

Using Criteria-Based Assessment to Measure and Improve First-Year Writing Proficiencies

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Introduction

At UC Santa Cruz, we are committed to using evidence-based decision making to enact curricular change. One of our primary methods for generating such evidence is **criteria-based assessment of learning**.

Collaboratively, faculty work with an assessment specialist in IRAPS to design studies specific to a course or degree program. For each study, they ...

- > develop an analytic rubric that specifies distinct criteria that align with program or course learning outcomes,
- > determine levels of proficiency for each criterion, and
- > select appropriate original student work or exam problems.

We collect evidence about how well students meet learning outcomes; this evidence allows us to assess which populations are most at-risk and what initiatives we might put in place to better support students.^{2,6}

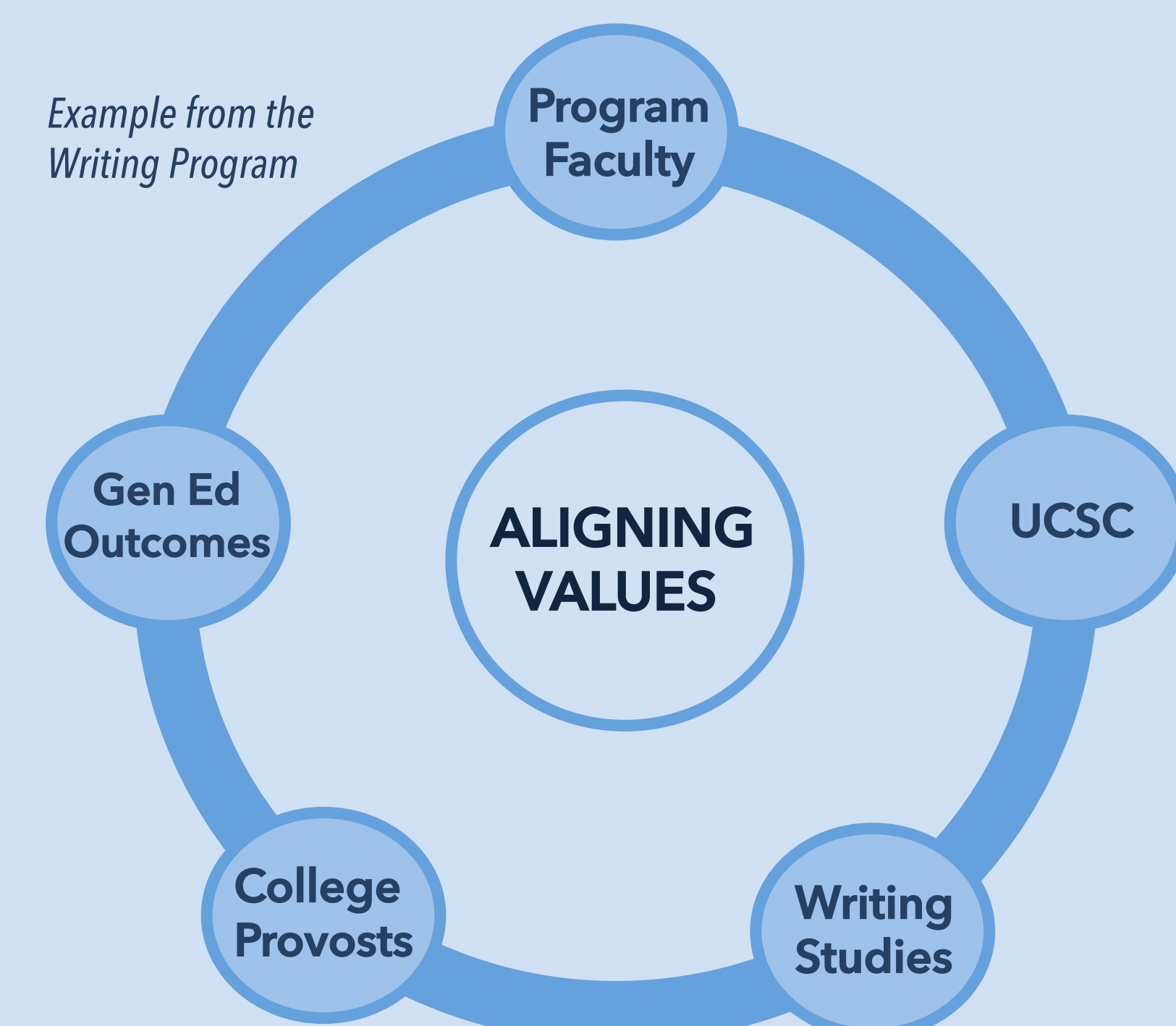
Benefits

Criteria-based assessment provides an opportunity to gather more in-depth evidence about students' proficiencies than we gain from course grades.¹ Specifically, the approach is...

- > **Institutionally- and course-driven**
as opposed to standardized (externally imposed)
- > **Authentic**
to faculty, field, and campus values
- > **Qualitative and quantitative**
to generate rich data for analysis
- > **A way to achieve "constructive alignment"**³
to improve teaching practices and student learning

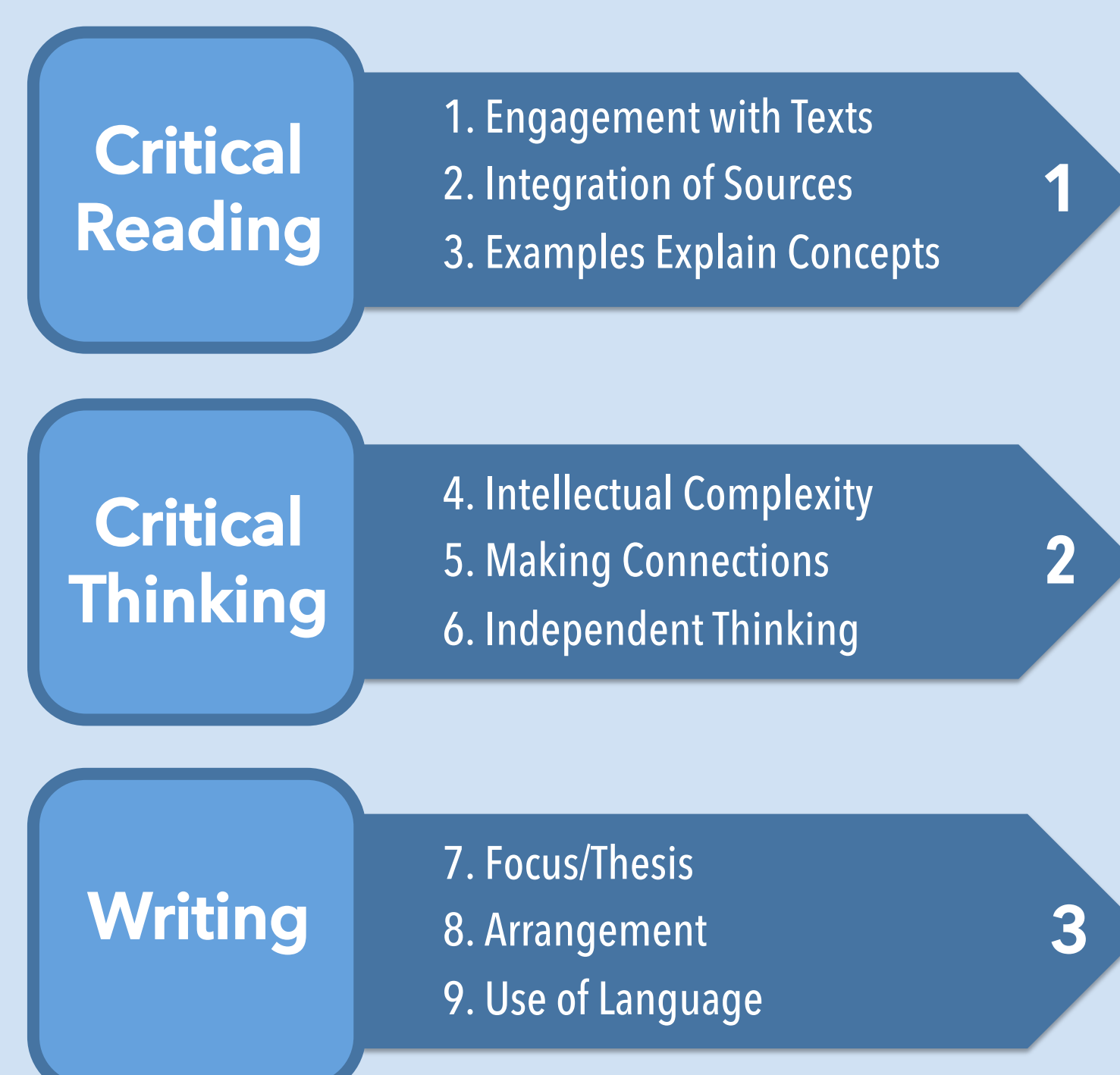
Dynamic Criteria Mapping

To generate criteria, we use dynamic criteria mapping, an empirically-grounded process that asks faculty to examine student work and to articulate what they value, in alignment with a number of local and field-specific values. This approach revises the notion that rubrics are (or should be) portable from institution to institution.^{4,5}

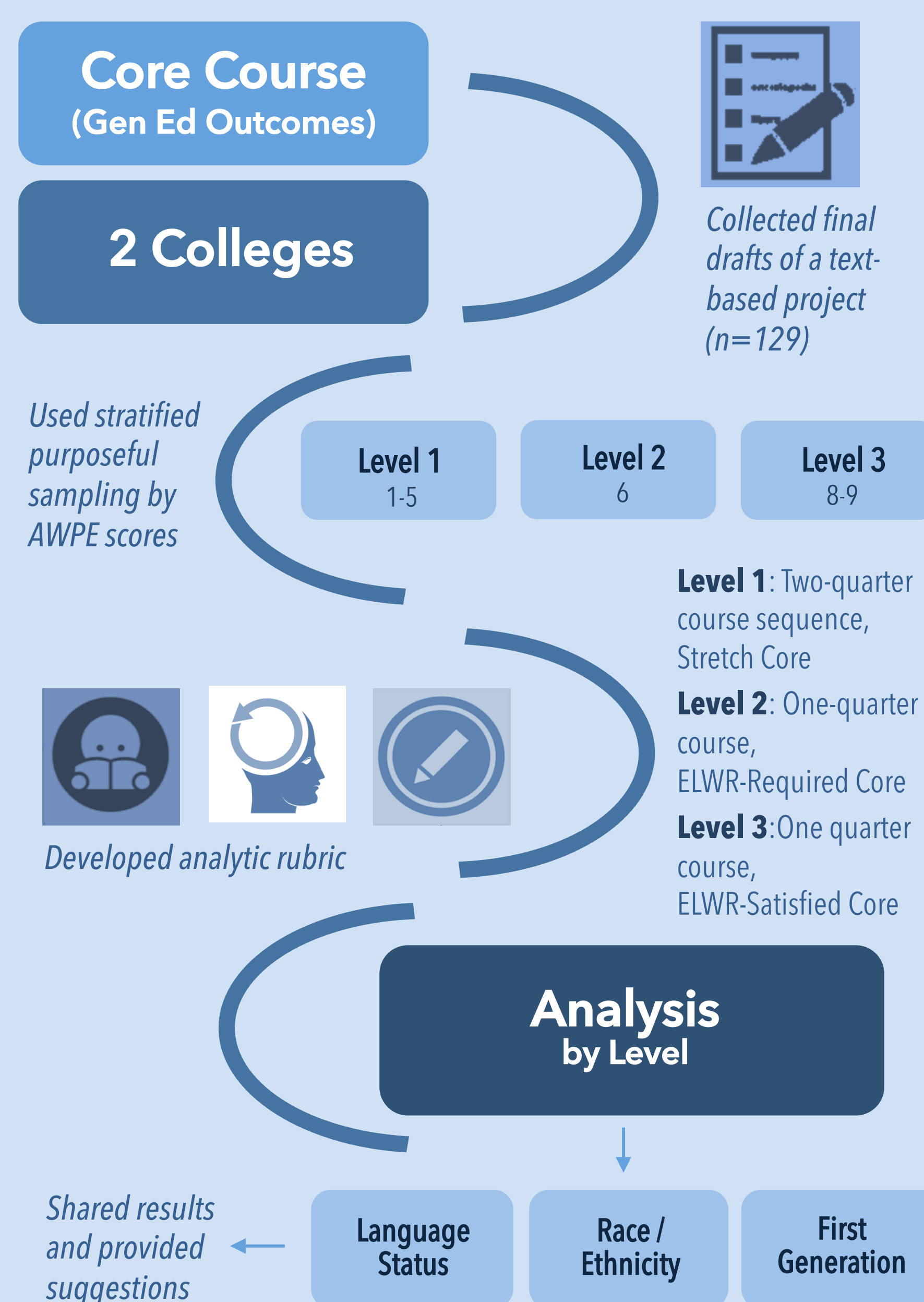


Analytic Rubric

UC Santa Cruz's first-year composition course outcomes include proficiencies in three domains: critical reading, critical thinking, and writing. We developed three criteria for each domain, and we defined four proficiency levels: exceed, meet, do not meet (tried but failed), and do not meet expectations (no evidence).



Methodology



Results

1. By Domain and Criteria

Domain 1: Critical Reading

Areas for Improvement

- > Providing sufficient context for introducing sources
- > Understanding the purpose of quoting and paraphrasing
- > Selecting relevant examples (personal/academic) to support ideas

Domain 2: Critical Thinking

Areas for Improvement

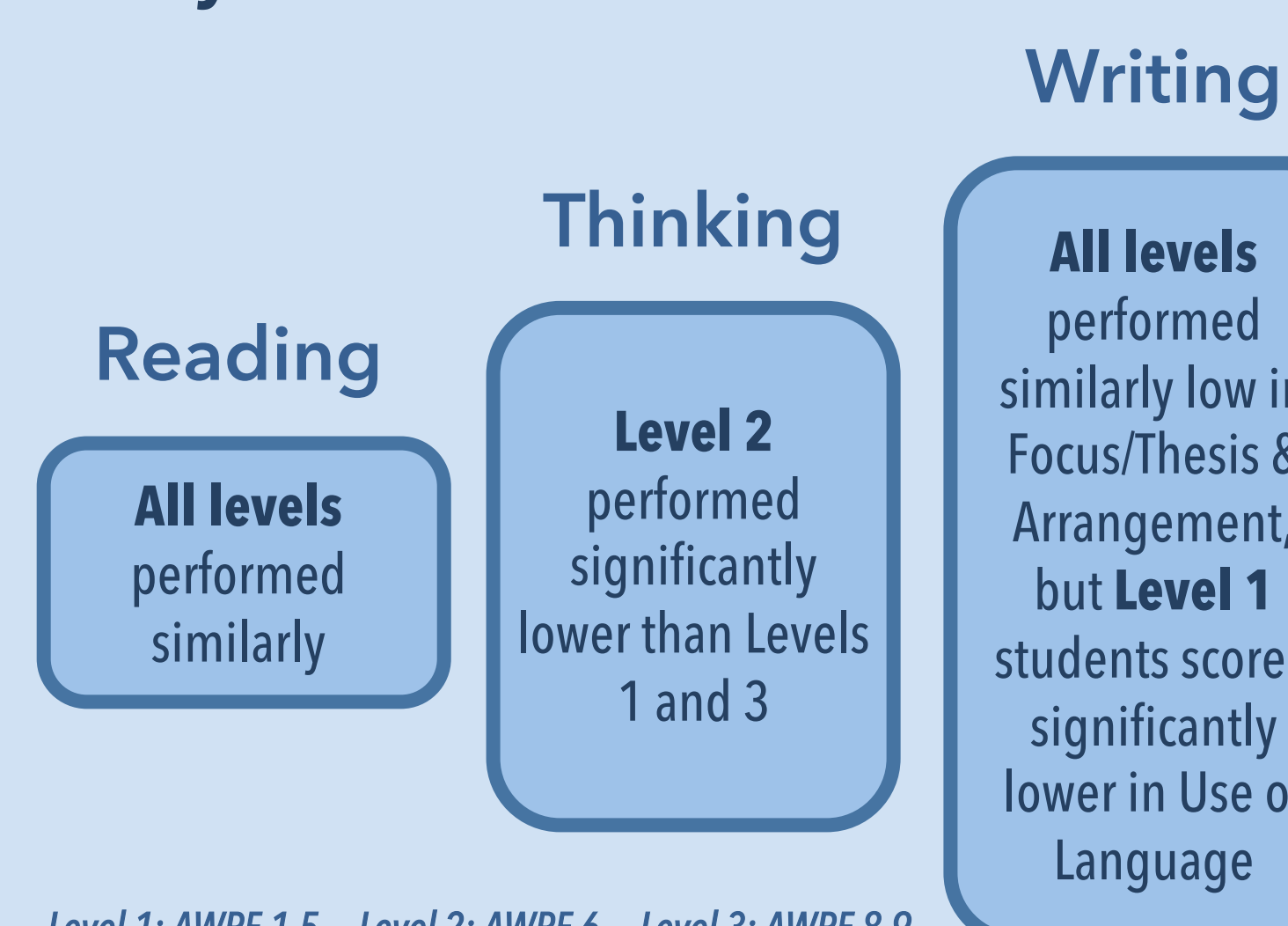
- > Establishing a distinct perspective from that of a text's
- > Relating a text to personal or academic experience
- > Differentiating between analysis and summary

Domain 3: Writing

Areas for Improvement

- > Developing a main idea consistently throughout project
- > Demonstrating the purpose of each paragraph
- > Exhibiting sentence-level control consistently throughout project

2. By Level



3. By Group Differences

(based on UC Application questions)

Language Status

- Level 1:** ESL students performed significantly better than English Only and Bilingual peers
- Levels 2 & 3:** ESL students performed significantly lower

Race / Ethnicity and First-Generation Status

No significant differences based on methodology; additional measures needed in future studies.

Implications

After analyzing the data, collaborating with various faculty groups to interpret the findings, and writing the final report, we identified at-risk populations of students:

- > Level 2 students with AWPE score of 6
- > English Only and Bilingual students in Level 1
- > ESL students in Levels 2 and 3

Then, we developed a list of recommendations to improve students' learning experiences, as well as UC Santa Cruz's infrastructure for writing support.

We are now in the process of revising our current structure for first-year composition, taking this study into account.

Curriculum

- > Align assignments and outcomes more explicitly
- > Strengthen pedagogical support
- > Integrate writing throughout undergraduate curriculum

Tutoring

- > Increase access for Level 2 students
- > Develop assessment plan to measure impact
- > Consider long-term structure

Placement

- > Re-examine cut-off scores for Level 2 students
- > Improve UC Application questions
- > Consider multi-measure placement approach

References

1. Allen, M. (2004). *Assessing Academic Programs in Higher Education*.
2. Anson, C.M., et al. (2012). "Big Rubrics and Weird Genres."
3. Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2011). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*.
4. Broad, B. (2003). *What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing*.
5. Broad, B., et al. (2009). *Organic Writing Assessment*.
6. Sadler, D.R. (2005). "Interpretations of Criteria-Based Assessment and Grading in Higher Education."

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