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The Effectiveness of the Writing Proficiency Assessment (WPA) in Improving Student Writing Skills at Huron University College

Report prepared by Dr. Theresa Hyland, Grace Howell and Zheng Zhang

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Huron University College is a federated liberal arts college within the University of Western Ontario. Its Writing Proficiency Assessment (WPA) was developed to introduce first year students to the culture of academic writing in university, and to impress upon them the importance of writing skills. Upon commencement of their first year, it provides students with feedback on their own strengths and weaknesses, and encourages them to seek help with their writing where weaknesses exist.

The intent of this study was to collect and analyze the writing of a sample of students who had completed a first year WPA as well as a second writing assessment during their graduating year (WPA2). This, along with data about students' writing performance in other essay courses, was used to identify the extent to which writing skills had improved. A sample of graduating students were also interviewed about how they improved their writing skills during their studies at Huron University College, and what role, if any, the WPA played.

Some findings from the study include:

- a significant increase in overall scores between WPA 1 and WPA 2;
- a strong correlation between the average scores for essays in content courses and the overall scores achieved on the WPA 2;
- a perception, by most students interviewed, that the WPA was a useful exercise; and
- the assertion by a majority of the students that consultation with professors is a key strategy for improving writing over the course of their university careers.

About the Authors

Dr. Theresa Hyland is Director of Writing and Cross-cultural Services at Huron University College, and has been the Assessment Consultant in the development and administration of the Writing Proficiency Assessment for the past 10 years. Her doctorate is in Education, with a focus on Second Language Acquisition. Her doctoral thesis examined the differences in citation practices between ESL and Canadian students on the Writing Proficiency Assessment. She teaches a variety of writing courses at the college besides administering writing services. In addition to the current research project, she has recently been involved in two other research projects: one that looks at how faculty convey their expectations for academic writing to students through their descriptions of writing assignments on their course outlines and another that looks at the differences in performance of 1st year students who take the assessment on the computer and those who do the pen and paper version. She has published articles *in Assessing Writing, Written Communication, The TESL Canada Journal, Contact*, *Inkshed* and the *CWCA Newsletter*.

Ms. Grace Howell, Research Officer and Coordinator, Centre for Inclusive Education, at the UWO Faculty of Education, is also a writing tutor in the Writing Skills Centre at Huron University College and has served as a marker for four years for the Writing Proficiency Assessment. In addition to her

teaching and administrative duties, she has served as Project Manager for the current research project and was co-investigator with Theresa Hyland on the project examining students' performance in the online version of the Writing Proficiency Assessment.

Zheng Zhang is a PhD candidate at the University of Western Ontario. She worked as a university lecturer teaching students majoring in English in Shanghai, China for four years. Besides being a research assistant on the current project, Zheng has published several books and articles on English as a second language (ESL) learning and teaching.