



Improvement of writing skills during college: A multi-year cross-sectional and longitudinal study of undergraduate writing performance



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ABSTRACT

We examined persuasive and expository writing samples collected from more than 300 college students as part of a nine-year cross-sectional and longitudinal study of undergraduate writing performance, conducted between 2000 and 2008. Using newly developed scoring rubrics, longitudinal analyses of writing scores revealed statistically significant growth in writing performance over time. These findings held for both persuasive and expository writing. Although writing performance was better among women than men, and better among students majoring in the humanities and social sciences than in natural sciences and engineering, neither women nor humanities and social science majors showed differential improvement over time from freshman to senior year. Our findings showed reliable increases in writing performance during a student's college years, and moreover demonstrated that such longitudinal changes can be effectively measured. We call for more such outcome assessment in higher education as an essential tool to enhance student learning.

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1. Introduction

The past decade has brought a renewed focus on accountability in postsecondary education in the United States. A scathing report from the [Commission on the Future of Higher Education \(2006\)](#), commissioned by then U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings (and thus informally referred to as the Spellings Commission), raised serious red flags about the quality, affordability, and accessibility of a university education in the United States. Moreover, the Spellings Commission identified a critical lack of publicly available data that students, policy makers, and educators could use to compare schools or evaluate the effectiveness of educational interventions. Among its many policy recommendations, the report suggested that U.S. colleges should be adopting value-added assessments of student learning and that accreditation standards be revised to prioritize student learning outcomes over inputs and processes.

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Table 1
Measures of Rater Agreement for Scores on Persuasive and Expository Writing Samples.

Rater Agreement Statistic	Persuasive (n = 249)	Expository (n = 236)	Total (N = 485)
Exact Agreement	0.71	0.62	0.66
Adjacent	0.28	0.36	0.32
Discrepant	0.01	0.02	0.02
Kappa	0.50	0.40	0.45
Kappa (linear weight)	0.55	0.49	0.52
Kappa (quadratic weight)	0.62	0.61	0.62

With its emphasis on measurement of undergraduate student learning, the Spellings Report brought accountability to the forefront of policy discussions about higher education, noting that “Colleges and universities must become more transparent about cost, price, and student success outcomes ... Student achievement. . . must be measured by institutions on a ‘value-added’ basis that takes into account students’ academic baseline... This information should be available to students, and reported publicly (Spellings Commission, 2006, p.4)”. Subsequent documents prepared for the [U.S. Department of Education](#) made even stronger recommendations, such as applying uniform accreditation standards that would require valid and reliable measurement of student learning ([Schray, 2006](#)). While these measures have not yet been put into practice, some accrediting bodies have demonstrated a renewed emphasis on measurable student learning outcomes as part of their accreditation standards ([Western Association of Schools and Colleges, 2012](#); for a broader view on the six regional accrediting bodies in the United States and the highly uniform standards by which they ensure the academic quality of their respective member institutions regarding assessing student learning, see [Middaugh, 2010, Table 1](#)). The Spellings Report put academia on notice that student learning would no longer be taken for granted. While the context of this report was based on colleges and universities in the United States, and post-secondary education varies greatly in nature and cost from country to country, issues of assessment and measurement of college level learning are of increasing relevance to institutions of higher learning around the globe.

The Spellings Report is not without critics. For example, some have noted that the report neglects critical information about the changing demographic constitution of colleges, considers only a small subset of a university’s goals for its students, and ignores the possibility of perverse incentives that assessment schemes might bring about ([Huot, 2007](#)). Moreover, there are arguments that assessments should be tied to particular classroom goals and contexts, and ideally tied to instructional purposes (e.g. [Green, 2009](#)). However, even critics of the Spellings Report acknowledge the political realities that the report engenders, and the need for assessment. As Angela [Green \(2009\)](#) states, “In seeking to counter the language of accountability, we should not lose sight of the real and ongoing need for assessment, of both our own performance and that of our students.” While the Spellings Report is not without flaws, it nonetheless raises issues that leaders in post-secondary education need to address before government or private interests address those issues for them.¹

Despite this, while there is no dearth of research that looks at the effectiveness of higher education, very little of that research actually measures student learning. Popular attempts to evaluate the efficacy of colleges, such as [U.S. News and World Reports](#) annual college rankings, tend to rely on resources and reputation rather than measurement of educational outcomes ([Pascarella, 2001](#)).² Studies of student outcomes often focus on measures such as retention/graduation rate (e.g., [Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinbach, 2005](#); [Jacoby, 2006](#)), GPA (e.g., [Topping, 1996](#)), job placement, or likelihood of graduate study (cf. [Gordon, Ludlum, & Hoey, 2008](#)). While all of those are valuable outcome measures, they are rather indirect approaches to evaluating learning. For example, an intervention that reduces the rigor of classes or standards for assigning grades would likely increase graduation rates and GPAs (and possibly job placement as employers consider GPAs as a criterion for hiring) but would be unlikely to increase student learning.

Other researchers have examined self-reports of learning (e.g., [Kuh & Gonyea, 2003](#); [Pike, 2006](#); [Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2004](#); for a review see [Pascarella, Seifert, & Blaich, 2009](#)). While self-reports can be revealing and suggestive, they rely on students’ metacognitive ability to accurately gauge and report the extent of their learning. However, students’ judgments of learning are susceptible to predictable biases (e.g., [Carpenter, Willford, Kornell, & Mulaney, 2013](#); [Rosenblit & Keil, 2002](#)), and those biases are particularly prevalent for the least capable students ([Kruger & Dunning, 1999](#)).

Other scholars (e.g., [Filkins & Doyle, 2002](#)) have examined student engagement using psychometrically validated instruments such as the National Survey of Student Engagement ([NSSE, 2007](#)). The NSSE correlates significantly with value-added measures of students’ abilities to “clarify, analyze, evaluate, and extend arguments” ([Pascarella et al., 2009](#)). This correlation arises because factors measured by the NSSE, such as student interaction with faculty or engagement in campus activities, facilitate learning. However, there are many educational interventions that have measurable effects on learning that do not

¹ Indeed, evidence has begun to accumulate suggesting that many pedagogical practices are not particularly effective. A recent report by the Coalition for Evidence Based Policy (2013) reviewed over 75 studies on the efficacy of educational interventions that had been commissioned by the Institute of Education Sciences. For studies identified as “having no major study limitations,” over 90% of the educational interventions showed no evidence of effectiveness. While the vast majority of these studies examined programs in primary or secondary education, the overwhelming proportion of well-meaning but ultimately unsuccessful attempts to improve education should serve as a reminder that if we don’t measure student learning systematically, we cannot be sure that students are learning.

² Despite this, over 400,000 students use U.S. News rankings annually in determining college choice ([McDonough, Antonio, Walpole, & Perez, 1998](#))

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