



Standards for a “C” Paper: Standards and Alignment in Maryland

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In 1997, Maryland embarked on a standards alignment project in writing. Maryland's public two-year and four-year colleges and universities formed a voluntary chief academic officers (CAO) group in an attempt to resolve inter-segmental issues affecting the transfer of general education credits. The required English composition courses were among the first to be tackled. The CAOs charged a group of eleven faculty members representing the state's two- and four-year institutions to serve on a statewide English composition committee to analyze the standards, assessment methods, and learning outcomes for the first-year English composition courses.

The committee began by collecting and comparing syllabi from all the first-year writing courses in the state, together with the scoring rubrics and grading guidelines that teachers handed out to students in those courses. Before moving on to the heart of the project—reading and assessing student writing samples, the committee analyzed the collected documents and distilled a set of common goals for the first-year writing course. Samples of student work were distributed for evaluation to small groups of faculty, who then discussed among themselves their assessment of the samples and their rationale for the grades. These “norming” sessions led directly to discussions of standards, evidence, and measurable competencies, and became the primary vehicle for the development of Maryland's outcomes-based composition standards.

Why a C Standard?

After extensive discussions that lasted almost a full academic year, the English composition committee agreed that the key to alignment was to define competencies (or learning outcomes) students could demonstrate through their writing that would assure both the students and their teachers that they were well prepared to move forward successfully into their upper-division courses. Maryland adopted the C-grade standard because some four-year institutions have upper-division writing courses that require a C or better as a prerequisite, and others require native students to earn C or better in all general education courses. The committee established a standard that would provide the most flexibility and the greatest ease of transfer for community college students. In order to arrive at the C standards, the committee had to negotiate the other grades as well. But, for the purposes of the articulation discussions, the C standards are the only ones that were ever published. The essence of the agreement among the faculty is that the C represents the exit standard from the first college-level writing course.

What Next?

Anyone engaged in K-16 standards work understands that establishing common standards is only part of the alignment process and that, if the work stops there, it will end up as one more useless report on some administrator's bookshelf. Ensuring that standards are communicated to teachers, integrated into the curriculum, and consistently applied to student work is the hard



STANDARDS FOR A "C" PAPER

Content

The "C" paper fulfills the assignment, meeting all specified requirements, such as subject, organization, and length, and reflects the author's awareness of audience and purpose. The paper presents a central idea supported by relevant material (facts, figures, examples, quotations, or other details). The reasoning is sound; arguments are supported with adequate evidence; and the paper makes appropriate use of specific, concrete, and relevant information. Other points of view are acknowledged and responded to as appropriate. Sources of information are accurately presented and fully attributed.

Organization

The "C" paper has a discernible and logical plan. It has a focus, and the writer maintains the focus throughout the essay. The writer has unified the entire essay in support of the central idea, or thesis, and individual paragraphs in support of subordinate points. Some individual paragraphs, however, may be weak. The writer promotes coherence through the logical order of paragraphs and the use of some or all of the following devices: thesis statement, topic sentences, opening and closing paragraphs, and transitions. The use of these devices may lack smoothness, but the writer has achieved an acceptable level of organization.

Style/Expression

The "C" paper uses reasonable stylistic options (tone, word choice, sentence patterns) for its audience and purpose. The writing is clear. As a rule, the paper has smooth transitions between paragraphs, although some transitions may be missing or ineffective. The meaning of sentences is clear, although some sentences may be awkward or there may be a lack of variety in sentence patterns. Nonetheless, sentence structure is generally correct, although it may show limited mastery of such elements as subordination, emphasis, sentence variety and length, and modifiers. The paper reflects current academic practices of language use established by professional associations such as the Modern Language Association and the American Psychological Association.

Grammar/Mechanics

The "C" paper follows the conventions of standard written U.S. English; thus, it is substantially free of errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and mechanics. What errors are present must not impede meaning nor overly distract the reader.

part. Maryland has worked hard to keep writing as a high priority in our K-16 community. The first year after the C standards were published, the University System surveyed all public two- and four-year institutions to determine whether the faculty knew about the standards and/or had received professional development to implement them. We discovered that 61 percent of the community colleges and 90 percent of the University System institutions (the public four-years) were using the standards by spring of 1999; nearly 70 percent of the institutions using the standards trained faculty through norming sessions during faculty orientation.

One sticking point for all the campuses was the lack of resources to compensate faculty for the extra training sessions. In spite of the fact that they initiated the project as a policy priority, the chief academic officers as a group were apparently unwilling to make a commitment of funding to support the promulgation of the standards. Faculty development around the standards continues to pose a challenge for underfunded composition programs.

For the past three years, the Maryland K-16 Leadership Council and Workgroup, a voluntary collaboration of K-12 and higher education CEOs, has continued to promote and extend the composition alignment work by broadening the discussion beyond the CAOs—a group limited to higher education, by definition—to include the K-12 community. Once the exit standards for first-year writing were established, the next to be addressed were the entrance standards (placement standards) for the first-



year writing courses, which inevitably led to discussions of high school graduation standards and student learning outcomes.

Maryland does not yet have common placement standards, although the community colleges have agreed on several common placement instruments. Since 2000, the K-16 Workgroup, supported by the University System of Maryland, has sponsored annual meetings involving high school teachers, together with college faculty (both two-year and four-year) to address the expectations and learning outcomes for college-ready high school students. These rich and complex conversations involve not only discussions of student writing samples (is/is not college ready) but also discussions of high school curriculum, teacher preparation,

reading and writing across the curriculum projects, and high school assessments. Although these annual meetings do not have a steady source of funding and are, therefore, somewhat serendipitous, the K-16 umbrella maintains the momentum by fostering close connections among teachers and faculty.

Conclusion

The story of the Maryland "C" standards is a parable of how a policy exigency (alignment) can bring a disciplinary community together. The Maryland English composition community is a viable, grass roots group of professional educators who understand the critical role they play in shaping policies around teaching and learning how to write. ■

In addition to its annual meeting, AAC&U offers a series of working conferences and institutes each year. Additional information about the upcoming meetings listed below is available online at www.aacu.org/meetings.

90th Annual Meeting

January 21-24, 2004

Practicing Liberal

Education: Deepening Knowledge, Pursuing Justice, Taking Action

Washington, DC

Network for Academic Renewal Meetings

March 4-6, 2004

General Education and Assessment: Generating Commitment, Value, and Evidence

Long Beach, California

April 15-17, 2004

Pedagogies of Engagement: New Designs for Learning In and Across the Disciplines

Chicago, Illinois

AAC&U Institutes

May 21-26, 2004

Institute on General Education

Newport, Rhode Island

June 23-27, 2004

Greater Expectations Institute

Snowbird, Utah

AAC&U Joins New Alliance

The National Alliance on the Uses of Writing in the Transition to College

AAC&U is a founding member of the National Alliance on the Uses of Writing in the Transition to College. The Alliance was formed to address the myriad of issues revolving around appropriate writing evaluation, particularly as it relates to the college admissions process, and to provide a prompt response to the national need for writing guidelines and leadership. The Alliance will produce guidelines for how student writing may appropriately be used in collegiate admissions and placement procedures. These guidelines will clarify and articulate in a common voice the appropriate uses of writing in the transition to college. Convened by the National Council of Teachers of English, the Alliance is composed of associations representing the writing discipline, admissions and registration associations, secondary and higher education administrative associations, and testing associations.

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