**Ann Dean, Director of College Writing**  
**Assessing College Writing at USM**

**Introduction**  
After eliminating the developmental writing course ENG 009, the English Department has two sets of questions about what and how students learn in their first-year writing courses:

1. If given more time and help from their instructors each week, can less-prepared students learn as much about writing as other students? Can they get to the same place by the end of one semester?

2. What should USM do to support students who struggle in their first-year writing course? How can we get the right support to the right students?

About 1000 students take college writing at USM each year. Some take a 3-credit version of the course (ENG 100): others take a 4-credit version (ENG 104), which gives them more time with their instructors and classmates each week. Students whose written SAT-Writing scores fall below 520 take the 4-credit version. Many of these students would in the past have been placed in a non-credit, developmental class.

Since the fall semester of 2008, the English Department’s college writing committee has been reading student work, gathering data from instructors and from MaineStreet, and working with the Office of Academic Assessment. We have preliminary answers to the questions above.

To answer the first set of questions, the committee pursued two different projects: (a) looking at student work and (b) tracking student performance in subsequent writing courses.

**a) Looking at student work.**

- The committee collected papers written in the 3-credit (ENG 100) and 4-credit versions (ENG 104) of the class.
- The Office of Academic Assessment took all names off the papers and gave each a number.
- A committee of full- and part-time faculty, led by Associate Professor Lucinda Cole, chose three issues to evaluate: the students’ use of standard written English, their ability to engage analytically with texts, and their ability to make connections between texts.
- The committee read the papers and used the course’s grading criteria document (available at [http://www.usm.maine.edu/eng/collegewriting.html](http://www.usm.maine.edu/eng/collegewriting.html) ) to grade each one.
- At a second session, readers looked at the A-papers from both courses, B-papers from both courses, etc. Then, we sent the paper grades to the Office of Academic Assessment to be correlated with SAT-Writing scores and to determine persistence in college.
Results
Students enrolled in the 4-credit version (ENG 104) of the class; i.e. those who came to USM less prepared for college writing, produced papers that met the same criteria as those written by other students (ENG 100). A-papers in the 4-credit college writing class looked like A-papers in 3-credit college writing. This was true of all the grades except for D and F. Students who earned D’s or F’s in the 4-credit version did significantly worse work than others.

Secondly, the grades given anonymously by the committee did not correlate with students’ SAT-Writing scores. In other words, SAT-Writing scores were not good predictors of how students would actually perform in their first-year writing classes.

b) Tracking student performance in subsequent writing courses.
- The Office of Academic Assessment tracked students who moved from the 4-credit version of college writing (ENG 104) into a writing-intensive course, ENG 120. Students coming from the 4-credit college writing performed as well as students coming from the 3-credit version.

To answer the second set of questions, the committee looked at instructors’ comments on student performance.

Using rosters distributed by the writing program, instructors rated their students according to the challenges they faced. Among other questions, we have asked:

- which students need even more writing instruction than ENG 104 can provide?
- which students have other life problems that interfere with their academic work?

Students who were rated by their instructors as having other life problems, had the lowest retention of any student group we have looked at.

Only 33% are registered at USM a year later.

The English Department is currently working with the Student Success Centers and the Learning Centers to get support to the students who need it. We will continue to look at student work, student performance, and instructors’ comments as we design infrastructure around the first-year writing course. We are encouraged by our work, since it shows that a significant majority of our students can succeed in our first-year course when they get sufficient assistance.