Proposed Changes to the Writing Skills Policy, 2004

Students will have the option of taking the test or taking the courses.

1. All students will be allowed to take the test twice, if they choose the test as their option. If the students do not pass, whichever is the higher score will be used for placement into coursework.

2. Students will be permitted to take the WST even if they are enrolled in the course.

3. Students who do not show for the WST or register for a course will be blocked from registration in the following term until they re-register.

4. Students who choose the option of coursework or who are placed directly into the first tier course by the WST will be judged by portfolio assessment at the end of the first-tier course. The evaluators will be instructors from across the curriculum, trained in holistic portfolio scoring, as the graders of the WST are now. Students will assemble portfolios according to consistent guidelines, which will include in-class and first-draft writing as well as revised writing. To pay for the reading of the portfolios, we will ask the Campus Fee Advisory Committee to pass a fee for the course that would equal the fee for taking the WST.

5. The course would still be credit/no credit, but at the end of the first-tier course, the portfolio evaluators would place a student into one of the following categories:
   1) no credit for course: must to take the first-tier course again;
   2a) credit for course: must take a second-tier course
   2b) credit for course and need not take the second tier course: satisfies the writing skills requirement because the portfolio demonstrates superior performance.

6. Students who have taken the first-tier course three times consecutively and have not passed, and who have a letter of good faith effort from their most recent first-tier teacher, may apply for a waiver, with the stipulation that their transcript will read that the writing skills requirement has not been met.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION: At its regular meeting of December 1, 2003, CIC considered the Revision of the University Writing Skills Requirement proposed by its Writing Skills Subcommittee. After a lengthy discussion with representatives of the Subcommittee, the Committee approved the proposal by a vote of 6-0-0.
ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The Writing Skills Subcommittee has met monthly for over a year to address issues raised by our current Writing Skills Requirement policy. In the past six years we have changed the policy in the following ways:

1. Made the writing prompt analytical and argumentative rather than narrative
2. Dropped the objective portion of the test
3. Made the passing grade on the essay an 8 (two scores on a scale of 1-6 graded holistically)
4. Sent the grading out to ETS for one year as a pilot, then to ACT in Iowa for several unsatisfactory years, and then brought the grading back to CSUH this year
5. Created two courses to answer the needs of students who do not pass the test: a first-tier course in the English Department (English 3000 for native speakers, 3001 for nonnative speakers) for those students who get a 6 or lower, and a second-tier course in three colleges for those students who get a 7 or who have completed the first-tier course. Students must achieve a 7 on the final essay in the first-tier courses, or a 6 or 5 (depending on the recommendation of the instructor) with a portfolio that passes.
6. Permitted students to re-take the WST if they get a 7 on their original test, but if they get a 6 they are required to take the first- and second-tier courses
7. Made exceptions for students with certain scores on the GRE, GMAT, CBEST and for those on-line students who pass EDUI 6706 with a B- or better.

The Writing Skills Subcommittee thinks these changes have been helpful to our students while maintaining and even improving rigorous standards.

Writing skills in the university

The Writing Skills Subcommittee thinks that this test may not be the best way to determine whether a student is competent in writing at the university level, so students should have an option other than a test. In the university students are asked to write in various contexts, such as in-class exams, take-home exams, research papers, and essays, many of which require drafting, revising and editing skills to produce the polished results of this recursive process. Even in-class exams, which are written in a timed session, are written on content that is familiar to the student, who will have spent time reviewing and reflecting on the material they will be asked to write about.

The WST tests none of these skills, which requires students to write hastily under timed circumstances on subjects unfamiliar to them. It therefore does not allow the drafting process that is so essential to competent university writing and asks students to write “cold,” on topics they have not been studying or reviewing. The WST, like many high stakes assessment tests, does not actually test the skill set that this university wishes to evaluate.

We are, in part, responding to the present very high fail rate by proposing an alternative way of meeting the requirement that will be easier for many students to achieve but will not lower standards.

The WST may be ethnocentric

Because it is a high stakes, timed test on “cold” subjects, the WST places non-native English speakers at a tremendous disadvantage compared to native English speakers. This is reflected in the respective pass rates of native-speaking and ESL students (this fall, native speakers 59%, non-native speakers 22%). High stakes, timed tests on cold subjects clearly favor those students with the innate familiarity that comes from lifelong use and mastery of a language: the native speaker of English. Those who are competent university writers, but lack the reflexive ability to hastily develop a cogent essay, suffer under the WST. It is not surprising, therefore, that for some ESL students the WST is a humiliating experience. If the WST actually tested university writing skills, the predicament of ESL students would be unfortunate, but necessary in the university’s effort to ensure the writing competence of its students. Because the WST does not actually test writing skills required by the university, the extra burden placed by the test on ESL students raises serious questions about fairness; in fact, it appears downright punitive.
Why keep the WST as an option?

Many students clearly possess competent writing skills, and coursework aimed at developing writing competence might be a waste of their academic and personal time. If students can write well under the artificial and unfavorable circumstances of the WST, it is a reasonable supposition that they are competent university writers – though it is important to note the converse of this claim is not a reasonable supposition.

Portfolio evaluation as an alternative

The use of portfolios can create a more robust picture of the student’s actual university writing abilities. The portfolios will consist of essays, drafts, and revisions under timed and non-timed conditions. Furthermore, portfolios give students the opportunity to demonstrate their writing abilities based on material they have read and discussed in class or had time to revise. Such a broad range of assignments is a much more accurate and fair reflection of the writing skills expected at the university level.

Writing Skills Test, CSUH, Pass Rates 1998-2003

The following data are extracted from more complex tables published in Annual Reports on the Writing Skills Test prepared by the Office of Assessment and Testing. The data requested were the “pass rates” for the past five years of 1st time test-takers who declared their primary language to be English versus those whose primary language was not English (labeled “ESL” in the table).

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>N 1963 % 57</td>
<td>N 2012 % 69</td>
<td>N 1944 % 79</td>
<td>N 2135 % 77</td>
<td>N 1969 % 59</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>N 566 % 14</td>
<td>N 568 % 21</td>
<td>N 657 % 28</td>
<td>N 670 % 30</td>
<td>N 699 % 22</td>
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| Graduates |          |           |           |           |           |
| English   | N 552 % 78 | N 433 % 83 | N 475 % 85 | N 513 % 85 | N 560 % 69 |
| ESL       | N 260 % 29 | N 278 % 32 | N 319 % 43 | N 338 % 45 | N 342 % 29 |

Note. N is the total number of test-takers for that category. The % in bold is the percentage of that number who passed.

Michael Strait
January 20, 2004

Writing Skills Policies at other CSU Campuses
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Number of Campuses</th>
<th>Campuses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exam only</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Hayward, Humboldt, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Cal Maritime, Northridge, Pomona, Sacramento, San Francisco, Sonoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course only</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Chico, San Marcos</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exam and course</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Fullerton, San José, (unless very high score on exam), Stanislaus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exam or course</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Bakersfield, Dominguez Hills, Fresno, Monterey Bay, San Bernardino*, San Diego*, San Luis Obispo</td>
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<td>*these CSUs have a very different testing situation than ours and so are not comparable</td>
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Draft Guidelines for First Tier Portfolio

The work in the portfolio is expected to demonstrate the student’s ability to write comprehensible, coherent texts; these texts will be generated both in and out of class.

- in class writings, e.g. essays and responses to texts
- polished writings created through revision and editing in multiple draft papers

Portfolio Evaluation Criteria

argument: Students demonstrate the ability to make a clear argument using a thesis to focus the writing employing a variety of strategies such as use of reasons supported by details, research, anecdotes, examples, quotations, and questions to support their position.

organization: Students demonstrate the ability to organize text in a clear and logical manner. Texts are easy to understand.

technical command: Students demonstrate the ability to use written language effectively and precisely. Their texts employ grammatical usage, varied sentence structure, and adequate paragraph development that are appropriate for the intended purpose. Revised texts are polished to meet standards and expectations of academic audiences.

Note: These portfolio evaluation criteria will be more fully developed during winter and spring based on Senate, EX Com, CIC, and first tier professor input.