sup>. In the case of Fairway, it is possible that change that is perceived to confront Iconic discourse may make faculty resistance to initiatives not only permissible, but also “natural.” In this way, assessment practices that cannot be scored reliably and

are not a valid representation of current compositional good practices have been allowed to remain intact because these are the practices that our much beloved department chair instituted.

### Chapter 3: Time for Change

Mike Rose writes about the well-meaning but ineffectual practices of remediation on some campuses in his recent essay, “Colleges Need to Re-Mediate Remediation” published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. He calls for those involved with administering and planning remedial programs to make remediation “as effective as it can be” by creating programs that

set high standards, are focused on inquiry and problem-solving in a substantial curriculum, use a pedagogy that is supportive and interactive, draw on a variety of techniques and approaches, are in line with students’ goals and provide credit for course work. (“Re-Mediate”).

In short, Rose believes that we need to shift our pedagogy in ways that take into account the wide variety of students who test into remedial programs, support them while they work through challenging and thought-provoking, inquiry-based critical work, and re-work our course structure so that students can begin to receive college credits earlier.

Given Rose’s premise of how basic writing programs need to be structured, how we assess students and programs is as crucial. The pressure on WPAs (writing program administrators) and faculty to build assessment into curriculum and to ensure that the assessment measures administered provide a valid representation of a student’s ability in a given time and space is tremendous. Great care must be taken to ensure that a program’s assessment measure does not uphold the “specific social positions” that ultimately “promote a particular social order designed to furnish the more powerful in society with a disproportionate number of resources and opportunities” (Huot 174). In

other words, we must make sure that assessment measures do not favor one cultural group over another. The stakes are high, and so we must heed Huot's warning and then take comfort in Rose's assertion that "when done well, remediation becomes a key mechanism in a democratic model of human development" ("Re-Mediation").

I have argued throughout this thesis that the current assessment measure at Fairway Community College, the mastery exam, is not reliably scored nor a valid representation of a student's abilities and potentially upholds the "specific social positions" that Huot describes. More specifically, I am concerned that those with more social capital progress in specific assessments more easily than those with less social capital. I do not believe that faculty have intentionally constructed an assessment measure to suppress various cultural groups, but in the end, intentionality becomes less important in light of the staggeringly low graduation rates for many minority groups at Fairway and at other colleges nationwide<sup>xvii</sup>. As a faculty member, I can attest that the writing competencies of my students are more racially even than the mastery exam pass rates suggest.

It is for these reasons and more that I will work through the following questions in this thesis and then again with groups of faculty in order to consciously construct an environment open to the creation of a valid assessment for students who have tested into developmental English at Fairway and who are working hard to move to college-level English:

1. What values do faculty, staff, and administrators communicate to students regarding standards of good writing?



2. How will faculty be engaged in dialogue about student writing and the assessment of writing?
3. In a new model of assessment, will students have a voice?
4. What are some options for end of program assessment?

### “What We Say Now”

We know that curriculum and assessment are inextricably linked. Looking at Fairway’s mastery exam, there is a very specific rhetorical stance being articulated regarding what faculty value, whether faculty are consciously aware of this or not. Based on the format of the mastery exam (timed, impromptu, no revision possibilities, over-reliance on five-paragraph theme, use of support and not evidence etc.), current traditional rhetoric appears to be the rhetorical stance at Fairway. As previously stated, if CTR is the dominant rhetorical stance, then Fairway is communicating to students that professors will lean heavily on lecture with a short question and answer period to ensure that students are paying attention. Additionally, students will come to know that professors feel that there is “an objective truth independent of the observer” (Hillocks 25). Developmental students will feel excluded in the classroom making any sort of community development difficult to achieve.

In terms of writing instruction in this stance, form is valued over content (Hillocks 25). Developmental students learn that they must memorize what is typically embodied within an introduction, main body paragraphs, and a conclusion. They learn about funnels for introductions and begin to count sentences in the very worst of cases. All of this leads to utilizing the five-paragraph form regardless of the rhetorical situation, which,

according to Edward White's sarcastic promise, will help protect students from "thinking too much" and allow them to write about "the three causes of the Civil War or abortion" and "whether God really exists" ("My Five Paragraph" 525). All of these methods are validated when students begin training for their mastery exam because the five-paragraph theme is held up as the golden standard for writing on this exam. Ultimately, this stance hurts students. The passing rate for the mastery exam is in decline, and I suspect that the impact of this approach negatively affects students in terms of preparation for work in other liberal arts courses.

#### "Having Our Say"

Currently, faculty members at Fairway have not fully engaged in issues surrounding assessment. At the summits that have been recently held at Fairway, faculty talked about how the mastery exam was starting to feel questionable and that the results that they received on students' papers were inconsistent with how they thought students were progressing. These occasions for dialogue are a good start, but more has to happen to foster an environment where faculty feel more connected to scholarship in the field and feel the importance of changing an exam that is truly working to keep various groups from moving on to college-level English. Additionally, faculty must do more than grumble about having to take time out of their busy schedules to prepare for the mastery exam and about having "to do something" – though they do not – when they receive mastery exam scores that feel wrong. Faculty must become fully conscious of the ways in which assessment drives curriculum in terms of their practice as it connects to current assessment theory.

O'Neill, Moore, and Huot discuss the problems found on many campuses as faculty debate the importance of the relationship between theory and practice. More importantly, they provide their readers with an understanding of how that very relationship between theory and practice is defined. They assert that some compositionists, Rose and Weiser for example, view theory as "positioned as intellectual, academic work, often seen as separate from – and in fact opposite from – practice" (36), while others like James Zebroski see a closer connection:

Theory is not the opposite of practice; theory is not even a supplement to practice. Theory is practice, a practice of a particular kind, and practice is always theoretical. The question is not whether we have a theory... but whether we are going to be conscious of our theory. (qtd. in O'Neill, Moore, and Huot 37)

Their call for "becoming conscious" is connected to the work that needs to occur at Fairway. One way to achieve a level of consciousness is to open up spaces for dialogue. While the summits are a good beginning and should become part of the traditions of the developmental English program, they are not enough. Faculty must come together at the start of the semester and make decisions about what they need to interrogate. This can happen in a series of departmental meetings and should result in a line item list of areas that must be addressed that may include but is not limited to course objectives, syllabi, course text books, models of good writing, and the master exam. After a list is sketched out, smaller groups need to be formed to take on the work and then be held responsible to report back to the larger group.

The developmental English department needs to begin by interrogating the language used to label students. While labeling may seem disconnected to assessment, I argue that it is tied to the pedagogy and ideology that upholds current assessment practices. Locally, the faculty and administration at Fairway use terms such as “remedial” and “developmental” to refer to students, which reflects a deficit model and an ideology that views students as broken and needing to be fixed. In the larger field, students are referred to as “developmental,” “remedial,” “basic,” “novice,” and “students who need extra time.” Rose, Bartholomae, Dixon, DelPrincipe, Adler-Kassner and Harrington, and others work through various names and defend the specific names they have chosen, stating their chosen names are less political than the ones that are bandied about in the field. I propose that we at Fairway critique the language we use and offer more affirmative alternatives. Instead of focusing on deficit, difference, places of development, or students who need more time, why not simply refer to students (who test in particular ways on one particular day) as just students? Instead of inserting the “condition” – be it medical, experiential, etc. – why not simply refer to students who take some classes that are not college-level as students? Put in another way, students who test into developmental English and/or developmental math also have courses that are college-level, and in these areas, they are not referred to as basic or in needing in any way. So how can they be remedial before noon and “normal” by afternoon? By removing the qualifier, we reject the monolithic identity that is firmly attached the minute students receive their placement scores. In short, let students be students.

Next, faculty need to consciously define their rhetorical stance. Earlier, I theorize that Fairway utilizes a current traditional rhetorical stance that, according to many in the

field, is largely ineffective. In order to construct a new rhetorical stance, it would be useful for faculty to interrogate an epistemic rhetorical stance. According to Hillocks, an epistemic stance, as defined by Berlin, is based on determining “truth.” In CTR, truth remains simple and uncomplicated, something that needs to be explained, while in an epistemic model,

[t]ruth is dynamic and dialectical, the result of a process involving the interaction of opposing elements. It is a relation that is created, not preexistent and waiting to be discovered... The New Rhetoric denies that truth is discoverable in sense impression since this data must always be interpreted – structured and organized – in order to have meaning. (qtd in Hillocks 24).

Hillocks asserts that truth is arrived at through dialogue and that teachers who utilize this stance construct environments where students in small groups discuss material making sure to include their own experiences and knowledge in the discussion (24). Further, Hillocks theorizes that the content that students engage with should be substantive in order to push students towards utilizing evidence; further, students should debate the evidence they encounter in terms of “probability instead of absolutes”; finally, students will arrive at some “reliable conclusion” only after working through a “dialectical process” that will “ameliorate [their] subjectivities” (24). In this way, students will not be in search of “truth” but in constructing sound arguments utilizing multiple voices and subjectivities.

Hillocks is pragmatic in his view of an epistemic stance. After his study on five states and noting the varied rhetorical stances, he concludes that very few classrooms utilize an epistemic approach. As such, he describes in detail what some of the characteristics of an epistemic environment might look like knowing that these are not written in absolutes:

- Discussion focuses on structured problems that are complex and not subject to simple solutions.
- Discussion often serve as preparation for writing but may also serve to help students learn strategies for critical thinking that they will later use in writing, although not necessarily about a given topic of discussion.
- Discussion takes that form of deliberative thinking about alternatives.

Hillock's reliance on encouraging students to move through dialectical process to determine truth feels very important for Fairway. If Fairway were to work towards this rhetorical stance, faculty would need to engage in the same process that Hillocks proposes that students do. Through dialogue, faculty would come together to determine what good writing looks like. By emphasizing content over form, faculty could shed their reliance on the five-paragraph theme and look at the importance of invention/creativity as defined by Sharon Crowley and Shannon Carter<sup>xviii</sup> to help students construct writing that is rich and powerful and moves students back to the author function as Foucault suggests.

## “Having Their Say”

In addition to the dialogue that happens between faculty members, students must also be included in this process because often the goals that students have for themselves in college are quite different than the goals of the curriculum. Russel Durst in *Collision Course: Conflict Negotiation and Learning in Composition* embarks on a qualitative study of a first-year composition course and finds that “while students want a more pragmatic approach to composition, teachers of contemporary writing classes typically stress more complex and demanding notions of critical literacy” (3). Durst attributes the students’ desire for composition to be something that helped them in their already “busy lives” because they have come to college with career goals. Durst’s position on student involvement is an important one, especially when he speaks to students resisting the writing process hoping instead to have a far more simple process; however, I do wonder if the students who attend Fairway have the same concrete ideas about majors and have realistic understandings of the work that they may be required to do in their field. Nonetheless, what is useful in Durst’s argument is that he raises the awareness that students, at times, have very different agendas than the faculty. It is for this reason that students must have a voice in shaping curriculum and assessment. Ideally, faculty are engaging in small group work discussing and constructing the elements involved in their rhetorical stance and inviting students into this process where students’ voices are heard. This can happen by surveying incoming freshmen who have just been placed into a developmental English class. They should be asked the following:

- What are your career plans?
- What types of literacies are involved in your career?

- What types of literacies do you feel expert in?
- How do you see college-level English fitting the needs of their chosen career?
- How should your developmental English class work towards helping them achieve their goals in college-level English?

The responses to these questions will allow students to feel more control in their studies by beginning to make connections between what they already know and their goals.

Faculty will also be able to incorporate this information in assignments and to help build community learning in the classroom.

In addition to surveying students when they enter their courses, freshmen who pass their mastery exams should be given an exit survey to see if their developmental English course(s) helped them to achieve what they feel they need to be successful in college-level English. The results of these surveys must be shared with faculty so that a discussion can take place about whether or not their chosen curricular goals reflect what students want. An alternate idea would be to ask faculty members to volunteer to make the work of the survey the content for their developmental English course. Students could engage in a semester-long study in exploring what they want to get out of college. Russel Durst engages in this type of work in his text, *Learning in College Composition*. Additionally, students and faculty need to engage with the idea of multiple literacies and the ways in which being literate in one area (worker, parent, musician) helps them move toward literacy in another area such as academics<sup>xix</sup>. Ideally, professors would share their students' explorations with the larger group, though professors would need to be careful not to lapse into a CTR stance.



## “Options, Please”

Thus far, I have focused on constructing an environment of inquiry utilizing an epistemic rhetorical stance, and I have taken a few steps away from assessment measures. I have done this because I contend that once you adopt a particular stance, then the specific assessment measure utilized will flow from the department’s stated goals. For the purpose of this paper, I will take a leap of faith and assume that Fairway has decided to interrogate their rhetorical stance through the aforementioned faculty dialogue. Additionally, faculty have constructed, administered and evaluated student surveys and now have a good understanding of:

- what they believe good writing to be as reflected in current practice and theory and have provided models of good writing translated in many languages;
- how students’ own goals may differ from departmental goals;
- ways to construct dialogue between faculty and students in order to work towards shared goals.

With these elements in place, the assessment piece comes about quite easily. The Conference for College Composition and Communication’s assessment of proficiency states that “judgments of proficiency must be made on the basis of multiple and varied writing situations (for example, a variety of topics, audiences, purposes, genres)” and that “assessment must be informed by such things as the core abilities adopted by the institution, the course outcomes established for a program, and/or the stated outcomes of a single course or class” (“Writing Assessment: A Position Statement”). The only possible choice for an assessment measure at Fairview that reflects this statement and

engages in dialogue between students and professors is portfolio assessment because of the emphasis on process over product and the ways in which professors will be encouraged to explore multiple truths and voices.

### “Portfolios”

Portfolios have been defined in many ways and serve many different needs. The specific brand of portfolio assessment that I advance here has its roots in Elbow and Belanoff's work at SUNY-Stonybrook<sup>xx</sup> in response to their university's timed mastery exam that served as a gatekeeping exam between developmental English and college-level English. While Elbow and Belanoff were among those who began the process of portfolio assessment, portfolios have evolved over time especially in terms of student choice and reflection. These elements have helped move assessment measures into classroom practice. Brian Huot in *(Re) Articulating Writing Assessment* notes that current modes of portfolio do more than assess students. In fact, they “undermine the current assumption that it is possible to ascertain a student's ability to write from one piece of writing, or that the writing or writer's development can be inferred incrementally through the evaluation of individual products or an aggregate of individual evaluations” (72). In portfolio assessment, Huot believes that “collecting, selecting, and reflecting” are acts of assessment (72). These acts occur in a classroom that utilizes an epistemic rhetorical stance through dialogue between the individual writer and professor and through feedback with their peers. Thus, “the act of writing and the ability to talk about that writing promotes a pedagogy that emphasizes not only the writing that the student produces and the process that generates the writing, but also the student's development as a writer” (72). In these ways assessment and classroom practice are combined.

For portfolios to be valid measures of student ability at the end of their developmental course sequence and to help promote blending assessment theory with classroom practice, the portfolio process on each campus needs to be fully fleshed out according to local needs. Much like the process that Roemer, Schultz and Durst write about in "Portfolios and the Process of Change," the first part of the conversion to a portfolio assessment for Fairway is to create a small group study (457). A small group of professors could construct portfolio assessments complete with types of writing to be included, assignments to be covered, and rubrics for each type of writing. Further, a rationale or explanation that clearly stated the type of choices that students were given in terms of which pieces they could decide to submit and a letter of reflection that clearly states students' roles in selecting pieces for inclusion and their argument for why their portfolio meets all of the course objectives. This work should be completed in accordance to the reflection letter created by Edward White in "The Scoring of Writing Portfolios: Phase 2." Once the process is complete, these professors could share their findings with the larger group. Additionally, the students in the pilot could take the mastery exam and have their tests submitted to the scoring session. In the end, the faculty could compare the grades the students would have received during the traditional mastery exam with those they will receive in the portfolio evaluation. Ultimately, though, one cannot compare the product oriented mastery exam with a process oriented portfolio. The rhetorical situation and conditions found in each promote different types of writing. Really, the only benefit to this comparison is for faculty to see what students can accomplish if given the time and space to develop a piece of writing utilizing a writing process approach.

To guard against problems with scoring reliability some beginning steps need to be taken. O'Neill, Moore, and Huot recommend that each professor, prior to the start of the semester, turn in their portfolio assignments for review (181). Each portfolio assignment is labeled with just the course number and must include all handouts, assignment directions, and writings that students select to include (O'Neill, Moore, and Huot 181). These, of course, are recommendations. The faculty at Fairview needs to determine which elements are specific to their program. The benefit for the faculty setting up very specific directions is twofold: first, this process ensures that the portfolios are assessed reliably and to guard against end of semester inconsistencies. Secondly, this process encourages faculty to take time at the end of the course to "reflect on [their] teaching (O'Neill, Moore, and Huot 183). In this way, faculty benefit by blending, almost seamlessly, theory, practice, and reflection.

Turning to scoring portfolios, Edward White's essay, "The Scoring of Writing Portfolios: Phase 2" examines some difficulties in scoring portfolios and offers programs a way to move through portfolios with respect to reliability, validity, cost, effort, as his approach reflects a more student-centered approach. White proposes a solution to the problem of scoring portfolios. He asserts that relying on a holistic scoring guide across all elements of the portfolio only causes problems with "the high cost of scoring, uncertainty about the authorship of the contents, low reliability among raters, and so on" (White 582). These problems arise when professors are held accountable for scoring all pieces of the portfolio and reading the letter of reflection and determining a grade. This process involves a great deal of time and effort by faculty at the end of the semester and has the potential to cause confusion about the overall grade for the project. White

wonders about the various problems that might arise from trying to figure out if the final grade be an average of all of the pieces, or what to do in the event of inconsistent writing (586).

Fortunately, White offers a better way that focuses on two important documents: the student's reflection letter and a set of goals that professors create that clearly state the goals for, in Fairway's case, the completion of the program (586). The importance of these documents cannot be overstated. First, the faculty must create a set of goals that students must achieve by the end of the program. These goals might include writing a persuasive multi-paragraph essay, use of internal citations according to MLA style, journal writing, evidence of process writing, etc. Faculty are then responsible for articulating these goals in a clear and concise way, perhaps in list form and attached to the course syllabus. Second, it is the student's responsibility to craft a reflection letter that is a persuasive piece that argues, using the pieces included in the portfolio as evidence, that they have satisfactorily met all of the goals of the program (White 588). White contends that the reflective letter in itself is a powerful document because "if the evidence does not demonstrate that the goals have been met, the reflective letter can discuss why and, if the discussion demonstrates powerful thinking about the issue, the portfolio might still receive a high grade (588). Thus, the onus is on the student to convince their readers that they have met the goals, and they also have the ability to demonstrate proficiency in skills that are not represented in their portfolios by utilizing them in their argument.

The potential benefits of portfolio assessment for the faculty are tremendous. In this process, faculty must create clearly articulated goals (outcomes, objectives, etc.) for

their program. This can only happen through dialogue, negotiation, and decision-making. For Fairway, creating common goals would help to unite the faculty and force many to respond to what is happening in the field. Next, faculty will benefit from the ease in scoring student's portfolios. In past portfolio scoring sessions, faculty members are responsible for scoring each individual piece, factoring in a reflective letter that may have been written in haste, and trying to determine an overall score for the portfolio. Now, faculty can read the student's argument in the letter of reflection and look for evidence in the work contained in the portfolio. Instead of spending thirty minutes on each element of the portfolio, White contends that professors can now score "six to ten per hour" (594) which is a tremendous saving in terms of faculty power and cost for long scoring sessions. In addition to the benefits directly to students and faculty, program directors can learn a great deal about their program through the letters in the portfolios. White uses an example from a four-year college whose goals included the importance of using a wide variety of critical lenses to "read" literary texts in order to see that multiple meanings can be constructed depending on perspective (593). Through portfolio review, professors found that a majority of their students experienced difficulty with this part of their reflection letter because of the way they conflated flattery for their professors and evidence from their portfolio. This conflation caused the department to emphasize this aspect of their work in courses. Faculty found that at the start of their project, many students lapsed into a "success narrative," a detailed account of how wonderful their professor was and how much they accomplished because of this. White asserts that faculty addressed the reflection letter in their courses and provided models for students to work with. Students benefitted by writing letters that were arguments as opposed to

flattery, and they became accustomed to looking at already-established writing to help them compose their own. This is exactly the type of work that Fairway needs to engage in.

Ultimately, Fairway needs to make substantial changes because the mastery exam currently in place is keeping “the gate locked” (Adams et. al 51), ensuring that many students never make it to college English. In addition to the violence committed on students, faculty members are also affected by this assessment measure. Whether professors are overtly discussing their concerns, the way the mastery exam is created, delivered, and scored is problematic. The talk around the tables at the recent summits is evidence of such dissatisfaction. Much like the students, they too must be freed from the backlash of this exam. One way, but certainly not the only way<sup>xxi</sup>, is to turn to portfolio assessment. This assessment measure has been in place for the past twenty years and has evolved into a reliable and valid measure that positively affects curriculum. Portfolio assessment effectively combines practice and theory and advances a model that allows students to remain at the center of their assessment. The time is now for Fairway to meet the challenge of valid assessment measures head on and adopt this practice on their campus.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Syllabi for Developmental Skills I and II and English Skills

#### Course One of a Two-Course Placement:

Developmental Skills I  
5 Hours, 5 Non-degree Credits

**TEXTBOOK:**

Langan, John. *English Skills with Readings*. 7th Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008.

**COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

Developmental Skills I is the first course of a two course basic skills sequence designed to improve fundamental academic skills in the areas of reading, writing, and critical thinking. Class instruction emphasizes the development of paragraph writing skills, literal and interpretive comprehension of reading texts, sentence structure, grammar and punctuation, and vocabulary.

**COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

Students who successfully complete the work of this class will be able to:

1. Read selected passages and identify the main idea, topic sentences, transitions, and supporting details.
2. Demonstrate knowledge of study and college survival skills, such as, time management, planning, memory strategies, note taking, and test taking.
3. Summarize reading selections.
4. Name and demonstrate knowledge of the various steps in the writing process, including brainstorming, outlining, editing, and revising.
5. Write clear, varied sentences that conform to acceptable standards of grammar, mechanics, punctuation, and word use.
6. Write a coherent and developed paragraph around a single controlling idea.
7. Demonstrate knowledge of the various components of the library and use these components effectively.
8. Use MLA style documentation for in-text citations and "Works Cited."

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS:**

1. Daily attendance and class participation.
2. All assignments must be completed in an acceptable manner

- and be submitted on the scheduled dates.
3. Successful completion of a research project.
  4. Successful completion of a student course evaluation.
  5. Completion of the Departmental Mastery Test.

**STUDENT EVALUATION:**

A student's final grade in this course is determined by how successfully he/she meets the course requirements. Students are expected to demonstrate mastery of paragraph writing, literal comprehension, sentence construction, basic grammar and punctuation, and certain library research skills. Students receiving an E or F are required to repeat the course. Students receiving a grade of D, C, C+, B, B+ will move to Developmental Skills II. Students receiving a grade of A, who also pass the departmental reading and writing skills assessment test, will move directly to Composition I.

**DEVELOPMENTAL ENGLISH MASTERY TEST:**

Upon successful completion of Developmental Skills I, students will be required to demonstrate their proficiency in reading, writing, and critical thinking on a departmental skills assessment test. For this test, students will be required to write a paragraph or more in response to one of three specific topic statements provided and to write a summary of one of two reading selections provided. The tests will be evaluated in a group reading session by all faculty teaching English Basic Skills courses. Tests will be evaluated on the basis of reading comprehension, paragraph/essay structure, sentence structure, and grammar and punctuation. Tests will be scored on a scale of 1-6 by two readers with a combined score of 7 or better as passing. A student must pass the course, but need not pass the Mastery Test, to move on to Developmental Skills II.

Course Two of a Two-Course Placement:

Developmental Skills II  
5 Hours, 5 Non-degree Credits

**TEXTBOOK:**

Langan, John. *College Writing Skills with Readings*. 7th Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008.

**COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

Developmental Skills II is the second course of a two-course basic skills sequence designed to improve fundamental academic skills in reading, writing, and critical thinking for students who have not demonstrated mastery in all five skill areas introduced in Developmental Skills I. Class instruction emphasizes the development of paragraph

and essay writing skills, reading comprehension, sentence structure, grammar and punctuation, and vocabulary.

**COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

Students who successfully complete the work in this course will be able to:

1. Read selected passages and identify the levels of general and specific supporting details.
2. Make inferences from and ask critical questions about selected reading passages.
3. Employ study and college survival skills, such as, time management, planning, memory strategies, note taking, and test taking.
4. Quote, summarize, and paraphrase.
5. Name and employ the various steps in the writing process, including brainstorming, outlining, editing, and revising.
6. Proofread and edit problems in their own writing.
7. Write multi-paragraph papers with introductions and conclusions.
8. Demonstrate their knowledge of the various components of the library and use these components effectively.
9. Use MLA style documentation for in-text citations and "Works Cited."

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS:**

1. Daily attendance and class participation.
2. All assignments must be completed in an acceptable manner and be submitted on the scheduled dates.
3. Successful completion of a research project.
4. Successful completion of a student course evaluation.
5. Successful completion of the departmental Mastery Test.

**STUDENT EVALUATION:**

A student's final grade is determined by how successfully he/she meets the course requirements. Students are expected to demonstrate mastery of paragraph and essay writing, reading for comprehension, sentence construction, basic grammar and

punctuation, and certain library research skills. Students receiving a grade of E or F in this course are required to repeat the course. Students receiving a grade of D, C, C+ B, B+, or A who also pass the departmental reading and writing skills assessment test (The Mastery Test) will move to Composition I.

**DEVELOPMENTAL ENGLISH MASTERY TEST:**

Upon successful completion of Developmental Skills II, students will be required to demonstrate their proficiency in reading and writing on a departmental skills assessment test. For this test, students will be required to write a paragraph or more in response to one of three topic statements provided and to write a summary of one of two reading selections provided. The tests will be evaluated in a group reading session by all faculty teaching English Basic Skills courses. Tests will be evaluated on the basis of reading comprehension, paragraph/essay structure, sentence structure, and grammar and punctuation. Tests will be scored on a scale of 1-6 by two readers with a combined score of 7 or better as passing. Students must pass the course and pass the departmental Mastery Test to move to Composition I.

Sole Course of a One-Course Placement:

English Skills

5 Hours, 5 Non-degree Credit

**TEXTBOOK:**

Langan, John. *College Writing Skills with Readings*. 7th Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008.

**COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

English Skills is a one-semester course designed to improve fundamental academic skill in reading, writing, and critical thinking. Class instruction emphasizes the development of paragraph and essay writing skills, reading comprehension, sentence structure, grammar and punctuation, and vocabulary.

**COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

Students who successfully complete the work in this course will be able to:

1. Read selected passages and identify the levels of general and specific supporting details.
2. Make inferences from and ask critical questions about selected reading passages.
3. Employ study and college survival skills such as time management, planning, memory strategies, note taking, and test taking.
4. Quote, summarize, and paraphrase.
5. Name and employ the various steps in the writing process, including brainstorming, outlining, editing, and revising.

6. Proofread and edit problems in their own writing.
7. Write multi-paragraph papers with introductions and conclusions.
8. Demonstrate their knowledge of the various components of the library and use these components effectively.
9. Use MLA style documentation for in-text citations and "Works Cited."

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS:**

1. Daily attendance and class participation.
2. All assignments must be completed in an acceptable manner and be submitted on scheduled dates.
3. Successful completion of a research project.
4. Successful completion of a student course evaluation.
5. Successful completion of the departmental Mastery Test.

**STUDENT EVALUATION:**

A student's final grade in this course is determined by how successfully he/she meets the course requirements. Students are expected to demonstrate mastery of paragraph writing, reading for comprehension, sentence construction, basic grammar and punctuation, and certain library research skills. Students receiving a grade of E or F are required to repeat the course. Students receiving a grade of D, C, C+, B, B+, or A who also pass the departmental reading and writing skills assessment test (The Mastery Test) will move to Composition I.

**DEVELOPMENTAL ENGLISH MASTERY TEST:**

Upon successful completion of English Skills, students will be required to demonstrate their proficiency in reading and writing on a departmental skills assessment test. For this test, students will be required to write a paragraph or more in response to one of three topic statements provided and to write a summary of one of two reading selections provided. The tests will be evaluated in a group reading session by all faculty teaching English Basic Skills courses. Tests will be evaluated on the basis of reading comprehension, paragraph/essay structure, sentence structure, and grammar and punctuation. Tests will be scored on a scale of 1-6 by two readers with a combined score of 7 or better as passing. **Students must pass the course and pass the departmental Mastery Test to move to Composition I.**



Table 4: Mastery Exam Prompts

Semester/Yr	Length	Rhetorical Modes	Time Limit	Support	# of Questions	Test Used Before
SU 1/2001	P+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arg (2)</li> <li>• Des</li> </ul>	60 mins	Student's experiences	3	N
SU 2/2001	P+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Des (2)</li> <li>• Exp</li> </ul>	NP	Student's experiences	3	N
SU 2/2002	E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arg (2)</li> <li>• Des</li> </ul>	NP	Students' experiences	3	N
FA/ 2002	E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arg (2)</li> <li>• Des</li> </ul>	NP	Student's experiences	3	N
FA/2002*	P+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Des (2)</li> <li>• Exp</li> </ul>	NP	Student's experiences	3	Y SU 2/2001
SP/2003	P+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exp</li> <li>• Arg(2)</li> </ul>	NP	Student's experiences	3	N
SP/2003*	P+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exp</li> <li>• Arg (2)</li> </ul>	NP	Student's experiences	3	N
FA/2003	E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exp</li> <li>• Des</li> <li>• Nar</li> </ul>	NP	Student's experiences	3	N
SP/2004	E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ex</li> <li>• Arg (2)</li> </ul>	NP	Student's experiences	3	N
SU 1/2004	E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nar</li> <li>• Arg (2)</li> </ul>	60 mins	Student's experiences	3	N
SU 2/2004	E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nar</li> <li>• Arg (2)</li> </ul>	NP	Student's experiences	3	N
FA/2004	E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ex</li> <li>• Des</li> <li>• Arg</li> </ul>	NP	Student's experiences	3	N
FA/2004*	E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ex (3)</li> </ul>	NP	Student's experiences	3	N
SP/2005	E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arg (3)</li> </ul>	NP	Student's experiences	3	N
SU 1/2005	E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Des</li> <li>• Nar (2)</li> </ul>	NP	Student's experiences	3	N
SU 2/2005	E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Des (2)</li> <li>• Exp</li> </ul>	NP	Student's experiences	3	Y SU 2/2001
FA/2005	E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Des</li> <li>• Arg (2)</li> </ul>	NP	Student's experiences	3	N
SP/2006	E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nar</li> </ul>	NP	Student's	3	N

		• Arg (2)		experiences		
SU 2/2006	E	• Des (2) • Exp	NP	Student's experiences	3	Y SU 2/2001
FA/2006	E	• Exp (2) • Arg	NP	Student's experiences	3	N
FA/2006*	E	• Ex • Des • Arg	NP	Student's experiences	3	N
SP/2007	E	• Des (2) • Exp	NP	Student's experiences	3	N
SU 2/2007	E	• Des (2) • Exp	NP	Student's experiences	3	Y SP/2006
FA/2007	E	• Arg • Exp (2)	NP	Student's experiences	3	N
FA/2007*	E	• Arg (3)	NP	Student's experiences	3	N
SP/2008	E	• Exp (2) • Arg	NP	Student's experiences	3	N
SP/2008*	E	• Exp • Arg (2)	NP	Student's experiences	3	N
SU 1/2008	E	• Des (2) • Arg (2)	NP	Student's experiences	4	N
SU 2/2008	E	• Exp (2) • Arg (2)	NP	Student's experiences	4	N
FA 2008	E	• Exp (2) • Nar	NP	Student's experiences	3	N
SU 2/2009	E	• Exp (3) • Arg	NP	Student's experiences	4	Y (2 quest. FA.2007)
FA/2009	E	• Exp (3) • Arg	NP	Student's experiences	3	N
SP/2010	E	• Exp (2) • Nar	NP	Student's experiences	3	N

**Key**

\* = retest provided  
P+ = paragraph or more  
E = essay

Arg = argumentative NP = no information

Des = Descriptive N = exam not on file  
Nar = Narrative

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Accuplacer is a machine-scored placement exam that tests students in three areas: reading comprehension, sentence skills, and essay writing. All three areas are weighted for placement in either Developmental English or College-level English. Please see <http://www.accuplacEnglsher-test.com/?gclid=CJjV5cfjs6ICFRBx5Qodime46g> for more information about the test.

<sup>ii</sup> 4,200 per semester is a tremendously large number. A study on placement assessment might be a next logical step.

<sup>iii</sup> There is currently a longitudinal study analyzing the success of students who move through the developmental English program; however, it is unclear how the cohorts are defined.

<sup>iv</sup> This is recommendation that I will make to the Center for Institutional Effectiveness at Fairway.

<sup>v</sup> See writing by Rose, Bartholomae, Shor, Adler-Kassner, and Bizzell for a more extended discussion.

<sup>vi</sup> See *A Guide to College Assessment* by O'Neil, Moore, and Hut p 57 for their addition to Huot's original schema.

<sup>vii</sup> It is important to note that Langan's brand of the writing process is more linear than models provided by Elbow, Bartholomae and Petrosky, Perl, Rose, Somers and others that stress drafting, recursive writing strategies and more attention to audience and rhetorical situation. Many faculty do move beyond Langan's treatment and include these theorists/compositionists in their work.

<sup>viii</sup> Please see Deborah Brandt's "Sponsors of Literacy" for more on this subject.

<sup>ix</sup> The Testing Coordinator is a professor from the developmental English program who has been appointed by the department chair to coordinate the entire testing process. The TC's responsibilities include: developing prompts, creating a range finder, directing the discussion during the grading session, distributing all exams to professors to give to students, reviewing tests that need third and fourth readers, and collecting them from faculty once they have met with students to explain the students' scores. The TC does not need to have a background in assessment, though interest in the field is seen as a bonus.

<sup>x</sup> Professors are not allowed to score their own students writing.

<sup>xi</sup> Please see Patricia Bizzell's "What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College?," Mike Rose's "Narrowing the Mind and Page," and David Bartholomae's "The Tidy House" and "The Study of Error" for more on this subject.

<sup>xii</sup> It is important to note that I am not suggesting that these rhetorical modes exist in isolation. Instead, in writing, they exist in connection with one another, much like an orchestra works as a whole playing many parts.

<sup>xiii</sup> Please see "In Teaching Composition, 'Formulaic' Is Not a 4-Letter Word" by Cathy Birkenstein and Gerald Graff, *They Say, I Say* by Graff and Birkenstein, "What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College" by Patricia Bizzell, Edward White's "My Five-Paragraph Theme Theme," and Kim Wesley's "The Ill Effects of the FPT" for more on this discussion.

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<sup>xiv</sup> Dr. Leigh Jonaitis and Professor Kelly Keane created a Teaching of Writing Circle and Study Circle for faculty in the English Department to work through current theory in the fields of composition and basic writing. These discussion groups have been running on a bi-monthly basis beginning in the Fall, 2008 semester.

<sup>xv</sup> In a review of the departmental files during his tenure, several files on portfolio assessment were developed.

<sup>xvi</sup> From a yet unpublished paper delivered by Dr. Leigh Jonaitis and Professor Kelly Keane at the Spring 2010 Conference on College Composition and Communication.

<sup>xvii</sup> According to Kay McClenny in "Helping Community-College Students Succeed: A Moral Imperative" published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* vol 55 issue 33, 14% of students in community colleges do not receive a single college-level credit in their first semester, 25% of fall-term students do not return for a second semester, 50% disappear after the second semester, and under 30% earn an associate's degree after three years (A60).

<sup>xviii</sup> Please see *The Way Literacy Lives* by Shannon Carter and *Composition in the University* by Sharon Crowley for more on this discussion.

<sup>xix</sup> For a continued discussion on literacies, please see work by Mike Rose, James Gee, and Shannon Carter.

<sup>xx</sup> Please see "Portfolios as a Substitute for Proficiency Examinations" by Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff.

<sup>xxi</sup> Other exciting developments in the field focus on mainstreaming students and reducing the need for strictly developmental courses. Please see The Accelerated Learning Program in Community College of Baltimore County and Arizona State University's Stretch Program for more information on these exciting initiatives.