

## First-Year College Writing and the AP English Language Exam: How a High School/College Partnership Affected Exam Performance

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper describes a model for integrating first-year college writing courses with AP English Language classes. It also presents the results of a study that tested whether a writing course rich in rhetorical theory, in which students learn composing processes and write extended essays, is effective preparation for the timed, impromptu essays on the AP Exam. Seven AP classes from under-represented high schools mirrored seven first-year college writing classes as they wrote and revised rhetorical analysis essays. Rhetorical analysis prompts from previous AP Exams were administered as pre and posttests to 160 AP students. Responses were rated by two endorsed College Board consultants. Although student responses improved significantly from pre to post, comments from the raters, combined with a review of high-scoring essays from previous AP Exams, suggest that some of the writing practices high school students learned may not have been as effective as “teaching to the test.” These results indicate that, while writing extended, process-oriented essays typical of first-year college writing can improve performance on the AP Exam, the AP Exam continues to measure different outcomes from those endorsed by WPA. Suggested changes to the AP Exam would make it a more accurate measurement of WPA outcomes.*

### INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in 1980, the AP English Language and Composition Exam has stirred controversy among WPAs, college writing instructors, high school English teachers, college and high school students, statisticians, and the College Board. A study of the first exam confirmed its validity as a writing test (Modu and Wimmers), but within a year, James Vopat objected

that the exam was valid *only* as a measure of what was taught in AP courses, not college writing courses (“Do I”). What followed was a series of acrimonious responses and replies in which one critic called the AP English Exam “a waste of money, energy, and time,” while a defender of the exam questioned Vopat’s sexual prowess.<sup>1</sup> Similar disputes, only slightly more civil, have flared up over the validity of AP English exams (Mahala and Vivion; Purves; White, “Apologia”; “Response”) and the quality of the AP program overall (Camara, et al.; Ganeshanathan; Lichten). More common is for critics and defenders of AP English simply to talk past one another. As a result, researchers continue to make a number of incompatible claims about AP course outcomes: the AP English Language course requires students to learn rich composing processes (College Board, *Course Description*; White, “Apologia”), or it forces students to focus on written products alone (Foster; Jones; Mahala and Vivion; Spear and Flesher; Vopat, “Politics”); the course teaches rhetorical theory and contextual approaches to discourse (Jolliffe, qtd. in College Board, *Setting*; Sarrett), or it teaches an objective, arhetorical view of texts reminiscent of the New Criticism (Foster; Holladay; Iorio; Jones; Mahala and Vivion; Vopat, “Politics”); colleges grant course credit for passing AP Exam scores because they know these scores reflect the completion of college-level work (Camara, et al.; College Board, *Course Description*; Main), or colleges accept AP Exam scores out of financial or bureaucratic necessity (Foster; Holladay; Mahala and Vivion; Vopat, “Going”; “Politics”).

One of the few points on which AP English critics and defenders agree is the need for more collaboration between college writing programs and AP English programs. To ensure that AP English Language course outcomes parallel those of first-year college writing courses, WPAs have called for increased dialogue between secondary and postsecondary institutions (Chapman; Hansen, et al., “Advanced”; Olson, Metzger, and Ashton-Jones). The College Board admits that AP can succeed only as a collaborative program between high schools and colleges and that the number of college faculty engaged with AP is inadequate (*Access*). The *AP Central* website recruits college faculty to participate in validity studies, help develop examinations, read examinations, and serve as consultants at AP workshops. Despite this mutual desire for cooperation, a search of the literature finds no reports of ongoing collaborations between college writing programs and AP English programs. The need for collaboration has never been more urgent, as AP continues to grow at an astronomical rate. According *AP Central*, nearly 60% of U.S. high schools offer AP courses, and over 90% of U.S. colleges and universities have an AP Exam policy. The number of high school stu-

dents enrolled in AP courses has more than doubled every 10 years since 1960 (College Board, *Access*).

One purpose of this paper is to describe a program at The University of Texas at Austin (UT) that integrates first-year college writing courses and AP English Language courses. Students Partnering for Undergraduate Rhetoric Success (SPURS) began in fall 2005 as a joint venture between UT's Department of Rhetoric and Writing (DRW) and Division of Diversity and Community Engagement. The program pairs first-year writing classes at UT with 11<sup>th</sup> grade AP English Language classes from underrepresented high schools in Texas. Participating AP teachers complete a summer workshop similar to the orientation required of all DRW instructors, and then their AP classes mirror partnering UT classes throughout two core units: rhetorical analysis and researched argument. Each AP class is introduced to rhetorical theory, practices various forms of rhetorical analysis, and eventually writes extended rhetorical analysis and researched argument essays. All the while, AP students communicate with UT student partners via email, blogs, discussions forums, and UT campus visits. After completing initial drafts of their rhetorical analysis and researched argument essays, AP students conduct peer reviews with their UT partners, receive instruction in advanced revising techniques, and eventually submit final drafts of their essays to the UT instructor for assessment and additional feedback.

A second purpose of this paper is to report on a study that tested the following controversial claim: a course rich in rhetorical theory, in which students write extended essays and engage in all stages of composing processes, is effective preparation for the timed, impromptu essays on the AP Exam (College Board, *Course Description*; Jolliffe, qtd. in College Board, *Setting*; Sarrett; White, "Apologia"). If this claim were shown to be true, then WPAs might be reassured that the AP Exam measures outcomes listed in the *WPA Outcomes Statement*. Unfortunately, testimony from former AP students indicates that often the course is taught as little more than test preparation, with timed, impromptu essays the only form of writing students practice (Spear and Flesher; Vopat, "Politics"). Since many of these students received passing scores on the exam, it appears that repeated timed writing drills are not just practiced, but practiced effectively, and may represent a way to pass the exam without having met desired outcomes. A second question this study explores, then, is whether teaching a robust college/AP curriculum is as effective as "teaching to the test." This question concerns AP English teachers who are rewarded, sometimes financially, based on successful exam results, but of course it also concerns WPAs who worry about

a disconnect between the AP English Language Exam and the outcomes it supposedly measures.

#### WPA OUTCOMES, FIRST-YEAR WRITING AT UT-AUSTIN, AND THE AP ENGLISH LANGUAGE EXAM

UT receives more AP Exam grades than any other college or university in the U.S., 18% more than the second highest school, University of Florida (College Board, 200). Students need only score a 3, the minimal passing grade, on the AP Exam to receive credit for UT's one-semester, first-year writing course, Rhetoric 306: Rhetoric and Writing (RHE 306).<sup>2</sup> According to UT's Measurement and Evaluation Center, about 75% of students who send their AP grades to UT receive credit for RHE 306. It seems likely, then, that the AP English Language Exam exempts more students from first-year writing at UT than at any other college or university in the U.S. These numbers warrant a close comparison of the exam and RHE 306.

The first-year writing program at UT is not necessarily typical of other institutions, but it is designed to produce outcomes described in the *WPA Statement* and, in this way, accords with WPA's attempt "to regularize what can be expected to be taught in first-year composition." RHE 306 focuses on written argument and is informed by process pedagogies and a mélange of what Berlin calls "transactional rhetorics" (15-17). Students are taught to engage actively in civic and academic discourse by attending to the "interaction of the features of the rhetorical process itself . . . material reality, writer, audience, and language" (155). The course is organized around a timely issue/controversy, which is addressed by a book-length work of non-fiction and a collection of shorter articles. In order to build textual and contextual knowledge of the issue/controversy, students read deeply, through a rhetorical framework (the course also uses a rhetoric textbook and a handbook), prior to writing. Students first conduct rhetorical analyses, combining textual and contextual approaches, of texts related to the issue/controversy. Later in the course, after having been trained in library research skills by librarians familiar with course content, students work more independently. They select their own controversies, form bibliographies of texts that are part of the conversation surrounding those controversies, and write their own arguments that contribute to the conversation. In addition to several short writing assignments, students write three longer papers (at least two of which are a rhetorical analysis and a researched argument) that consist of a topic proposal, which receives peer and instructor feedback, a first submission, which receives peer and instructor feedback, and a final submission, which is graded according to quality of revisions, among other criteria.

The *AP English Language Course Description* details a course whose outcomes would seem to align with RHE 306/WPA outcomes. The course asks students to read widely in different disciplines and historical periods and to consider the rhetorical situation of texts they read. Students write in a variety of informal and formal contexts and learn rich composing processes, which include reviewing peers' drafts and revising their own. Eventually students learn to write researched arguments, in which they evaluate sources, synthesize sources in their own arguments, and cite sources according to established conventions. Similar to RHE 306, the AP course teaches students to "enter into conversations with other writers and thinkers" and to "use citations for substance rather than show, for dialogue rather than diatribe" (College Board, *Course Description* 10).

The AP English Language Exam itself, however, appears to measure a different set of outcomes from those that appear in the *Course Description*. Forty-five percent of an AP Exam score is derived from multiple choice questions that "test the students' skills in analyzing the rhetoric of prose passages" (College Board, *Course Description* 13). Aside from the question of whether multiple choice questions are valid measures of writing skills, which has been the source of much criticism of the exam (Foster; Holladay; Mahala and Vivion; Vopat, "Do I"; "Politics"; White, "Apologia"), the view of textuality embodied in the multiple choice questions is at odds with that taught in RHE 306 and described in the *WPA Statement*. The questions are informed by "objective rhetorics" (Berlin 7-11), in the sense that they approach language as a self-contained system that can be understood apart from any rhetorical context. Students are asked to read brief passages from unfamiliar works that are introduced by single sentences, like "this passage is taken from a nineteenth-century essay" (College Board, *Course Description* 14), or "this passage is taken from a twentieth-century book" (24). Not surprisingly, the questions ask for purely formal analysis of the passages, and so the "rhetoric" being analyzed consists of rhetorical devices functioning in self-contained texts.

The essay section of the exam, which accounts for the remaining 55% of the exam score, is also misaligned with RHE 306/WPA outcomes. The most obvious discrepancy is that the exam requires students to write three essays in 120 minutes, which forecloses many composing processes (e.g., drafting and revising) essential to the RHE 306 curriculum. One of the most persistent criticisms of the exam is that it limits available composing processes (Foster; Jones; Mahala and Vivion; Spear and Flesher; Vopat, "Politics"), and the College Board concedes that "extended, revised essays cannot be part of the AP Exam" (*Course Description* 9). AP essay questions focus on argument, but the impromptu nature of AP prompts severely lim-

its opportunities for invention. Students are not given sufficient time or background knowledge to investigate the rhetorical situation and discover authentic arguments. As a result, they essentially are given a thesis (or limited choice of a thesis, such as “write a carefully argued essay that agrees or disagrees with Postman’s assertion,” *Course Description* 36) and asked to support it. Students are given neither a specific purpose for writing nor a specific audience, and so high-scoring essays tend to be approximations of an ideal, autonomous text.

The AP essay prompts consist of three types: (1) a rhetorical analysis of a brief passage; (2) an open-ended argument in which students are required to take a position on a pre-selected issue and draw on their own reading, knowledge, and experiences for evidence; and (3) a synthesis essay in which students are given passages from six sources, along with fifteen additional minutes reading time, and asked to use (and cite properly) three of the sources in support of an argument.<sup>3</sup> Since the study described here focuses on rhetorical analysis, I will limit my subsequent discussion to AP rhetorical analysis prompts and RHE 306 rhetorical analysis papers. The AP rhetorical analysis prompts, similar to the multiple choice questions, are informed by assumptions of textual stability and objectivity. Students are given a brief, unfamiliar passage, sometimes without author or date, and asked to analyze its rhetorical strategies. The prompts include a few sentences that describe the work from which the passage is excerpted, but they include virtually no information about the writer, the intended audience, or the subject matter and prior history of the conversation. As a result, the prompts force formal, New Critical-like analyses, with rhetorical devices replacing literary devices as the units of analysis. Although in recent years the exam has included more passages from non-literary figures, still the writers are almost always well-established, and the passages of high rhetorical or literary merit. In fact, one of the outcomes listed in the *Course Description* is the ability “to analyze and interpret samples of *good* writing” (emphasis added, 11), and a review of sample student responses on *AP Central* reveals that high-scoring analyses involve implicit (and sometimes explicit) *appreciation* of the passage. High-scoring responses never criticize the passage or suggest that its rhetorical effects might vary depending on the audience. As with all essay questions on the AP Exam, students are given 40 minutes to complete their rhetorical analyses.

RHE 306 instructors may choose to use Faigley and Selzer’s *Good Reasons* or Lunsford and Ruskiewicz’s *Everything’s an Argument* as their rhetoric textbook (the latter is listed on *AP Central* as an appropriate textbook for the AP English Language course), and all RHE 306 rhetorical analysis assignments follow the guidelines listed in these textbooks. Prior to begin-

ning a rhetorical analysis of a text, students must investigate the author, the text's subject matter, and the conversation to which the text contributes. They research the text's publication venue and target audience, and use this knowledge, as well as textual clues about the intended audience, to analyze how the text works *for particular groups of readers at a particular time*. Students generally choose "ordinary" discourse (e.g., public policy arguments), so they do not take a reverential approach to the text. They are just as likely to detail a text's shortcomings with particular readers as they are to note its rhetorical effectiveness. High-scoring rhetorical analyses in RHE 306 never treat the audience as monolithic. Furthermore, students themselves are given a rhetorical purpose for their analysis (e.g., working as a reviewer for an editorial board), and the text they analyze is added to a developing bibliography that will inform their later arguments. As with all paper assignments in RHE 306, students write a topic proposal, receive feedback, submit a first draft, receive feedback, revise and submit a final draft, and receive final comments. Completing the assignment takes weeks.

#### DESCRIPTION OF THE SPURS PROGRAM

The purpose of this section is to describe in some detail how the SPURS program works. Not only is this description necessary to contextualize the study described later, but also it is hoped that other college writing programs might begin similar partnerships with AP English programs, particularly at high schools whose students are underrepresented at postsecondary institutions.

AP English teachers from participating high schools and their partnering DRW instructors attend a two-day workshop at UT prior to the beginning of the fall semester. One goal of the workshop is to simulate the orientation required of all first-time DRW instructors, so on the first day teachers are introduced to the theoretical framework of lower-division writing courses at UT. The SPURS program coordinator and SPURS instructors provide teachers with an overview of rhetorical theory in the morning, followed by an overview of composition studies in the afternoon. Each session is followed by group discussions in which AP teachers are encouraged to ask questions and share information about their current practices. Day two of the workshop is devoted to teaching rhetorical analysis as practiced in the DRW.<sup>4</sup> In the morning, the SPURS program coordinator leads teachers and instructors in a group rhetorical analysis of a brief, contemporary argument (say, a *New York Times* op-ed) as a way of modeling classroom activities. Teachers receive practice in (and tips on how to teach) analysis of audience, purpose, and context; identification of claims,

reasons, and evidence; analysis of rhetorical appeals; and analysis of the persuasive effects of language and style. In the afternoon, partnering teachers and instructors break off to plan their partnerships in more detail and to draft a schedule for the rhetorical analysis unit. Teachers return to their campuses with handouts reviewing the material covered on day one, suggested readings from their rhetoric textbook (all participating high schools purchase class sets of *Everything's an Argument*), a sample syllabus, and sample assignments.

Soon after the fall semester begins, the SPURS program coordinator visits each high school, accompanied by the school's partnering SPURS instructor. The purpose of these visits is to welcome students to the program, explain to them the program's scope and purpose, and introduce them to RHE 306 and some basics of rhetorical theory. Immediately after these visits, each AP class begins mirroring its partnering RHE 306 class as closely as possible, covering the same pages in the textbook, learning the same concepts of rhetorical analysis, and conducting in-class, group rhetorical analyses of many of the same articles. Course readings for the AP class are selected by the teacher and SPURS instructor and, in general, consist of contemporary public policy arguments on issues that interest students. These types of arguments are chosen in order to capitalize on students' pre-existing topic knowledge and familiarity with discourse conventions. While the AP class is mirroring its RHE 306 class, college and high school students correspond via email, discussion forums, and blogs. Because the college students are learning the same material and practicing the same skills, the communication between classes allows both groups to ask questions of each other and practice what they are learning. Also during this period, upon request from the AP teacher, the SPURS program coordinator and/or partnering instructor visits the high school to elucidate tricky concepts or further model classroom techniques.

Once the AP teacher is satisfied that his or her students are ready to write an extended rhetorical analysis, the SPURS program coordinator and instructor visit the high school to assign the paper. (Some instructors and teachers use the same rhetorical analysis assignment for both classes, but most modify the AP assignment slightly.) This visit serves two purposes: (1) to make sure the AP students understand every aspect of the assignment and (2) to instruct them in the rich composing processes taught in RHE 306. In particular, students are taught how to produce a solid draft, which is required before they conduct formal peer reviews with their UT partners. An appropriate deadline for first drafts is set, and on that day the AP students submit their drafts electronically to their UT partners for review. (Some, but not all, instructors and teachers also have the AP students

review their UT partners' papers). Most of the AP classes visit UT around this time, which allows student partners to meet and workshop their rhetorical analyses in person. In addition to these face-to-face consultations, the UT students produce extended, written peer reviews of their partners' rhetorical analyses. These reviews are guided by a standard RHE 306 peer review prompt that focuses reviewers' attention on global concerns of rhetorical strategy.

Once the AP students receive their written peer reviews, the SPURS coordinator and instructor make their third, and final, formal visit (as mentioned, the SPURS coordinator makes additional visits upon the AP teacher's request). The purpose of this final visit is to instruct the AP students in how to respond to feedback and conduct genuine, global revisions. In particular, students are instructed in the differences between revising and editing. They are encouraged to continue corresponding with their UT partners and to ask for clarification from their partners or AP teacher if they are unsure of how to respond to specific comments. An appropriate deadline for final drafts is set, and on that day the AP students submit their papers electronically to their SPURS instructor for summative commentary. Although instructors do not assign grades, in every other way they respond to the papers as if they were submitted by RHE 306 students. The papers are returned to the AP students and the rhetorical analysis unit concluded.

## THE STUDY

The SPURS rhetorical analysis unit fulfills AP Program requirements. Students complete college-level work in a high school setting, and every component of the unit addresses a curricular requirement of the AP English Language course. The College Board claims that writing extended, revised essays, such as those SPURS students write, "will help make students more self-aware and flexible writers and thus may help their performance on the exam itself" (*Course Description* 9), and White claims that "the best and only useful preparation for AP essay exams is to write and to develop a writing process that allows good writing to appear on the test" ("Apologia" 38). Does writing the type of extended rhetorical analysis taught in RHE 306 improve students' ability to write the 40-minute rhetorical analyses found on the AP Exam? To answer this question, SPURS students were asked to write on AP rhetorical analysis prompts immediately prior to, and immediately after, completing the rhetorical analysis unit. The AP responses were then rated by two experienced AP readers. The results are analyzed below.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Participants were 11<sup>th</sup> grade AP English Language and Composition students from seven high schools participating in the SPURS program. (Schools typically offer AP English Language in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade and AP English Literature in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade). Table 1 provides demographic descriptions of the seven high schools. Although demographic information was not collected from SPURS students, the population of SPURS classes did not appear to differ significantly from school populations overall. This might be due to the fact that AP English courses are open to all students at these schools, and so SPURS classes comprised students of all skill levels who chose to take AP English.

Table 1. Demographic Information for SPURS High Schools

	School Type	% Economically Disadvantaged	% Race/Ethnicity			
			Black	Hispanic	White	Other
High School A	Large City	79.7	33.9	63.4	2.0	.7
High School B	Large City	86.9	6.9	89.6	3.2	.3
High School C	Large City	99.0	2.7	94.0	2.8	.5
High School D	Large City	88.6	7.5	83.3	8.8	.4
High School E	Large City	79.8	61.3	37.7	.4	.6
High School F	Mid-Size City	75.9	83.2	14.7	1.6	.5
High School G	Rural	59.5	30.4	43.5	24.7	1.4

Source: Texas Education Agency

### *Materials*

Test materials were free-response (essay) questions from the 2004 and 2005 AP English Language and Composition Exams. One question consisted of a 65-line passage from Rachel Carson's 1962 book *Silent Spring* and instructions to "analyze the rhetorical strategies that Carson uses to construct her argument" (College Board, 2004 2). A second question consisted of a 59-line passage from Maria Stewart's 1832 *Lecture Delivered at Franklin Hall* and instructions to "analyze the rhetorical strategies Stewart uses to convey her position" (College Board, 2005 2). These questions were selected because they are typical of recent AP rhetorical analysis prompts, which usually ask test-takers to analyze historically significant arguments

from the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century. Also, the similar length of the passages and nearly identical task instructions helped ensure the internal validity of the measurement tools.

### *Design*

The study used a pre-experimental (one-group, pretest/posttest) design because no control group was available. The current study would have been more robust if the performance of SPURS students had been compared to the performance of students who were taught to write the type of responses AP Readers seem to prefer. However, SPURS is not an AP prep program but rather an outreach program intended to introduce students to college writing. Although not all sections of AP English Language at SPURS schools were partnered with a UT class (due to a limited number of college classes), the SPURS rhetorical analysis unit was taught in all sections. Thus, no school could provide an AP English Language class that was completely unaffiliated with SPURS.

### *Procedure*

So as not to disrupt normal educational practices, SPURS teachers administered the pre and posttests to their students. Students were informed that they would be answering a practice AP free-response question, but they did not see the questions in advance and did not know that their responses would be part of the SPURS program evaluation. The order of the two prompts was counterbalanced so half the students wrote on the Carson passage for the pretest and half wrote on the Stewart passage for the pretest. Students were given 40 minutes (the suggested time on the AP Exam) to write their responses. The teachers collected the responses, de-identified and coded them, and submitted them to the SPURS program coordinator.

### *Scoring*

The essays were rated on the same 1-9 scale used to score the free-response questions when they appeared on the actual AP Exam. One rater has been an endorsed College Board consultant since 1995 and has been an AP Reader of the English Language Exam since 1998; a second rater has been an AP Reader three times since 2002. Ratings were averaged when discrepant by only one point. Ratings discrepant by more than one point (approximately 6% of the essays) were eliminated from the data set, as no reliable adjudication method was available. Pre and posttests were mixed randomly to help ensure the internal validity of the scores.

*Results*

Table 2 shows the results of the pre and posttests for all seven SPURS schools. Each school improved its mean test scores from pre to post. A repeated measures analysis of variance was run in order to examine change from pre to post and differences between schools. Improvement was highly significant ( $p < .001$ ) at three schools, marginally significant ( $p = .10$ ) at two schools, and the improvement of SPURS students overall was highly significant ( $p < .001$ ). See Appendix A for a sample of student writing that improved significantly from pre (scored a 4 by both raters) to post (scored a 6 by both raters).

Table 2. Pretest and Posttest Scores for SPURS High Schools

	<i>N</i>	Mean Pretest	Mean Posttest
High School A	25	2.68	3.64 <sup>a</sup>
High School B	18	3.72	4.11
High School C	27	2.52	3.67 <sup>a</sup>
High School D	21	2.33	3.29 <sup>a</sup>
High School E	8	3.00	3.63 <sup>b</sup>
High School F	29	3.41	3.55
High School G	22	3.68	4.09 <sup>b</sup>
Total	150	3.03	3.70 <sup>a</sup>

a.  $p < 0.001$

b.  $p = 0.10$

How did SPURS students fare on the actual AP Exam in May? Before sharing these data, I should note two factors that severely limit their significance. First, students wrote only two essays (a rhetorical analysis and a researched argument) as part of the SPURS program. Not only did the program constitute a relatively small percentage of the AP course, then, but also it did not address the multiple-choice questions on the exam or the open-ended argument essay. Second, the schools could only provide me with mean AP scores from the previous three years—not individual scores—so I could not test whether a school’s improvement on the exam was statistically significant. Still, as seen in Table 3, AP Exam scores improved at a rate higher than the national average at six of the seven SPURS schools. Please note that the number of SPURS students who took the AP Exam is higher than the number who participated in the study because students who were absent for the pre or posttest were not included in the data set.

Table 3. AP Scores of Students at SPURS Schools

	Mean AP Score, Previous 3 Years <sup>a</sup>	<i>N</i>	AP Scores of SPURS Students <sup>b</sup>
High School A	1.22	30	1.67
High School B	1.66	24	1.79
High School C	1.35	35	1.77
High School D	1.53	26	1.92
High School E	1.28	13	1.23
High School F	1.30	35	1.51
High School G	1.99	29	2.10

a. National average was 2.75.

b. National average was 2.85.

## DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The results of this study support the College Board's claim that a course informed by rhetorical theory, in which students are taught composing processes and write extended essays, may improve performance on the AP Exam. The nearly universal improvement of test scores in the study, including highly significant statistical improvement at three schools, indicates that the SPURS program was successful in preparing students for rhetorical analysis free response questions. A pessimist might note that improvement was only marginally significant at two schools and not significant at two schools, and a score of 3 or 4 (the range of mean posttest scores for all seven schools) on free response questions is considered "inadequate," according to AP scoring guidelines. (These schools would probably need a mean of almost 5 to reach the national average<sup>5</sup>). Also, all seven schools scored well below the national average on the actual AP Exam in May. But considering how these schools have performed on recent AP Exams, their rate of improvement is encouraging.

It is a different question entirely whether teaching a robust college/AP curriculum is as effective as "teaching to the test." Feedback from the College Board consultants hired to score the pre and posttests, coupled with a review of high-scoring sample essays posted on *AP Central*, indicates that AP Readers may value different outcomes from those endorsed by RHE 306/WPA. Consequently, the SPURS program may have actually *hurt* student performance in three distinct ways. First, one of the weaknesses of the pre and posttests, according to both AP scorers, was their reliance

on appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos to the exclusion of other rhetorical strategies, such as diction, syntax, imagery, details, and figurative language. Indeed, high-scoring rhetorical analysis essays on the AP Exam mention rhetorical appeals infrequently. More often, these essays focus on a writer's word choice, syntax, imagery, tone, use of details and examples, etc. SPURS students were unprepared to write such essays, not because they were taught a narrow list of rhetorical strategies, but rather because they were taught rhetorical appeals in the context of a theory of discourse, rather than as atomized devices. It is unlikely that RHE 306 students would use the terms ethos, pathos, and logos in the manner valued by AP scorers because they learn these terms in a different theoretical context. Following Kinneavy, RHE 306 is informed by the assumption that *all* texts are bound by the rhetorical triangle, and thus all communication, in a sense, involves appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos. The AP English Language Exam represents almost a complete inversion of the rhetorical triangle, in which the text itself circumscribes appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos (what Kinneavy might call "product discourse," p. 38). In this context, rhetorical appeals are seen as formal components of texts, just like diction and syntax, and analyses that rely exclusively on discussion of ethos, pathos, and logos may seem narrow. See Appendix B for a sample of student writing that received the same score (5 from both raters) for pre and post, even though the posttest clearly demonstrates a more richly rhetorical understanding of discourse—a desired outcome of RHE 306/WPA.

A second weakness of the pre and posttests, according to one AP scorer, was their mixing of evaluation with analysis. In RHE 306, students are taught that texts, because they must be actualized by human beings, should be analyzed in the context of their audiences. Sophisticated analyses consider the ways texts affect different audiences differently, and in so doing, they inevitably blend analysis of effects with assessment of effectiveness. AP rhetorical analyses, on the other hand, assume a stable, objective text (or at least a text directed toward a monolithic audience, referred to as "the reader" or "the audience"), and so they can achieve a level of pure analysis unavailable in a more contextual approach. AP rhetorical analysis is reminiscent of New Critical explication, as described by Graff: the text is presumed to be rhetorically effective/organically unified, and the job of the analyst/explicator is to demonstrate how this effectiveness/unity is achieved. AP rhetorical analyses, then, are no less evaluative than those taught in RHE 306, but the evaluation is made in advance, so test-takers need not make any evaluative comments in their essays. Students who have learned the RHE 306 model of rhetorical analysis would find evaluative comments unavoidable. For example, the posttest included in Appendix A concludes

that Carson's argument may not have adequately considered the objections of farmers who must control pests. For AP Readers, such an evaluation may seem off-topic in an essay expected to be pure analysis.

Finally, one of the AP scorers remarked that most of the essays were just too brief, with students' best insights often unelaborated. SPURS students received no instruction in writing timed, impromptu essays, and in fact, they were advised *against* strategies that would seem effective for timed writing. They were encouraged to investigate the contexts of the texts they read and to read the texts they analyze deliberately. Students were instructed that the writing they produce in a first sitting should not be considered final and that, in order to avoid getting blocked, they should turn off their internal editor when they first start writing. It seems possible, then, that these lessons led to students producing shorter texts than they might have with more practice in high-pressure, timed writing situations.

It seems, then, that completion of a course like RHE 306 may not be the ideal preparation for the AP English Language Exam. Ironically, a better way to prepare for the exam might be to analyze it using the skills taught in RHE 306. For example, students could learn that they are writing for a simple audience, a college writing instructor or AP English teacher who will read hundreds of essays on the same topic in a single week, and who has been trained to evaluate each essay using standardized criteria. Students could familiarize themselves with the conversation they want to join by studying sample essay responses from past years' exams. In the case of rhetorical analysis essays, students would learn that their audience does not value critique of the passage under analysis, nor does their audience expect the passage to be analyzed in its original context or in terms of different audiences. Their audience does value intelligent use of formal devices (e.g., diction, syntax, imagery, figurative language, details, and appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos in the manner described above), so students should study these devices and practice using them as tools of analysis. Finally, students should practice their own writing situation: 40 minutes to read a 60-line passage, analyze it, and write a rhetorical analysis essay about it. Such an approach might seem unethical, the worst sort of "teaching to the test," but it might also be seen as a lesson in sizing up and responding to an authentic rhetorical situation. And considering the rewards of high AP scores, it hardly seems fair to deny students their best opportunity to succeed on the exam. The real problem is that the temptation to "game" the test exists in the first place. If the outcomes measured by the AP Exam more clearly aligned with those endorsed by WPA, then AP teachers and students might not be tempted to seek shortcuts.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The current investigation raises doubts about the validity of the AP English Language and Composition Exam. The exam may not measure outcomes parallel to those produced by the first-year writing course at UT, and others who have compared the exam to first-year writing at their universities have reached the same conclusion (Hansen, et al., “Advanced”; “Argument”; Mahala and Vivion). The College Board claims validity for all its AP exams, but the research on which these claims are based is not wholly persuasive. The College Board’s standard validity studies ask college students to take the AP Exam that corresponds to the course in which they are enrolled, and then their exam scores are compared with their final course grades. As others have noted (Hansen, et al., “Advanced; “Argument”; Jones; Vopat, “Do I”), this method of research may show a *correlation* between exam scores and grades, but it misses the question that is most important to WPAs: does the exam measure what is being taught in first-year writing? Other College Board research is similarly problematic. For example, a 2006 brochure, “Setting a Policy for AP English,” displays a table indicating that students who pass the AP Exam perform better in “second-level English courses” than students who complete a first-year writing course. The brochure does not include a citation, but it refers readers to a URL where they can access a number of research studies. On this webpage one finds that the original source of the table is a 1998 Educational Testing Service report, “Advanced Placement Students in College: An Investigation of Course Grades at 21 Colleges,” the data for which were gathered from students entering college in 1991. The problems with referencing twenty-year-old research are exemplified by the case of UT, one of the twenty-one colleges in the study. The “introductory” and “second-level” courses cited are no longer even offered in the same department. RHE 306 is a writing class offered in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing, and E 316 is a literature course offered in the English Department. Ironically, the most compelling support for the predictive validity of the exam comes from researchers who criticize it. Hansen and her colleagues found that students who passed the AP Exam and students who completed a first-year writing course performed roughly the same on sophomore-level writing tasks (“Advanced”; “Argument”). Their findings do not justify exemption from first-year writing, however, as neither group performed satisfactorily. The only students who did perform satisfactorily were those who passed the AP Exam *and* completed a first-year writing course, which further indicates that AP programs and college writing programs may be producing different outcomes.

Recent changes to the AP English Language Exam are encouraging. In 1989, Foster criticized a type of question that presented students with a sentence in isolation and asked them to choose its best rephrasing from a list of choices. Although this type of question was still being criticized in 1993 (Mahala and Vivion), by then the sentences were presented in the context of longer passages. Now such “sentence manipulation” questions have been dropped entirely from the exam. For the first time in 2007, the exam included multiple choice questions that tested students’ understanding of citations, and students were required to write a synthesis essay in which they cited sources in support of an argument. Such changes reflect the movement in writing instruction away from general composing principles and toward instruction that situates students in a specific discourse. Further changes of this sort are necessary if the exam is to be a valid measurement of WPA outcomes.

The AP English Language Exam could more accurately measure WPA-endorsed outcomes simply by adopting the practices of other AP courses. For example, AP offers three studio art courses in which student work is assessed based on portfolios rather than exams. According to studio art course descriptions, thousands of students submit portfolios every year, and the work “may have been produced in art classes or on the student’s own time” (College Board, *Studio* 8). The idea of making at least part of the AP English Exam portfolio-based is not new. In 1989, Foster suggested that one of the three free-response questions be replaced by an extended, revised essay that students had completed under the supervision of an AP teacher. Since a precedent exists for submitting AP work produced outside an exam setting, and since the AP English Language course requires students “to write essays that proceed through several stages or drafts, with revision aided by teacher and peers” (College Board, *Course Description* 9), it seems reasonable to expect that such essays be part of the course assessment.

The timed essays that students write for the exam could become more richly contextual by adopting the practices of AP History courses. Like the AP English Language course, the AP U.S. History course does not prescribe a reading list, but it presumes some common content knowledge because “a student must be able to draw upon a reservoir of systematic factual knowledge in order to exercise analytic skills intelligently” (College Board, *History* 5). Multiple-choice questions test “*knowledge-based* analytical skills” (emphasis added, 14), and, for the document-based essay question, “*outside knowledge is very important and must be incorporated into the student’s essay if the highest scores are to be earned*” (emphasis in original, 14). The troubling consequences of requiring no content knowledge are exemplified by the highest-scoring sample response to the Maria Stewart

prompt published on *AP Central*. The essay, which scored an 8, falsely identifies Stewart as a former slave and claims that “Stewart is successful in describing and calling [for] an end to the plight of African Americans.” In fact, according to Bizzell and Herzberg, “hearing such trenchant words from the mouth of a woman was too much for [Stewart’s] audience,” and a year after her speech at Franklin Hall, Stewart “would leave the speaker’s platform because of the opposition she had aroused” (1033). In her farewell speech, Stewart stated flatly: “I find it is of no use for me as an individual to try to make myself useful among my color in this city” (qtd. in Bizzell and Herzberg 1042). It seems that Stewart herself did not believe she had been rhetorically successful, but of course there is no way for test-takers to know this without sufficient contextual information. Recent changes to the AP English Language Exam (e.g., multiple-choice questions based on the analysis of texts; free-response questions requiring reading-to-write skills) repudiate the outmoded view of composition as a basic skills course that requires no content knowledge. But why limit content knowledge to that which students must learn on the spot? Despite the statement in the AP English Language course description that there is no required reading list, the exam questions themselves, of course, contain required reading. The writing and rhetorical analysis tasks on the exam would more accurately measure outcomes that parallel first-year college writing courses if students had seen the texts before and had spent the school year learning about their history, context, and discourse conventions.

Recently in the pages of this journal, White has acknowledged our “grudging acceptance of AP scores” (“Testing” 132), and Hansen and her colleagues have stated unequivocally that, although they recommend stricter policies for course exemptions, they “do not advocate abolishing AP English courses” (“Argument” 40). I echo these scholars’ sentiments in asserting that college writing programs, like it or not, are partnered with AP English, and this need not be a bad thing. Although some elite institutions have eliminated AP credit-by-examination, and others have raised the minimum score by which students earn credit for first-year writing (Ganesananthan; Haswell; Jaschik), many institutions feel they have no choice but to grant credit for a score of 3 on the AP English Language Exam. Schools that need to increase enrollment must grant credit for a 3 to attract students (Foster; Holladay; Mahala and Vivion; Owen; Vopat, “Going”; “Politics”). Schools like UT, which are not necessarily looking to increase enrollment, simply do not have enough classroom space and instructors to staff first-year writing courses for all students. Given these realities, college writing programs must become more actively involved with AP in order to avoid what Mahala and Vivion discovered about their university seventeen

years ago: “There was no university policy for a regular review of any of the tests that the university accepts for credit. In other words, departments that accept credit-by-examination had virtually conceded the responsibility to grant certain university credit to various national testing agencies” (43).

The SPURS program views its partnership with AP programs as an opportunity, rather than as a necessary evil, and the DRW encourages other college writing programs to begin similar partnerships. By reaching out to AP programs, college writing programs can improve the alignment of high school and college writing instruction, particularly at high schools whose student population is underrepresented at postsecondary institutions. And if college writing programs were more involved with AP programs, they could push for appropriate changes to the AP Exam. Then colleges and universities might feel more confident that AP students are exempted from first-year writing because they have achieved appropriate outcomes, not because of bureaucratic necessity.

## NOTES

1. After being accused of writing a “limp, muckraking article,” Vopat responded: “I do not understand how Professor Wicke feels that he knows so much about my personal life, and I’ll try to forget that reference to my ‘limp’ article.” See the “Comment and Response” sections of *College English*, 44 (2), February 1982, and *College English*, 44 (5), September 1982 for the full exchange.

2. See Lichten, Hanset et al., “Argument,” and Haswell for research suggesting that a score of 3 may not justify exemption from first-year writing, as well as a list of the growing number of institutions that require a 4 for exemption. The DRW investigated the possibility of requiring a 4 for exemption from RHE 306, but according to UT’s Measurement and Evaluation Center, every year approximately 1500 entering freshmen score exactly a 3 on the AP Exam and convert that score to RHE 306 credit. Considering that RHE 306 classes are capped at 20-25, even raising the minimum credit-by-examination score from a 3 to a 4 would necessitate some 60 additional sections of RHE 306 every year. The Department decided that it had neither the instructors nor the classroom space to accommodate that many students.

3. The synthesis essay prompt measures some of the outcomes described in the “Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing” section of the *WPA Statement*, but important differences remain. First, although the question does expect students to evaluate the sources provided, it does not require students to find the sources themselves. Second, the exam question affords no more opportunity for invention than do the other free response questions, as students are still given a limited choice of theses from which to choose. Third, the *WPA Statement* encourages students to view library research as a way of finding a conversation to join, rather

than as a way to cherry-pick sources that will support their argument. The AP question would seem to encourage the latter activity.

4. Another day-long orientation, covering the researched argument, is held prior to the spring semester. During the spring, each AP class partners with its SPURS instructor's new RHE 306 class on the researched argument.

5. The free response questions used in this study appeared on the 2004 and 2005 Form B exams, and *AP Central* does not provide scoring statistics for these versions of the exam. The average scores on the rhetorical analysis questions on the 2004 and 2005 Form A exams were 4.74 and 4.92, respectively.

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## APPENDIX A

### *Student 1 Pretest (scored a 4 by both raters)*

In the excerpt from a lecture delivered in Boston in 1832, Maria W. Stewart tries to display the need for African Americans to be considered for more "industrious and ambitious" jobs that are "serviceable to society." To convey her point of view, the author uses metaphors, diction, and sentence structure.

The author uses metaphors to add color to her writing and better convey her point. She says that African Americans' souls are "ragged as we are." It is very striking to think of a person's soul as ragged like an old dish towel. She compares the mind of a servant to the "scorching sands of Arabia" where nothing can grow.

The passage's diction makes the author's voice ten times louder than if she would have used facts alone. Other than displaying diction metaphorically, the author chooses to use words of a higher level, which displays her intelligence. Word choice is especially important in refuting claims of ignorance, which have been placed upon her and her race. She replaces these terms

with words like “noble souls,” “industrious,” “ambitious,” and “your spirit fires my breast.”

Lastly the author uses sentence structure to convey her position. She starts two paragraphs with the single word “again.” Although this is a fragment, it conveys the drudgery that African Americans are faced with. She ends one paragraph with a question, asking if white people don’t have lazy people among them. This style leaves people wondering.

The author displays her position well using both rhetoric and devices. Using more intelligent words and sentence structures increases her credibility as a writer and educator.

*Student 1 Posttest (scored a 6 by both raters)*

Many environmentalists in modern society are continuously searching for ways to enlighten Americans to the deadly effects of poisons and pesticides. Such is the objective of Rachel Carson in her published book *Silent Spring*. In this naturalistic rhetoric piece, Carson identifies many reasons why deadly poisons should not be used to regulate the population of pests on farms. She asserts that not only are pesticides potentially harmful to other animals, but humans as well.

The claim Carson most wants her readers to accept is that pesticides are dangerous for humans. To back up this claim, Carson provides an anecdote dealing with workers who were in need of “skilled medical attention” after handling foliage treated by parathion a month earlier. Another fact that supports Carson’s claim is that parathion was used in Indiana in 1959 without any measures to protect “boys who roam through woods or fields.” As soon as she mentions these facts of humans being harmed by poison, she, perhaps even unintentionally, transcends logos to another, more personal level—targeting specifically people’s emotions. Most readers would be terrified that a “universal killer” is out there without their knowledge.

Because Carson is a noted biologist, most readers will assume that she knows a lot about the environment and how it affects plants, animals, and humans. As a result, credibility is added to her opinions. With that being said, it is very important to look at when this book was written: 1962. The 1960s was a decade filled with societal revolutions, and many people were trying to become “one with nature.” Carson may have been identified with hippies, which could help or hurt her case depending on the reader. Carson

could have helped her credibility by providing more than just one alternative solution or by addressing the situation from a farmer's point-of-view, but she did not. Her book definitely contains a lot of bias, and this may turn off some readers.

Pathos is obviously Carson's number one rhetorical strategy throughout this particular excerpt of her book. She attempts to evoke sympathy in her readers by using such words as "innocent," "lifeless," and "doomed" to describe the animals. Towards the end of her article, Carson begins to question those who possessed the authority to decide to use potentially hazardous pesticides on the environment. By doing this, she may make readers feel angry that this has happened without their knowledge.

There is no doubt that Carson's attempt at transforming the attitudes of society towards the environment could be effective with many readers. Her emphasis on the side-effects of dangerous pesticides was sufficient enough to catch the reader's attention. However, she came really close to generalizing the intentions of farmers. Obviously, not all farmers are out to kill thousands of animals like she portrayed. Overall, the excerpt exhibited zealous rhetorical strategy, but if she would have paid closer attention to potential opponents it would have been exquisite.

## APPENDIX B

### *Student 2 Pretest (scored a 5 by both raters)*

The excerpt from Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" is full of rhetorical strategies. It uses a number of ways to convince the reader to side with the view of the writer. Some of these ways include vocabulary, negative tone, figures of speech, and an unwavering message.

The vocabulary plays a significant role in conveying the writer's message. For example, the spray that covers vegetables is described as a "lethal film." The negative connotation of "lethal" causes the reader to feel fear. Nature is described as "doomed." "Eradicating" is used to describe the killing humans are doing. This word triggers the thought that humans are acting rashly or thoughtlessly. Another well-placed word is "easy." Carson presents the idea that it would have been "easy" for farmers to "slightly" change their farming in order to prevent killing the birds. The process may actually be difficult, but now it seems like it would have been easy. In these ways the vocabulary played a huge role in persuading.

The overall tone of the passage is extremely negative. Humans are portrayed as thoughtless, hateful, unsympathetic, and out of control. The birds are shown as being helplessly destroyed. The passage presents the future as horrifically sad by implying that birds may no longer be with us. Each of these details builds the intensity and sadness of the situation.

Figures of speech help make the negative tone more vivid. Airplanes carrying pesticides are sent on a “mission of death,” and the chemicals they drop are described as a “wave of death” sweeping the landscape. It is the people in power who have decided for the people to kill all the pests that bother farmers, and their decisions are having repercussions “like ripples when a pebble is dropped into a still pond.” In her ending sentence she makes it seem as if leaders have made these decisions behind the people’s backs.

This excerpt from “Silent Spring” is attempting to convey that pesticides like parathion that are sprayed around the world are dangerous to nature. The unrelenting message is that nature and animals will be destroyed by pesticides because of the actions of a few. The world is being damaged without people’s consent.

In conclusion, through various means, Carson attempts to prevent the pesticidal killings occurring in nature. She does this by instilling compassion for nature as well as for the future in her article. The vocabulary, negative tone, figures of speech, and unwavering message play large roles in Carson’s rhetorical process.

*Student 2 Posttest (scored a 5 by both raters)*

Maria Stewart faced a difficult task in her lecture in Boston in 1832 because she was probably addressing an audience of mostly whites. Throughout this excerpt Stewart attempts to rise to the challenge by making appeals to logos, ethos, and pathos.

Stewart makes a logical appeal in challenging the claim that blacks are “lazy and idle.” She points out that when people are unable to “rise above the condition of servants and drudges” it “deadens the energy of the soul” and makes people seem lazy when they might have accomplished much in life if given the opportunity. She concedes “with extreme sorrow” that some African Americans are lazy, but in her rebuttal she asks the rhetorical question, “And have you not a similar class among yourself?” Stewart’s audience would surely admit that there are many lazy white people, and many listen-

ers might conclude that they would feel uninspired if they were doomed to a life of drudgery.

Stewart makes an ethical appeal when she acknowledges that some African Americans are lazy. This conveys to her audience that she is not idealizing her people. She references the *Liberator*, which might be effective with the audience because they see that Stewart is literate and involved in the cause of African American rights. Stewart also claims she is “willing to die by the sword” to defend her position. Some people in the audience might have thought she was exaggerating, but for some this would show that Stewart is not out for personal gain.

Stewart is most effective at pathos appeals that pull on the heartstrings of the audience. She asserts that African American’s servile labor is as insignificant and unimportant as a spider’s web. A spider works hard to spin a web and capture enough food to survive. African Americans work hard to earn a miserable wage and to attempt to live respectably. Neither is lazy, but neither has a chance at progression. This comparison appeals to listeners’ imaginations and helps them see the situation of blacks in a whole new light.

Maria Stewart may not have convinced her audience that blacks should be equal because slavery still existed for thirty years after her speech. However, she may have planted the seeds of persuasion by speaking so eloquently about the despondent cycle of “drudgery and toil.”

