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## Academic Literacy: A Statement of Competencies Expected of Students Entering California's Public Colleges and Universities

### Executive Summary

This document reports what faculty from all three segments of California's system of higher education think about their students' ability to read, write, and think critically. It echoes the lucid arguments made for literacy in the Statement of Competencies in English Expected of Freshmen, which appeared in 1982, but it necessarily revises and updates that earlier document. In the past two decades, California's educational landscape has been swept by substantial changes in pedagogy, advances in technology, and new emphases on critical reading, writing, and thinking across the curriculum. These changes have transformed the field, and they have shaped this report in ways that could not have been foreseen twenty years ago.

Like the earlier report, this document was produced by a faculty task force appointed by the Intersegmental Committee of Academic Senates (ICAS), which is comprised of the Academic Senates of the University of California, the California State University, and the California Community Colleges. Unlike that earlier document, this report is based upon the responses of faculty from many disciplines requiring students to read, write, and think critically. The task force invited faculty who regularly teach introductory or first-year courses to participate in a Web-based interview study that asked the following questions. (A transcription of that survey appears in the appendices.)

- ▶ What do they expect of their students' reading, writing, and critical thinking?
- ▶ How well are their students prepared for those expectations, and why or why not?
- ▶ How do they expect their students to acquire these skills, experiences or competencies that they are missing at matriculation?

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We also asked those faculty to identify other factors that contributed to their students' academic success:

- ▶ What attitudes or predispositions-"habits of mind"-facilitate student learning?
- ▶ What kinds of technology do faculty use or intend soon to use with their own classes?

This report summarizes responses to these questions and describes patterns that emerged in the answers. It then combines our colleagues' views with research and our collective professional experience to produce specific recommendations that will improve the level of literacy among first-year students in all segments of higher education in our state.

### Contents of This Report

The statement is divided into three parts, followed by appendices:

- ▶ Part I: Academic Literacy: Reading, Writing and Thinking Critically: discusses expectations and perceived student preparation and provides a rationale for these competencies understood as larger, more holistic "abilities" rather than a list of discrete "skills."
- ▶ Part II. Competencies: charts the competencies of Part I and juxtaposes them with comparable competencies noted in the California Language Arts Content Standards and in the California Education Roundtable Content Standards.
- ▶ Part III. Strategies for Implementation: offers suggestions for "teaching the processes of learning."

A Selection of Significant Findings and Recommendations Contained within this Statement

### Academic Literacy across the Content Areas

- ▶ We affirm the role of California schools in enhancing democracy, and we believe that literacy skills serve as the foundation for greater equity.
- ▶ All the elements of academic literacy-reading, writing, listening, speaking, critical thinking, use of technology, and habits of mind that foster academic success-are expected of entering freshmen across all college disciplines. These competencies should be learned in the content areas in high school. It is, therefore, an institutional obligation to teach them.
- ▶ In order to be prepared for college and university courses, students need greater exposure to and instruction in academic literacy than they receive in English classes alone. This need calls for greater coordination of literacy education among subject matter areas within high schools.
- ▶ The inseparable skills of critical reading, writing, listening and thinking depend upon students' ability to postpone judgment and tolerate ambiguity as they honor the dance between passionate assertion and patient inquiry.
- ▶ We applaud recent efforts towards collaboration and articulation between high

schools and colleges, and urge that these efforts be continued and expanded.

- ▶ We recommend imaginative and practical professional development as a central component of improving literacy education.

### Habits of Mind and Critical Thinking

- ▶ The habits of mind expected of students-their curiosity, their daring, their participation in intellectual discussions-are predicated upon their ability to convey their ideas clearly and to listen and respond to divergent views respectfully.
- ▶ Faculty expect students to have an appetite to experiment with new ideas, challenge their own beliefs, seek out other points of view, and contribute to intellectual discussions.
- ▶ Analytical thinking must be taught, and students must be encouraged to apply those analytical abilities to their own endeavors as well as to the work of others.
- ▶ Students should generate critical responses to what they read, see, and hear, and develop a healthy skepticism toward their world.
- ▶ Students must assume a measure of responsibility for their own learning, must discern crucial values of the academic community, must seek assistance when they need it, and must advocate for their own learning in diverse situations.
- ▶ Self-advocacy is a valuable practice that emerges from the recognition that education is a partnership.

### Reading and Writing Connection

- ▶ College faculty report that student reading and writing are behaviors and that, as such, they are interpreted as evidence of attitudes regarding learning.
- ▶ Successful students understand that reading and writing are the lifeblood of educated people.
- ▶ Students, like the writers whose works they read, should articulate a clear thesis, and should identify, evaluate and use evidence to support or challenge that thesis while being attentive to diction, syntax, and organization.
- ▶ Students who need help overcoming their lack of preparation will generally need to engage in practices of self-advocacy, including finding campus instructional resources on their own.

### Reading

- ▶ 83% of faculty say that the lack of analytical reading skills contributes to students' lack of success in a course.
- ▶ Faculty respondents concur with the CERT standards which, unlike the California Language Arts Standards, call for students' comprehension of "academic and workplace texts."
- ▶ Reading is generally not formally taught after a certain point in students' K-12

education.

- Teachers in all disciplines must help students develop effective critical reading strategies.
- We must teach our students to be active makers of meaning and teach them the strategies all good readers employ: to think critically, to argue, to compare, to own an idea, and to remember. Reading is a process that requires time and reflection, and that stimulates imagination, analysis, and inquiry.

### Writing

- Only 1/3 of entering college students are sufficiently prepared for the two most frequently assigned writing tasks: analyzing information or arguments and synthesizing information from several sources, according to faculty respondents.
- More than 50% of their students fail to produce papers relatively free of language errors, according to our faculty respondents.
- Faculty judge students' ability to express their thinking clearly, accurately, and compellingly through their writing. College faculty look for evidence in papers that students are stretching their minds, representing others' ideas responsibly, and exploring ideas.
- In college, students may well be asked to complete complex writing tasks across the disciplines with little instruction provided.
- Faculty expect students to reexamine their thesis, to consider and reconsider additional points or arguments, to reshape and reconstruct as they compose, and to submit carefully revised and edited work.
- College faculty assign writing to get to know how students think, to help students engage critically and thoughtfully with course readings, to demonstrate what students understand from lectures, to structure and guide their inquiry, to encourage independent thinking, and to invite them into the on-going intellectual dialogue that characterizes higher education. Writing in college is designed to deepen and extend discourse in the pursuit of knowledge.
- In the last two years of high school, students need to be given instruction in writing in every course, and to be assigned writing tasks that
  - demand analysis, synthesis, and research
  - require them to generate ideas for writing by using texts in addition to past experience or observations, and
  - require students to revise to improve focus, support, and organization, and to edit or proofread to eliminate errors in grammar, mechanics, and spelling.
- Implementation of strong writing-across-the-curriculum programs in high schools statewide can help prepare high school students for their writing requirements in college.

### Listening and Speaking

- ▶ Students are expected to speak with a command of English language conventions.
- ▶ All students who enter college without having developed essential critical listening skills or who have not had ample practice speaking in large and small groups will find themselves disadvantaged.
- ▶ The California English Language Arts Content Standards [on listening and speaking], if regularly addressed and evaluated in the years before high school graduation, would equip entering college students to perform requisite listening and speaking tasks.
- ▶ College-level work requires students to be active, discerning listeners in lecture and discussion classes and to make critical distinctions between key points and illustrative examples, just as they must do when they read and write.

### English Language Learners (L2 Learners)

- ▶ Language minority students comprise nearly 40% of all K-12 students in California.
- ▶ The dominant perception among faculty respondents is that many L2 students are not prepared to meet college-level academic demands.
- ▶ Academic English involves dispositions and skills beyond those of conversational fluency. Classification of L2 students as FEP (fluent English proficient) is best determined by assessment of the multiple abilities necessary in academic situations: reading, writing, listening and speaking.
- ▶ "ESL" is faculty short hand for many types of students, regardless of their varying language problems and backgrounds. Yet, all second language learners are expected to control the same set of competencies for success as other students upon entering postsecondary institutions.
- ▶ To provide appropriate instruction for each individual L2 learner, we must recognize the different subgroups of second language learners distinguished primarily by such differences as
  - ▶ length of residence in the U.S.,
  - ▶ years of U.S. schooling, and
  - ▶ English language proficiency, both oral and written.
- ▶ L2 students who have received most, if not all, of their education in California schools may continue to have special, academic literacy needs. Thus, specialized college or university instruction in academic English is both desirable and necessary; and additional time may be required to complete requirements essential for success at the baccalaureate level.
- ▶ L2 learners, their peers, parents, teachers, and administrators should come to understand that special language instruction is not remedial. Given this awareness, L2 students will be more likely to further develop academic English through ESL work at the college level.

## Technology

- ▶ Students' success in college has as much to do with their ability to find information as to recall it.
- ▶ While many entering students are familiar with some technological elements (notably e-mail and Web browsing), few demonstrate the crucial ability to evaluate online resources critically.
- ▶ Students need to form questioning habits when they read, especially material found on the Internet where students must evaluate materials for clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, significance, and fairness.
- ▶ Technological skills and students' critical appraisal of them should also be taught across the curriculum.
- ▶ Students should enter with basic technological skills that include word-processing, e-mail use, and the fundamentals of Web-based research. All students, therefore, should have regular access to computers.

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