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The *WPA Outcomes Statement*, validation, and the pursuit of localism

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ABSTRACT

This validation study examines the *WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition*, a United States consensus statement for first-year post-secondary writing, as implemented in a unified instructional and assessment environment for first-year college students across three different institution types. Adapting categories of contemporary validation from Kane (2013), we focus on four forms of evidence gathered from early and late-semester student performance ($n = 153$): scoring, generalization, extrapolation, and implication. With an emphasis on education policies in action, the study generates important questions that, in turn, provide a basic framework for further research into the challenges of aligning broad consensus statements with locally developed educational initiatives.

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To validate an interpretation or use of test scores is to evaluate the plausibility of the claims based on the scores. An argument-based approach to validation suggests that the claims based on the test scores be outlined as an argument that specifies the inferences and supporting assumptions needed to get from test responses to score-based interpretations and uses. Validation then can

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be thought of as an evaluation of the coherence and completeness of this interpretation/use argument and of the plausibility of its inferences and assumptions. (Kane, 2013, p. 1).

1. Introduction

In the United States, the *WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition* has been designed to identify common knowledge, skills, and attitudes desired by post-secondary entry level composition programs (Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2000/2008). Intended to introduce first-year students to writing expectations in post-secondary settings, the *Outcomes Statement* provides a common administrative and instructional configuration for American higher education. The *Outcomes Statement* is a consensus statement developed, amended, and used by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, a non-profit organization organized for educational and scientific purposes (Harrington, Malencyzk, Peckham, Rhodes, & Yancey, 2001; O'Neill, Adler-Kassner, Fleischer, & Hall, 2012). With its five outcomes (rhetorical knowledge; critical thinking, reading, and writing; processes; knowledge of conventions; and composing in electronic environments) and twenty five traits supporting them, the *Outcomes Statement* has been used as the basis for assessment of student writing and for the evaluation of program outcomes. The *Outcomes Statement* "articulates what composition teachers nationwide have learned from practice, theory and research" (Thomas, 2013, p. 165).

The impetus for the *Outcomes Statement* came in response to pressures from the six United States regional education accrediting agencies—Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Higher Education; New England Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Institutions of Higher Education; North Central Association of Colleges and Schools Higher Learning Commission; Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities; Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges; and Western Association of Colleges and Schools Accrediting Commission of Senior Colleges and Universities—for institutions to demonstrate student learning outcomes embedded within programmatic and institutional settings. While the U.S. Department of Education does not accredit institutions or their programs, the Secretary of Education is required by law to authenticate these agencies as authorities capable of evaluating the quality of education in programs they accredit. Because they are responsible for educational quality, these accrediting agencies have a great deal of leverage in requiring institutions to demonstrate that learning outcomes are used to improve student performance on specific educational domains such as writing ability.

The ever present American tension between federalism (the role of a strong central government) and localism (the resistance against such a government in favor of regional autonomy) is expressed by the original contributors to the *Outcomes Statement*. As Rhodes, Peckham, Bergmann, and Condon (2005) observed, "We confronted an unpleasant fact: the term *first-year composition* varied widely in meaning. . .the term was hotly contested among the very people in charge of administering it. So we asked ourselves, if we couldn't agree what first-year composition should be, how could we ever account for what we do?" (p. 12). Operationally, it was difficult for Writing Program Administrators (WPAs) to reconcile their particular state and institutional contexts—institutional missions, the demographic make-up of their students, instructional faculty, the configurations of their departments—with national consensus statements specifying what students should learn in their first year of college-level writing.

Resolution of these tensions was found in the emphasis on broad outcomes—"what students exiting first-year composition should know and be able to do" (Rhodes et al., 2005, p. 12)—not on standards and accompanying levels of performance. According to Yancey (2005), the focus on outcomes was a way to recognize the unique local situation of first-year composition programs while providing curricular stability that resonated on a national level. "While outcomes articulate the curriculum, they do not specify how well students should know or understand or do what the curriculum intends. . .Because outcomes are not benchmarked against levels of performance, individual programs or institutions can have the same curricular outcomes but have different ideas about when and how well they want students to perform" (Yancey, 2005, p. 22). As a result of the focus on outcomes and the absence of levels of performance, a first-year writing program at a two-year, rural community college focused on retraining adult, displaced factory workers in the state of Michigan could have the same outcomes as undergraduates enrolled in the highly-selective first-year writing program at Harvard University. Recent

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