

College-Level Literacy: An Inventory of Current Practices at Ontario's Colleges

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for the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario



Higher Education
Quality Council
of Ontario

An agency of the Government of Ontario

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Cite this publication in the following format:

Fisher, R. & Hoth, W. (2010). *College-Level Literacy: An Inventory of Current Practices at Ontario's Colleges*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

Published by:

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario

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Executive Summary

Centrality of language proficiency in academic achievement

- Proficiency in language is recognized as an essential component of student success at Ontario's colleges and in the provincial workplace.
- Research indicates that postsecondary underachievement, failure, and attrition are highly correlated with academic under-preparedness, especially with respect to deficits in language proficiency.
- Contemporary college students in Ontario do not represent a homogeneous population; rather, they exhibit a wide range of abilities and needs related to language proficiency. Additionally, an increasing percentage of Ontario college students have second language challenges.
- The identification of students who are *at-risk* of not successfully completing their programs due to deficits in language proficiency, and the provision of timely and appropriate remediation where necessary, represent critical priorities in supporting student success.

HEQCO/HOL College Level Literacy Project

- In addressing these challenges, Ontario's colleges have developed a wide range of practices, programs, resources, and services to assist all students in achieving their required outcomes, regardless of their beginning characteristics in terms of language proficiency.
- The purpose of this project is to conduct a comprehensive state-of-the-field review of current practices, instruments, resources, and services related to the assessment and development of college-level language proficiency for all students enrolled in postsecondary programs at Ontario's 24 colleges.
- The project employed a descriptive research methodology designed to compile, collate, analyze, and report quantitative and qualitative information related, primarily, to post-admission, postsecondary language practices.
- Project design consisted of three overlapping phases: (1) consultation with a Project Advisory Panel; (2) extensive secondary research of relevant literature and documents; and (3) primary data gathering, analysis, and reporting based on extensive consultations at all 24 Ontario colleges and with other key stakeholders.
- A ladder curriculum framework, identifying key constructs of Assessment, Remediation, and Level 1 and Level 2 Communications courses, proved to be a useful

instrument for gathering and reporting information. Three categories of college size, based on the Fall 2009 intake of students into postsecondary programs, provided further insight into the distribution of various practices.

- All 24 Ontario colleges participated in this study.

Findings and Discussion

- Some form of post-admission formal Assessment of language proficiency, for placement purposes, was reported by 62 per cent of Ontario colleges; however, the scale, method, instruments, and benchmarks varied significantly across, and sometimes within, colleges.
- Three general methods of formal language assessment were reported:
 - Writing sample: 33 per cent of colleges conducted language proficiency assessment based solely on student writing samples. Rubrics were commonly employed, but exhibited varying benchmarks and evaluation criteria; formal training and calibration of graders were professional expectations at most colleges. Several colleges were also pilot testing *computer-grading* of writing samples; no consensus was reported on the relative merits of computer versus human grading.
 - Computerized assessment of Reading Comprehension and/or Sentence Skills: 20 per cent of colleges relied solely on this method for assessing language proficiency, based on the assumption, not fully supported in the literature, that assessment of reading comprehension and/or sentence skills constituted a reliable surrogate for measuring writing skills.
 - Multiple measures: 47 per cent of colleges employed multiple measures, usually through a combination of writing sample and computerized assessment of reading comprehension/sentence skills, a method strongly supported in the literature.
- Only 25 per cent of colleges conducted some type of formal “exit” testing that mirrored entry-level criteria. Only four colleges reported rigorous practices in exit testing that also replicated their formalized entry-level processes of double-blind grading; scoring rubrics; and trained, calibrated graders.
- Overall, the extent and diversity of current assessment practices at Ontario colleges suggested that a significant degree of activity was occurring in this field. Many of these current practices were supported by the literature (multiple measures, focus of writing modality, use of rubrics, training and calibration of graders, etc.). However, neither shared policies, nor consistent provincial strategies, nor were universal commitments reported with respect to common practices in formal assessment of language proficiency.
- All 24 colleges reported some form of Remediation or language upgrading service.

- Three categories of primary remediation methods were reported:
 - Support Services: 29 per cent of Ontario colleges relied primarily on support services (such as Learning Centres, Student Support Centres, etc.) to meet additional language upgrading needs of students.
 - “Transcript” Courses: 25 per cent of Ontario colleges relied primarily on remedial, upgrading, or foundations languages courses. For the purpose of this Report, these types of remedial/upgrading courses were referred to as “Transcript” courses since, while students earned credits on their college transcripts for completion of these courses, the credits earned through this method did not qualify as credits that could be applied toward postsecondary program completion. While remedial assistance was often more focused and intensive, students became “off cycle” with their cohorts in terms of program mapping.
 - “Modified” Level 1 Courses: 29 per cent of Ontario colleges relied primarily on Level 1 Communications courses that were “modified” in some manner, such as extra hours, smaller class sizes, pedagogical accommodations, and/or specialized teachers. Through this method of mainstreaming or concurrent remediation, students received remedial assistance while simultaneously earning Level 1 credits that qualified as credits toward postsecondary program completion.
 - Combinations: 17 per cent of Ontario colleges relied primarily on both Transcript and Modified Level 1 Communications courses to meet the remedial needs of their students. Additionally, half of Ontario colleges reported some form of supplemental assistance and/or dedicated “writing centres” available to any student requesting, on a voluntary basis, additional assistance; 29 per cent also offered organized activities related to oral language skills.
- The landscape of language services located at Ontario colleges was at times complicated by an overlapping array of pre- and post-admission upgrading services for adults and students from non-traditional pathways, and/or language acquisition services for a range of students, including internationally trained immigrants, for whom English/French was not their first language. For example, in 2009-2010, the most common “Other” languages reported by new Ontario college students included Arabic, Chinese, Spanish, Korean, and Farsi. Further illustrating the overlapping array of language services. ACE (Academic & Career Entrance Certificate Program) provided, in 2008-2009, non-postsecondary preparatory language “upgrading” courses for several thousand students who were concurrently enrolled in postsecondary programs.
- All 24 colleges required mandatory Level 1 Communications Courses in most (46 per cent) or all (54 per cent) postsecondary programs. Concomitantly, all colleges required mandatory Level 2 Communications Courses in some (21 per cent), most (63 per cent), or all (16 per cent) postsecondary programs. Level 1 and 2 Communications courses addressed a range of student language needs, as well as a range of program-specific language outcomes. Language-related Essential Employability Skills mandated by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities were also addressed primarily through Level 1 and 2 Communications courses, which represented, in form, content, and

delivery, the greatest commonality of any language practices, programs, or services encountered during the preparation of this Report.

- Other avenues for post-admission language credits for students enrolled in postsecondary programs were provided by OntarioLearn.com and various ESL/ FSL (English/ French as a Second Language) programs.
- More than half (54 per cent) of colleges reported some form of ongoing formal institutional research related to language proficiency, student demographic variables, student success and retention, and/or pilot studies on the effectiveness of various pedagogical practices, assessment instruments, and/or methods of remediation. Such evidence-based measures of effectiveness added credibility to requests for support and expansion of college-level literacy programs and practices.

Conclusion

- This Report represents a comprehensive inventory of current practices related to language proficiency assessment and skills development across Ontario's college system, based on information gathered during the academic year 2009-2010.
- With respect to Level 1, Level 2, and program-related Communications courses, this Report describes a significant degree of commonality across the system in terms of learning outcomes, delivery methods, terminology, and adherence to MTCU requirements regarding generic communications skills and essential employability skills.
- However, with respect to the Assessment and Remediation steps of the ladderized curriculum framework employed in this study, this Report presents a landscape characterized by a wide range and diversity of activities, terminology, methods, benchmarks, instruments, service models, delivery agents, and measures of effectiveness.
- This diversity is significant in light of a recurring proposition, in the context of a 20-year chronology of Ontario studies as well as the research on postsecondary literacy practices, that common system-wide approaches to these issues can produce positive outcomes, for a wide range of stakeholders, with respect to:
 - facilitating communication among practitioners and administrators,
 - providing a common framework for interpreting and reporting learner achievements,
 - permitting evidence-based decision-making at both the college and system levels,
 - providing common measures of effectiveness and accountability across the system,
 - establishing portability and transferability of assessment scores and achievement results, thus enabling students to move from college to college without

undergoing unnecessary re-assessment or logistically challenging requests for “equivalencies”.

- All contributors to this Report recognized some potential benefits of common approaches; however, many institutions were heavily invested in their current, and often well-established, practices. The challenge is to reconcile these divergent approaches and practices for the sake of all stakeholders.
- It is hoped that this Report, in describing the extent and variety of current practices related to language proficiency, and in raising timely and pertinent questions concerning these practices, will act as a catalyst for productive discussion and fruitful developments as Ontario colleges work to fulfill a shared vision of helping all college students achieve success through enhanced literacy.

Note: While a wide array of preparatory language upgrading and language acquisition courses, programs, and services are delivered at colleges across the province, the primary focus of this Report is on ***post-admission*** language programs and practices for students ***currently enrolled in postsecondary programs***.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to express their gratitude to the many individuals who generously contributed to the preparation of this Report.

We thank the 73 individuals representing all 24 colleges and numerous stakeholder groups who participated in many meetings and discussions, reviewed and vetted several draft versions of parts or all of this Report, and generously provided more time than was originally asked of them. Their willingness to share their knowledge, insights, experience, and perspectives has greatly enriched the final product, and provides a solid foundation for more collaborative work in the future. (Names and titles of all contributors are listed in Appendix A.)

We also greatly appreciate the expertise and guidance provided by the members of our **Project Advisory Panel** in the planning, implementation, oversight, and review of this project from beginning to end:

- Vera Beletzan, Program Manager, English Language Centre, Humber College
- Martha Finnigan, Coordinator, School of Communication, Language & General Studies, Durham College
- Mac Greaves, Associate Dean, Aboriginal Studies, & Liberal Arts, Georgian College
- Gary Jennings, Acting Associate Dean, Language Studies Department, Mohawk College
- Dr. Hasan Malik, Acting Dean, School of Community & Liberal Studies, Sheridan College
- John Struthers, Academic Chair, School of English & Liberal Studies, Seneca College
- Dr. Ursula McCloy, Research Director, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario

Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to the **Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario** and to **Fanshawe College** for generously providing the funding that made this project possible.

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List of Acronyms Used in the Report

ACE	Academic & Career Entrance Certificate Program
BTSD	Basic Training for Skills Development
CCL	Canadian Council on Learning
CCLB	Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks
CELBAN	Canadian Language Benchmark Assessment for Nurses
CEP	College English Project
CIC	Citizenship & Immigration Canada
CIITE	Colleges Integrating Immigrants to Employment
CLB	Canadian Language Benchmarks
CPS	Clearly Post-Secondary
CSAC	College Standards & Accreditation Council
EAP	English for Academic Purposes
ESL	English as a Second Language
FSL	French as a Second Language
GED	Ontario High School Equivalency Certificate
HEQCO	Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario
HOL	Heads of Language
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
ITI	Internationally Trained Immigrant
L1, L2	Student for whom English is their first (L1) or second (L2) language
LBS	Literacy & Basic Skills
LINC	Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada
MTCU	Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities
NLS	National Literacy Secretariat
OCAS	Ontario College Application Service
OCWE	Ontario College Writing Exemplars
OLC	Ontario Literacy Coalition
OLS	Ontario Literacy Secretariat
OSLT	Occupation-Specific Language Training
OSSD	Ontario Secondary School Diploma
RPS	Ready for Post-Secondary
TOEFL	Test of English as a foreign Language

Note on Terminology

“College”

For the purpose of this Report, “college” is used as an omnibus term representing the 24 publicly funded postsecondary institutions comprising the Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAATs).

“Literacy” and “Language Proficiency”

For the purpose of this Report, “literacy” and “language proficiency” are used interchangeably and in the very broadest sense to refer to the reading, writing, and in some instances speaking and listening skills required for success at Ontario colleges. The interchangeability of these terms is reflected in the literature and in comments provided by respondents to this report, and is deemed appropriate by the authors in light of the range and variability of current practices reflected in this Report.

I. Introduction

Background

Centrality of Language Proficiency in Academic Achievement

In the 21st century, language proficiency constitutes an indispensable component of student success at Ontario's colleges and in the provincial workplace. By 2015, it is estimated that approximately 70 per cent of new jobs, including entry-level positions, will require some form of postsecondary education or skills training (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006, 2009; Colleges Ontario, 2009; Hodgson & Shannon, 2007; Human Resources Development Canada, 2000). The Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) noted, for example, that "the highest labour-market demand between now and 2015 will be for trades and college graduates" (2009, p. 113).

Particularly significant in the context of this current Report on college-level literacy, CCL (2009) also noted that postsecondary attainment levels "must be accompanied by literacy levels that maximize the value of the education" (p. 113). In fact, literacy [referred to in this Report as *language proficiency*] facilitates all of these educational and occupational activities; it is, in the words of Frank McKenna, "the great enabler" (in Alexander, 2010, p. 1). Individuals who are proficient in language are, quite simply, "more likely to succeed at college" (Alexander, p. 11).

However, in relation to academic preparedness for college success, only 58 per cent of Canadian adults (aged 16-64) currently demonstrate literacy levels sufficient to function in today's economy and society (CCL, 2006). A recent American study found that "over half (56 per cent) of all college students say that high school left them unprepared for the work and study habits expected in college", while 35 per cent specifically identified "gaps in the quality of writing that is expected" (Achieve, 2005, p. 4). The U.S. National Commission on Writing (2003) similarly noted, in *The Neglected 'R': The Need for a Writing Revolution*, that "by the end of first year of college, more than 50 per cent of the freshman class are unable to produce papers relatively free of language errors or to analyze arguments or synthesize information" (p. 14). Bartlett's (2003) oft-quoted article "Why Johnny can't read, even though he went to Princeton" suggested that, although writing is the "edifice on which the rest of education rests" (p. 7), postsecondary institutions "have not been doing a good job of teaching students how to write" (p.1).

The centrality of language proficiency to college success has been demonstrated repeatedly by research findings indicating that postsecondary underachievement, failure, and attrition are highly correlated with academic under-preparedness, especially with respect to deficits in language proficiency (Grubb, 2002; Hoyt, 1999; Jennings & Hunn, 2002; Perin, 2004; Tamburri, 2005; Vorhees, 1993). Similar conditions prevail specifically within the context of language proficiency needs and practices at Ontario colleges. For example, *Vision 2000*, a provincial policy document tasked with reviewing the mandate of Ontario's college system (Pascal, 1990), identified academic under-preparedness as a "key factor" (p. 18) in student decisions to drop out of college. Subsequent studies at Ontario colleges have provided further empirical evidence

correlating student attrition with academic under-preparedness in language proficiency (Dietsche, 1990; Fisher & Engemann, 2009; Marshall, 2008; Payne, 1999). Payne's (1999) study, for example, found that 41 per cent of entry-level students at one Ontario college were assessed "below the functional skill level for postsecondary communications" (p. 3) and consequently required some form of remediation.

Concomitantly, the benefits arising from institutional investment in upgrading for academically underprepared postsecondary students, in terms of improved grades and retention rates, have been well documented (Attewell et al., 2006; Bettinger & Long, 2005; Glenn, 2005; Herzog, 2005; Hoyt, 1999; Kreysa, 2007; Moss & Yeaton, 2006; Raab & Adam, 2005; Wallace, 2010; Weissman et al., 1997). Specifically in the Ontario context, a recent large-scale longitudinal study (n = 6,500) at one Ontario college found significant improvements in year-over-year retention rates for students who had successfully completed a writing skills course (69 per cent retention rate) compared to the overall student population (63 per cent retention rate), while students who failed to complete the writing skills course had a disturbingly low (27 per cent) retention rate (Fisher & Engemann, 2009).

Therefore, a growing sense of urgency is now associated with the need to guarantee that Ontario colleges design and implement effective policies and practices to ensure that all contemporary college students acquire the appropriate levels of language proficiency required for educational and occupational success in the 21st century.

A Chronology of Reports on Language Proficiency at Ontario Colleges

The centrality of language proficiency in student success has long been recognized within Ontario's college system, and efforts to address this critical issue can be traced through a series of relevant studies and reports over the last two decades. A chronology of significant documents related to language skills assessment and development at Ontario colleges includes:

- *Vision 2000: A Review of the Mandate of Ontario's Colleges* (Pascal, 1990). This report from the Ontario Council of Regents recognized academic under-preparedness as a key factor in college attrition rates, and identified "language and communications skills [as] prerequisites for success" (p. 35). The report proposed student assessment be conducted "at the time of admission and when necessary throughout the student's time in college [and suggested that] system-wide standards and planning . . . must be improved if the system is to address the problem of the *revolving door*" (pp. 15, 18) of college attrition. Recognizing the need for a coherent provincial strategy, while at the same time acknowledging the role of institutional autonomy and multiple stakeholders, the report proposed mandatory integration of *generic skills* (including *Communication Skills*) into all college programs. Emphasizing "consistency in program outcomes, not standardization of delivery" (p. 41), this document proposed the establishment of a College Standards & Accreditation Council (CSAC) to coordinate this undertaking.

- *Employability Skills Profile* (Conference Board of Canada, 1992, 2000). This report from the Conference Board of Canada's Corporate Council on Education responded to widespread demand from educators and students for a clear statement about the *generic skills* that employers were looking for and educators were seeking to address. According to the Conference Board, employers were clearly looking for people who could, first and foremost, *communicate* effectively. Specifically, employers valued employees who could:
 - understand, speak, and write effectively,
 - listen in order to understand and learn,
 - read, comprehend, and use written materials.
- *Desired Entry Level Competencies for Ontario's Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology* (Tilly, 1998). Situated within the context of *Vision 2000*, the Conference Board's *Employability Skills Profile*, and the CSAC movement, this report (submitted to the Secondary School Reform Project on behalf of Ontario's Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology) further defined generic skills in terms of "learning outcomes that would be characteristic of all college graduates". Since academic preparedness would be "critical to success in college", the report attempted to articulate the "desired competencies" expected for students entering Ontario's colleges. While these entry-level competencies were "neither rigid determinants of admission nor infallible predictors of students' success", they were, nevertheless, "key factors in student success" (p. 1). The primary generic skill (to communicate effectively) incorporated and delineated four modes of communication (Writing, Reading, Listening, and Speaking) as well as Research Skills and specialized program-related communication skills. In terms of desired entry-level writing skills, the report proposed that students entering Ontario colleges should be able to produce writing that has:
 - a discernible stated purpose and a logical pattern of organization,
 - a controlling idea that is cohesively developed,
 - paragraphs that develop a main idea with details and examples clearly related to the main idea,
 - control of the essential mechanics of writing (e.g. complete sentences, subject/verb agreement, consistent use of tense).

Significantly, these entry level competencies addressed both the mechanics of writing as well as higher order thinking skills.

- *A Small Step Toward a Common Writing Assessment* (Rowen, 1997). Commissioned by the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) and George Brown College, this report focused on the design and development of a writing assessment instrument and a corresponding scoring rubric that could reliably assess writing through an authentic, performance-based measure of student writing abilities relative to the needs of different programs. The resultant instrument considered two types of writing (expository and persuasive), three features of writing (i, focus, development,

and organization; ii, voice, vocabulary, and sentence variety; and iii, grammar and mechanics), and four levels of writing performance. This report suggested standards for both Entrance and Exit levels of college- writing performance, noted the benefits of using a common scoring protocol “across institutions” (p. vi), and recommended a “system-wide approach” (p. vi) to the assessment of college-level writing proficiency.

- *The Revised Common Writing Assessment (Rowen & Graham, 2000).* Commissioned by the Ontario Literacy Coalition (OLC), this document linked Rowen’s (1997) Common Writing Assessment instrument to the Learning Outcomes initiative and Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) criteria developed by the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU). The revised instrument was found to be a valid and reliable tool that could provide important diagnostic information on students’ levels of writing proficiency for both admissions and placement purposes at Ontario colleges. Two levels of the revised instrument – RPS (Ready for Post-Secondary) and CPS (Clearly Post-Secondary) – specifically related the scale to learning outcomes in postsecondary programs at Ontario colleges. The instrument measured student responses to prompts which required the writer to explain or describe something (expository writing), or to present and support an argument or point of view (persuasive writing). The report also proposed that “common assessment and common articulation of levels and standards for learners . . . should move us forward as a field to best practices in common assessment” (p. 6).
- *Ontario College Writing Exemplars (OCWE): A Window onto Writing at College (Hill et al., 2003).* Sponsored by Colleges Ontario Heads of Language (HOL), this project extended the initiatives of the Conference Board of Canada’s Employability Skills Profile, the College Standards and Accreditation Council movement, and the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) project to provide a valuable resource for developing effective generic writing skills for all college students in Ontario. The document identified a range of college-level writing tasks (memos, short reports, research essays, technical) and provided a rubric-based rating scale, a bank of student writing samples, and a wealth of supporting material. In terms of academic preparation for college success, the document provided added value by delineating a progressive continuum of writing skills from secondary school to college, while also addressing the needs of ESL (English as a Second Language) students.

While this Report is primarily focused on *post-admission* literacy practices for students in *postsecondary* programs, many of these and other studies also refer to *preparatory* language practices and services related to adult learners, to ESL/French as a Second Language (FSL) students, and to occupation-specific language skills, issues which also arose in the course of preparing this Report. The following chronology represents a sub-set of reports focused on these associated areas of concern:

- *Common Assessment in the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) Program (Alden, Anderson, & Perry, 2000).* This report built on a previous MTCU document (*Working with Learning Outcomes, 1998*) by delineating the principles, practices, and benefits of common assessment practices in facilitating communication among service

providers, supporting transportability of learner outcomes without undergoing unnecessary re-assessment, and providing a common framework for interpreting and reporting student achievements. The document attempted to “develop shared concepts and vocabulary to describe common assessment” (pp. 27-28) to the benefit of all stakeholders.

- *The Level Descriptions Manual: A Learning Outcomes Approach to Describing Levels of Skill in Communications & Numeracy (Toews & Rankin, 2000). Published by the Ontario Literacy Secretariat (OLS) with funding assistance from the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) and the LBS Section of MTCU, the report defined language proficiency levels, descriptors, and performance indicators for each of the five LBS levels “to be used consistently across the province” (p. 3). This report proposed “a common language for practitioners to describe learner achievements and skill levels [in the hope] that practitioners will continue to work toward a shared perspective of skill levels, and that this tool will help increase the consistency of assessment” (p. 8).*
- *Language Skills for the Workplace: Developing a Framework for College Delivery of Occupation-Specific Language Training in Ontario (2007). Undertaken by Colleges Ontario and funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), the report examined existing Occupation-Specific Language Training (OSLT) practices in Ontario colleges, identified gaps and opportunities for occupation-specific language training, and provided input on guidelines for moving toward a province-wide framework for college delivery of occupation-specific language training.*
- *Heads of Language Survey of Services and Support for Postsecondary ESL Students (Cechetto & Klassen, 2006). This research project gathered and analyzed data related to admission policies, tracking procedures, and assistance to ESL students enrolled in postsecondary programs at 18 Ontario colleges. In interpreting the results, colleges were sub-categorized based on the estimated relative proportion of ESL students at each college. The project described the extent and diversity of practices for ESL students, and proposed more consistency and rigour in post-admission assessment and remediation practices.*

In conclusion, two decades of reports and documentation have consistently identified a cluster of common constructs for consideration with respect to effective language practices at Ontario colleges including:

- common learning outcomes related to communications skills;
- common learning outcomes related to employability skills;
- early and ongoing assessment of student language proficiency;
- common assessment instruments to measure college-level literacy;
- common benchmarks for both entry- and exit-level demonstrations of language proficiency;
- attention to both language mechanics and higher order thinking skills (organization, persuasion, documentation, supporting evidence, etc.);

- recognition of a range of language needs of incoming college students, including adult learners and ESL/ FSL students; and
- recognition of program-related and/or occupation-specific language needs and activities.

A recurrent theme running throughout this 20-year chronology is the need for a *system-wide framework of common practices* related to assessment instruments, benchmarks, terminology, and curriculum delivery. Such a system-wide approach could not only contribute to improved language proficiency for *all* students enrolled in postsecondary programs at Ontario colleges, but could also better facilitate communication among service providers, support transportability of learner outcomes without unnecessary re-assessment, and provide a common framework for interpreting and reporting student achievements.

Ontario Colleges and Language Proficiency

In fulfilling their mandate of career-related education, Ontario's 24 publicly funded colleges have built upon the insights and recommendations of the previously delineated reports, and currently deliver a wide range of programs and services designed to help individuals develop the skills they need to succeed in their educational and employment destinations of choice. To this end, Ontario's colleges, under the direction of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, currently offer:

- Certificate programs, which take 1 year or less;
- Diploma programs, which take 2 or 3 years;
- Graduate certificates that require a degree or diploma upon entry;
- Apprenticeship and in-class training for certification programs for skilled trades such as a carpentry, culinary arts, or welding;
- Programs that lead to a bachelor degree;
- Programs offered cooperatively with universities that can lead simultaneously to a degree and a diploma; and
- Work-integrated learning programs, which provide work experience related to a field of study.

MTCU also sets expectations and provides quality assurance frameworks to ensure that college programs are of high value and relevant to the needs of both employers and students. All college graduates must attain the key vocational and essential employability skills required to successfully complete their educational programs and to find employment in their field of study, as well as the broader generic skills and knowledge that will give them flexibility and allow them to continue to learn and adapt throughout their working lives.

To accomplish this goal, MTCU articulates expectations for success in terms of Learning Outcomes that represent culminating demonstrations of learning and achievement; additionally, MTCU requires that all graduates demonstrate specific Essential Employability Skills, including skills related to language proficiency. Specifically with respect to language proficiency, MTCU requires that graduates must reliably demonstrate the ability to:

1. *communicate clearly, concisely, and correctly in the written, spoken, and visual form that fulfills the purpose and meets the needs of the audience; and*
2. *respond to written, spoken, or visual messages in a manner that ensures effective communication* (2005, p. 16).

While the desired outcomes are clearly articulated by MTCU, the challenge of effectively addressing the language proficiency needs of all students in the Ontario college system is complicated by the fact that contemporary students are not a homogeneous population; rather, they exhibit a wide range of background characteristics, educational experiences, and entrance levels of language proficiency. Estimates of the percentage of students who arrived through non-direct pathways (i.e., pathways other than direct entrance from high school) range from 64 per cent (McCloy & Motte, 2007) to 60.5 per cent (Colleges Ontario, 2009). In some cases, these “delayed entrants” may have previous postsecondary education, while others who have been out of the educational system for long periods may enrol at Ontario colleges in response to exogenous forces such as changes in the provincial economic situation; these latter students often arrive “with few academic skills and many outside-college responsibilities” (Roueche & Roueche, 1994a, p. 3). Additionally, 12 per cent of Ontario college students have reported high use of Special Needs/Disability Services (Colleges Ontario, 2009), while certain demographic segments of the student population have been associated with particularly high drop-out rates (HEQCO, 2010).

This diversity of beginning characteristics demonstrated by incoming students, especially in terms of language proficiency, is further complicated by a significant percentage of L2 college students, that is, students whose first language is not English. For example, Colleges Ontario (2009) reported that, across the system, English was the first language for 79 per cent of Ontario college students, while 5 per cent reported French, and 16 per cent reported “Other” as their first language. In Ontario’s two francophone colleges, 88 per cent of students declared French as their first language, while in Metro Toronto colleges, 29 per cent reported a first language other than English or French. However, it is important to note that these figures were based on student self-reporting of mother tongues, a process that may reflect, for a number of reasons, a significant under-reporting of the actual case. For example, during the data-gathering phase of this project, college representatives consistently reported higher estimates of L2 ratios in their student populations than those based on student self-reporting. Furthermore, based on contemporary demographic trends, there is every reason to believe that the range of diversity of beginning characteristics of incoming college students, in terms of language proficiency, will continue to expand in the foreseeable future.

While a great deal of activity has occurred at the individual institutional level to meet the challenges of a student population with such an extent and diversity of language needs, to date, however, there has been no comprehensive provincial inventory describing the form, nature, structure, and scope of these current language-related practices across Ontario’s college system. Nor is there a province-wide mechanism in place to gauge the effectiveness of these services. While all colleges are striving to achieve common ends, they exhibit great diversity in their methods of addressing language proficiency needs. It is time, therefore, to take stock of current practices across the Ontario college system with respect to addressing the critical factor of language proficiency.

Consequently, this Report extends the chronology described above by providing a comprehensive empirical snapshot of current language-related practices at Ontario colleges in the context of these documents and their attendant concerns, recommendations, and proposals. Specifically, this Report is intended to provide the Heads of Language (HOL) of Colleges Ontario and the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) with the updated information needed to assess the role that colleges are currently playing and to inform decisions regarding best practices in assessing and addressing language proficiency needs of all Ontario college students, whether through new initiatives, revisions, and/or expansion of current initiatives. This study, therefore, is guided by a key objective, namely:

- to provide a comprehensive inventory of the form, nature, structure, and scope of activities currently performed at Ontario colleges in support of language proficiency for students enrolled in postsecondary programs.

This objective is characterized by three further objectives:

- to review the metrics and indicators currently employed to assess the language proficiency levels of incoming students for the purpose of appropriate placement;
- to review the methods of remediation/upgrading for those students who require additional support to ensure success in their postsecondary programs; and
- to review the form, nature, structure, and scope of all English (French)/Communications courses delivered in postsecondary programs.

It is hoped that this inventory of current practices will contribute, especially in the context of previous reports described in the chronology above, to the ongoing process of improving practices and services in support of language proficiency for all students enrolled in postsecondary programs at Ontario colleges.

Methodology

This project employed a descriptive research methodology designed to gather, collate, analyze, and present a detailed and comprehensive inventory of current practices related to language proficiency assessment and skills development across Ontario's college system. The process was designed to involve appropriate college personnel as well as other key stakeholders in an open, transparent information-gathering process in order to ensure that this Report accurately reflected and represented the full range of current practices at Ontario colleges. To this end, the project design comprised a number of concurrent components:

Project Advisory Panel

A Project Advisory Panel was established to oversee the project from its inception and provide direction to the investigators. This Advisory Panel, consisting of Executive members of the Colleges Ontario Heads of Language Committee, participated in briefings and discussions in order to:

- clarify the purpose and parameters of the project,
- articulate a vision and develop a conceptual framework to guide the project,
- refine the methodology,
- develop an appropriate information gathering instrument, and
- review the preliminary and final drafts of the Report.

Secondary Research

The Principal Investigator conducted an extensive literature review and documentary analysis of material in the public domain, including documents, publications, background reports, legislation, guidelines, and policies, as well as research publications and conference presentations relevant to college-level language practices, especially as they related to the needs of contemporary students in postsecondary programs at Ontario colleges. Resources reviewed for this study included national, regional, provincial, and local (college) documents and websites related to legislation, funding agencies, infrastructure, partnerships, curricula, programs, practices, instruments, resources, etc. [A complete list of documents consulted during the preparation of this report is presented in the References section.]

Primary Research

Primary research consisted of consultations (in person, by telephone, and through electronic correspondence) conducted by the Principal Investigator through the Fall of 2009 and Winter/Spring of 2010. Over 70 individuals were consulted during the preparation of this Report, individually or in groups, representing all 24 colleges and key stakeholder groups (such as College Sector Committee for Adult Upgrading, Colleges Ontario, HOL, HEQCO, Ontario College Application Service, Ontario College Quality Assurance Service, MTCU, OntarioLearn, etc). A complete list of individuals consulted in the preparation of this project is included in Appendix A.

A questionnaire, developed collaboratively by the Project Advisory Panel, was employed to gather, in a consistent and transparent manner, information related to all aspects of language proficiency assessment, program delivery, instruments, resources, and related services and practices. The transcripts arising from interviews employing this questionnaire [see Appendix B] provided the major source of primary data, supplemented by documents such as course catalogues, institutional reports, and instructional materials furnished by the colleges.

Subsequently, individual profiles were developed for each college, and drafts of these profiles were provided to each college with opportunities to revise, edit, add, delete, or update any information in the profile. All but one college provided revised, approved profiles [see Appendix C]. Also, the Principal Investigator delivered an electronic copy of the Preliminary Report to all colleges (May, 2010), and presented the key findings at the 2010 Annual General Meeting of Heads of Language; an ensuing discussion session provided further opportunities for comment and dialogue. The Final Report was revised accordingly and reflects the input and feedback gathered from a wide range of contributors throughout the 9-month course of this project.

Assumptions, Vision and Conceptual Framework

In consultation with the Project Advisory Panel, the following Assumptions, Vision and Conceptual Framework were developed to guide the execution of this project.

Assumptions

- In the province of Ontario, language proficiency is a critical factor supporting students' successful completion of college programs and subsequent integration into the workforce.
- Students who exhibit deficits in language proficiency are at greater risk of failure and attrition, and these deficits need to be addressed effectively to ensure student success and retention at Ontario colleges.
- Contemporary college students are not a homogeneous population; rather, they exhibit a wide range of abilities and needs with respect to language proficiency.
- Colleges are required to provide high quality courses and programs to address the language proficiency needs of all students.
- Colleges need to deliver programs and services in a manner that provides coherence and consistency across the Ontario college system.

Vision

The vision statement guiding the preparation of this Report may be stated as follows:

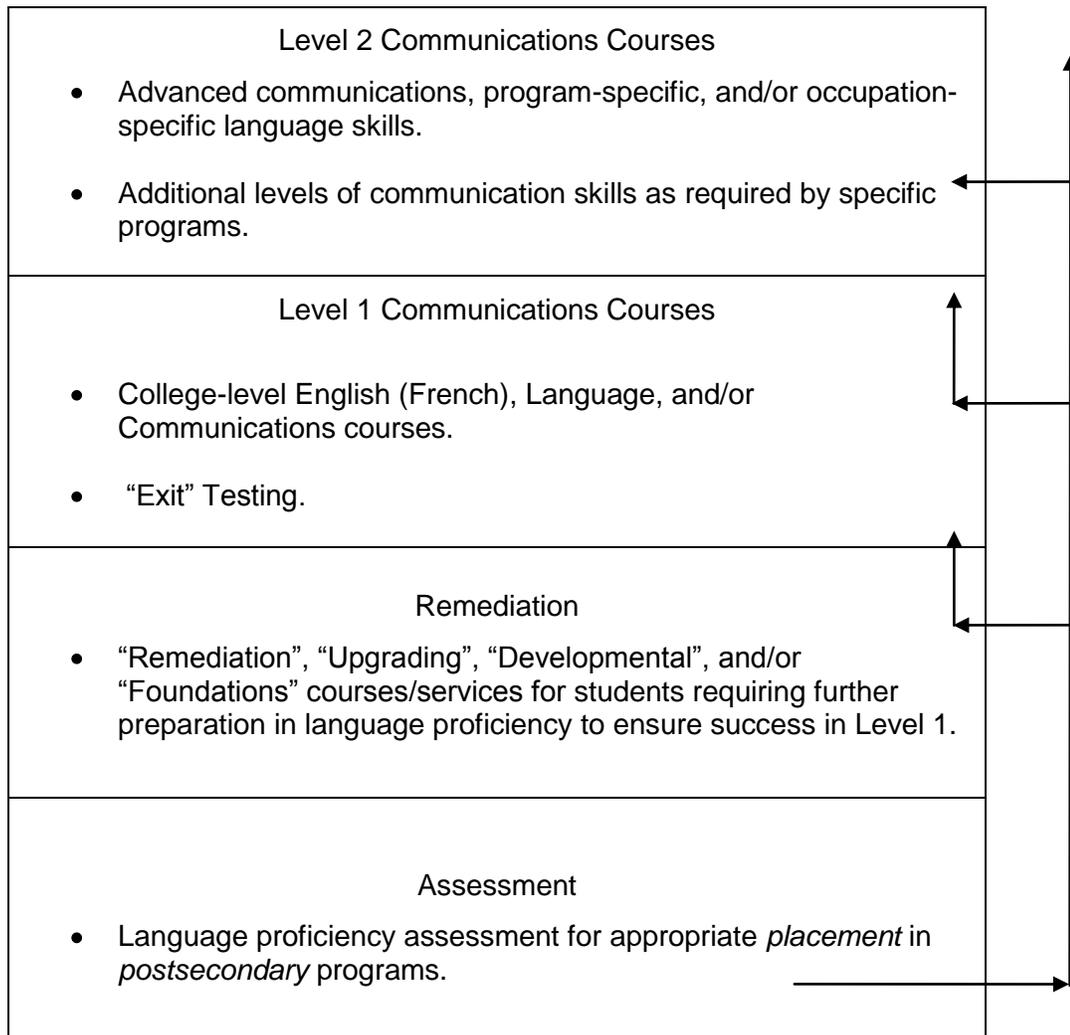
All students entering the Ontario college system will have access to programs and services that accurately identify their current level of language proficiency, and effectively provide appropriate language skills development as required.

Conceptual Framework: Laddered Curriculum

In order to describe current language services and practices across Ontario's 24 publicly funded colleges in a coherent and consistent manner, the Project Advisory Panel collaboratively developed an integrated conceptual framework for gathering and reporting information related to current practices, services, and processes. The individual components of the framework may be graphically represented as a laddered curriculum in which the process of assessing and developing language proficiency progresses hierarchically through several related steps, beginning with a base level of Assessment, subsequently leading to appropriate curriculum delivery through Remediation (depending on individually identified student needs), Level 1 (college-level communications courses), and/or Level 2 (advanced-level, program-specific, and/or occupation-specific communications courses). The components of the framework, when linked, form a coherent integrated system designed to address the language needs of all contemporary students enrolled in postsecondary programs at Ontario colleges. Figure 1 graphically represents the four "steps" of the Laddered Curriculum employed in this Report as a

conceptual framework for the coherent and consistent gathering, analyzing, and reporting of findings:

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Laddered Curriculum for Language Proficiency



Assessment

For the purposes of this Report, Assessment refers to assessment of language proficiency for placement purposes in postsecondary programs (i.e., not for admission purposes), as well as the tools and instruments used to make those assessments, and the benchmarks or standards against which a student’s language proficiency is measured. A corollary dimension of

assessment, namely “exit testing”, is considered to be a component of Level 1 college-level Communications courses, where changes in levels of language proficiency can be measured through the extent of students’ achievement of learning outcomes.

Remediation

For the purposes of this Report, Remediation refers to practices designed to address identified language deficits (based on some form of assessment) in order to provide each student with an adequate level of academic preparedness, as required, to support success in college-level programs. These practices are variously referred to as “remedial”, “developmental”, “upgrading”, and/or “foundational” courses or services, and are delivered through a range of methods and services.

Level 1 Communications Courses

For the purposes of this Report, Level 1 refers to college-level language courses (often designated as “English” or “Communications” courses) through which students earn credits toward postsecondary program completion. Completion of at least one such course is usually a mandatory requirement at Ontario colleges. Level 1 may also include some form of post-instruction assessment, referred to in this Report as “Exit testing”, through which students demonstrate their level of language proficiency upon completion of a language education course.

Level 2 Communications Courses

For the purposes of this Report, Level 2 refers to advanced communications, program-related, and/or occupation-specific language skills courses beyond Level 1 Communications courses. These courses, through which students learn and demonstrate the development of advanced and/or program-specific language skills, may be mandatory depending on specific program requirements. Further levels of program-required communications skills development, often with specific purposes (such as Presentation Skills, Feasibility Reports, Journalism/Broadcasting Communications, etc.) are included in this category of Level 2 courses.

II. Key Findings

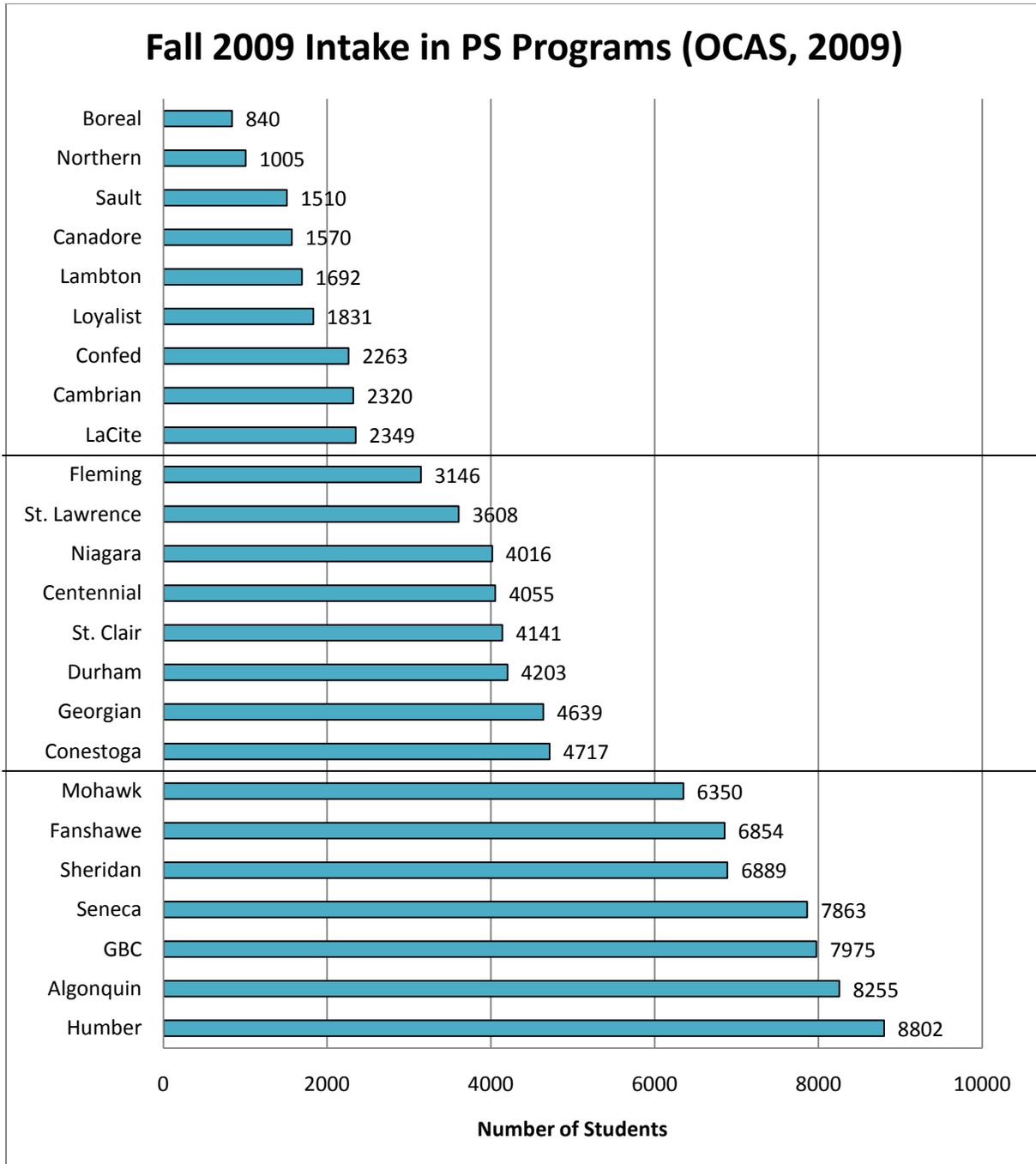
Note: This section presents the actual findings only, presented primarily in terms of the distribution (as percentages) of practices occurring across the Ontario college system, as well as the distribution across three comparative categories based on college size. An analysis of these findings is reserved for the following Section III: DISCUSSION.

The laddered curriculum framework proved to be a useful instrument for gathering and reporting information on current practices related to language proficiency at Ontario colleges. Consequently, the information presented in this section is reported within the context of the conceptual framework, i.e., it follows the hierarchical steps of a laddered curriculum (ASSESSMENT, REMEDIATION, LEVEL 1, LEVEL 2). This section also presents some relevant information on other contemporary activities occurring at Ontario colleges, such as pre-postsecondary language services, and language-related research activities.

Key information is presented in summary graph formats representing percentage ratios of colleges utilizing specific practices, resources, or services. Also, each summary graph is accompanied by a second graph indicating further comparative distribution of these percentage ratios across three categories of colleges characterized by College Size. For convenience, these distribution ratios characterized by college size are also presented in table format.

The three categories of College Size are based on the Fall 2009 intake of students into postsecondary programs, as identified by the Ontario College Application Service (OCAS, 2009). Nine colleges were designated as “Small” based on intakes of less than 2,500 students; eight colleges were designated as “Medium” based on intakes of 3,000-5,000 students; seven colleges were designated as “Large” based on intakes of more than 6,000 students. Figure 2 graphically represents the three categories of College Size (based on OCAS figures of Fall 2009 intake into postsecondary programs), and identifies the specific colleges in each category.

Figure 2. Three Categories of Ontario College Registrations Based on College Size (OCAS, 2009)



Assessment

Pre-Admission Screening

All 24 colleges reported some form of pre-admission screening of incoming students' academic preparedness based on a range of educational factors and pathways. Students were admitted to Ontario colleges based primarily on their attainment of an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD), an Ontario High School Equivalency Certificate (GED), and/or through an Academic and Career Entrance Certificate Program (ACE). Students were also granted admission based on "Mature Student" status (over 19 years of age) and/or acceptable ESL scores obtained through a variety of sources and pathways.

Across the system, colleges reported variations in interpretation with respect to minimum requirements in language proficiency, with specific program requirements also varying across and within institutions. Some degree of flagging "at-risk" students was reported by some colleges, based mainly on secondary school grades (for example, less than 65 per cent in high school English) and/or application status (adult learner, ESL/FSL, etc.). However, with few exceptions, (such as students with OSSDs in Basic or Essential/Workplace high school programs), applicants who met minimum entrance requirements were granted admission to Ontario colleges. Therefore, at the pre-admission stage, no consistent pan-systemic processes or instruments were reported, beyond general admissions screening and program-specific language requirements, for assessing the language proficiency of incoming students.

Post-Admission Assessment

For the purposes of this Report, the term Assessment refers primarily to the post-admission assessment of language proficiency for placement purposes, as well as the tools and instruments used to make those assessments, and the benchmarks or standards against which a student's level of language proficiency may be measured.

In this context, the majority of colleges (63 per cent) reported that some form of informal assessment of language proficiency was occurring. These informal assessments, often based on student writing samples, usually occurred as an introductory pedagogical activity near the beginning of a course, and usually within the context of a Level 1 English or Communications course. Based on these informal assessments, teachers might identify language deficits and suggest remediation or special placement; however, because these types of informal classroom assessments were conducted predominantly at the discretion of individual teachers, with no formalized institutional policies or processes, it was not possible to accurately report on the nature, scope, or comparative distribution of these informal classroom practices across the system.

Formal Language Proficiency Assessment of Incoming Students

Some form of formal assessment of language proficiency for placement purposes was reported at 62 per cent of Ontario’s colleges; however, the scale, method, instruments, and benchmarks employed in these formal assessments were found to vary significantly across, and sometimes within, institutions. Based on “best estimates” provided by sources consulted for this report, approximately 8 per cent of Ontario colleges conducted formal assessment in “Some” programs, and 33 per cent in “Most” programs; only 21 per cent conducted formal language assessment in “All” programs at their institution. Further comparison of this data, based on “College Size”, yielded the following table:

Table 1. Formal Assessment Activity Based on College Size

College Size	No Formal Assessment	Formal Assessment in Some Programs	Formal Assessment in Most Programs	Formal Assessment in All Programs	Total
Small	56%	0%	22%	22%	100%
Medium	50%	12.5%	25%	12.5%	100%
Large	0%	14%	43%	43%	100%
All	38%	8%	33%	21%	100%

The following graphs represent the percentage distribution of formal assessment activities across the college system (Fig. 3), and based on three categories of college size (Fig. 4).

Figure 3. Distribution of Formal Assessment Activity at Ontario Colleges (n = 24)

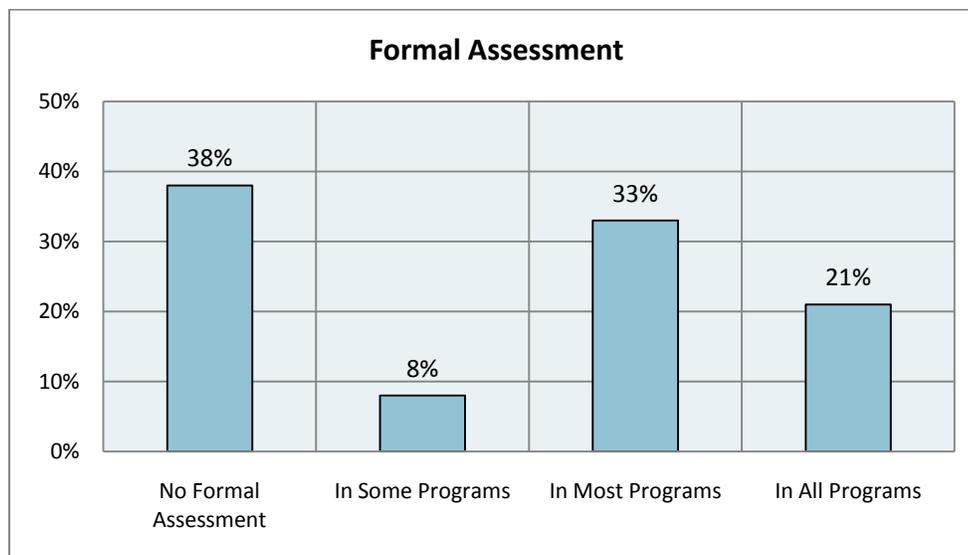
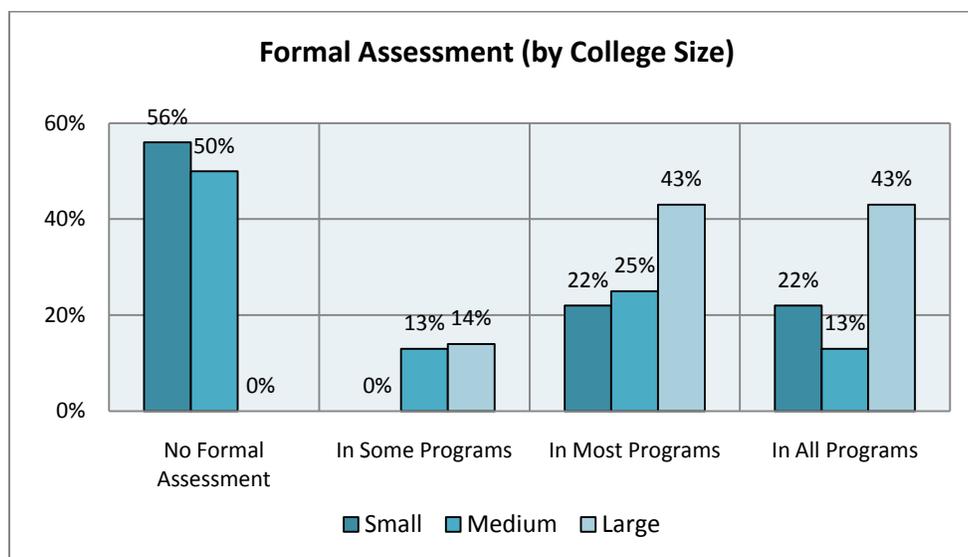


Figure 4. Distribution of Formal Assessment Activity by College Size



Methods of Formal Assessment

In terms of the methods employed by those 15 colleges that conducted formal assessment of the language proficiency levels of incoming students, three categories of assessment methods were identified; 33% per cent of these colleges assessed language proficiency solely on the basis of a student writing sample, 20 per cent relied solely on the results of computer-based assessment, while 47 per cent employed multiple measures, usually through a combination of writing sample and computer-based assessment. A further comparison of this data, based on “College Size”, yielded the following table:

Table 2. Formal Assessment Methods Based on College Size

College Size	Writing Sample Only	Computer-based Only	Multiple Measures	Total
Small	0%	50%	50%	100%
Medium	25%	0%	75%	100%
Large	43%	14%	43%	100%
All	33%	20%	47%	100%

The following graphs represent the percentage distribution of formal assessment methods across the college system (Fig. 5), and based on three categories of college size (Fig. 6).

Figure 5. Distribution of Assessment Methods at Ontario Colleges (n = 24)

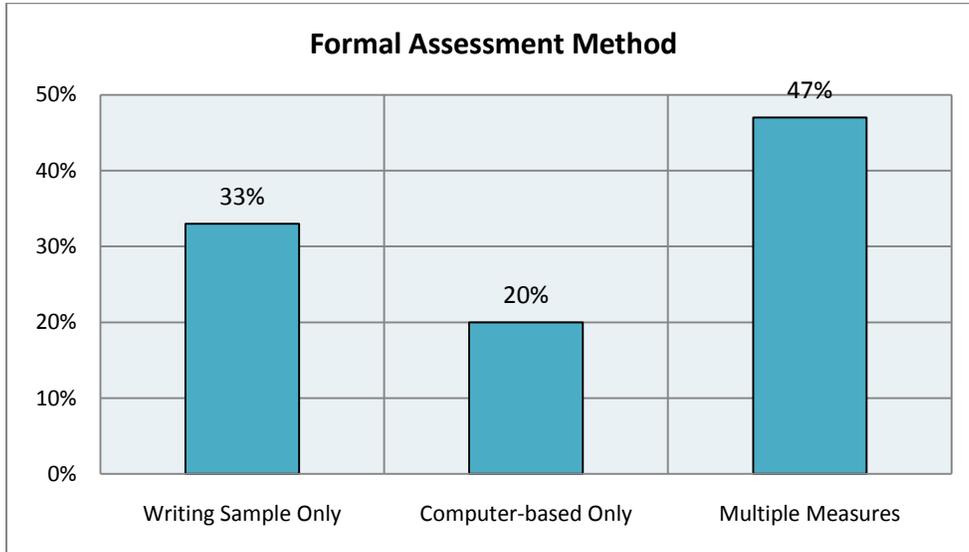
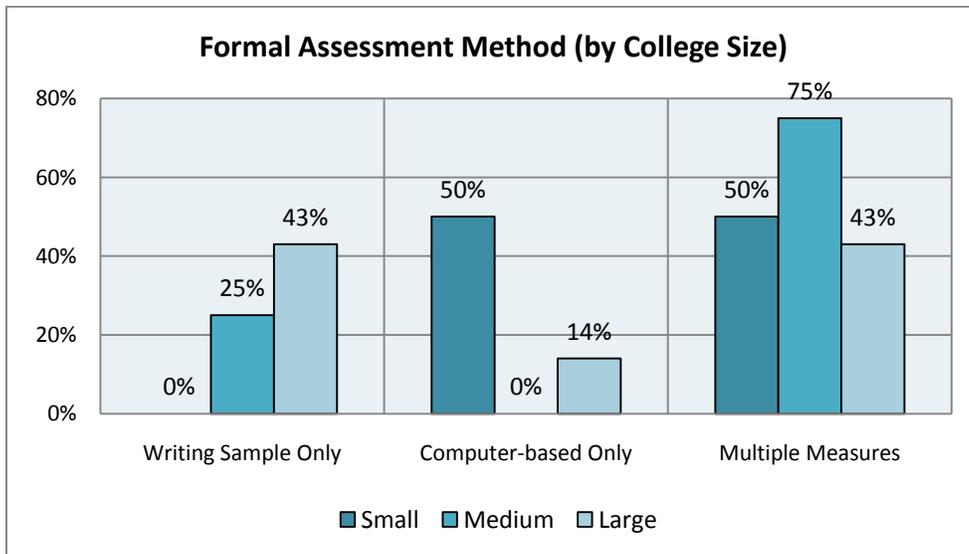


Figure 6. Distribution of Formal Assessment Methods by College Size



“Exit” Testing

Findings indicated that some type of formal “exit” testing (i.e., a measure or indicator of language proficiency following some form of language training) occurred at 25 per cent of the colleges in Ontario. A further comparison of this data based on “College Size” indicated that 57 per cent of Large colleges conducted some form of formal exit testing, while only 11 per cent of Small colleges and 13 per cent of Medium-sized colleges conducted exit testing related to language proficiency. The following graphs represent the percentage distribution of exit testing across the college system (Fig. 7), and based on three categories of college size (Fig. 8).

Figure 7. Distribution of Exit Testing at Ontario Colleges (n = 24)

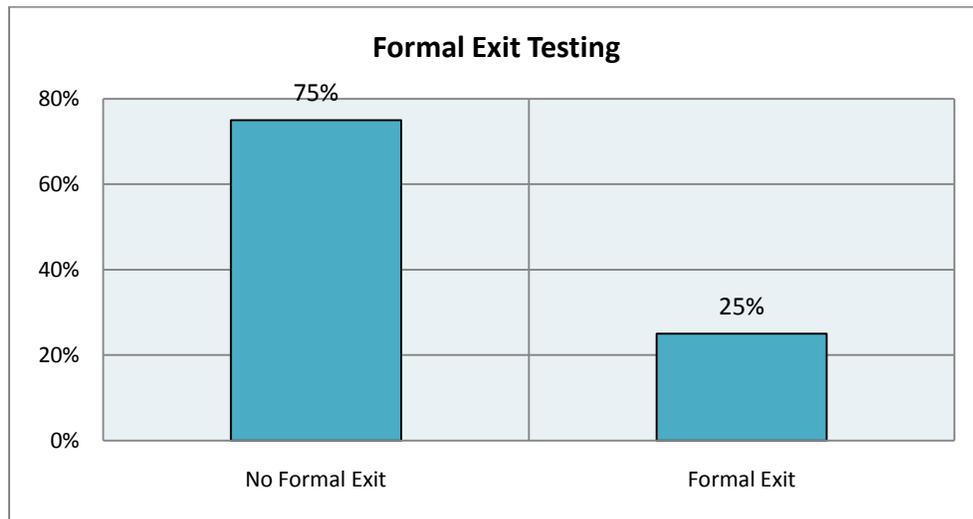
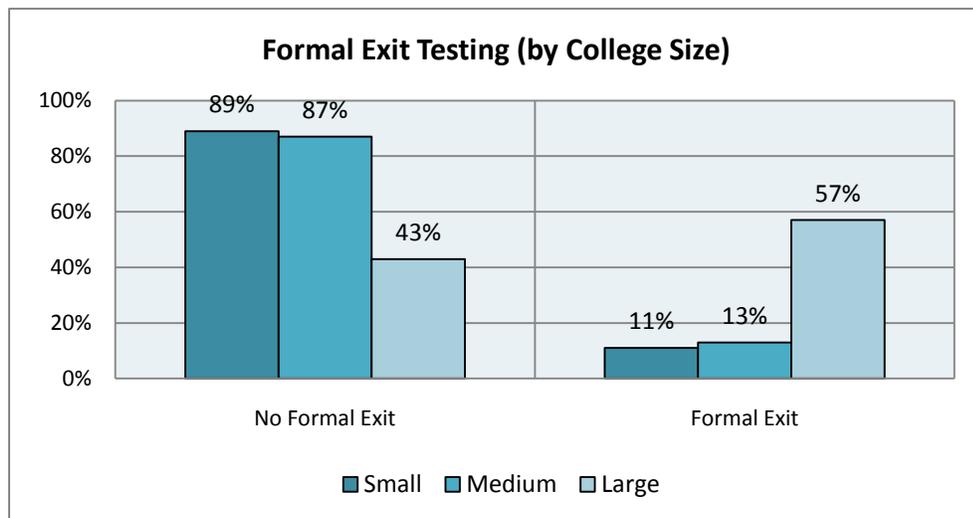


Figure 8. Distribution of Exit Testing by College Size



Remediation

For the purposes of this report, Remediation refers to practices designed to address identified language deficits in order to provide each student, as required, with an adequate and appropriate level of academic preparedness. Whether or not any method of formal language assessment was conducted, all 24 colleges reported the provision of some form of remediation or upgrading for students who required additional language skills support in order to increase their likelihood of academic success in postsecondary programs. Across the system, three categories of remediation methods were reported as follows:

- Support Services: 29 per cent of Ontario colleges relied primarily on support services (such as Learning Centres, Student Support Centres, etc.) to meet additional language upgrading needs of students;
- “Transcript” Courses: 25 per cent of Ontario colleges relied primarily on remedial, upgrading, or foundations languages courses. For the purposes of this Report, these types of remedial/upgrading language courses are referred to as Transcript courses since, while students earned credits on their college transcripts for completion of these courses, the credits earned through this method did not qualify as credits that could be applied toward postsecondary program completion.
- “Modified” Level 1 Courses: 29 per cent of Ontario colleges relied primarily on Level 1 Communications courses that were modified in some manner, such as extra hours, smaller class sizes, pedagogical accommodations, and/or specialized teachers. Through this method of concurrent remediation, students earned Level 1 credits that qualified as credits toward postsecondary program completion.
- Combinations: 17 per cent of Ontario colleges relied primarily on both Transcript and Modified Communications courses to meet the remedial needs of their students.

A further comparison of this data, based on “College Size”, yielded the following table:

Table 3. Remediation Methods Based on College Size

College Size	Primary Reliance on Support Services	“Transcript”- Courses	“Modified” Credit Courses	“Transcript” plus Modified Credit Courses	Total
Small	11%	22%	45%	22%	100%
Medium	50%	0%	25%	25%	100%
Large	14%	71%	15%	0%	100%
All	29%	25%	29	17	100%

The following graphs represent the percentage distribution of remediation methods across the college system (Fig. 9), and based on three categories of college size (Fig. 10).

Figure 9. Distribution of Remediation Methods at Ontario Colleges (n = 24)

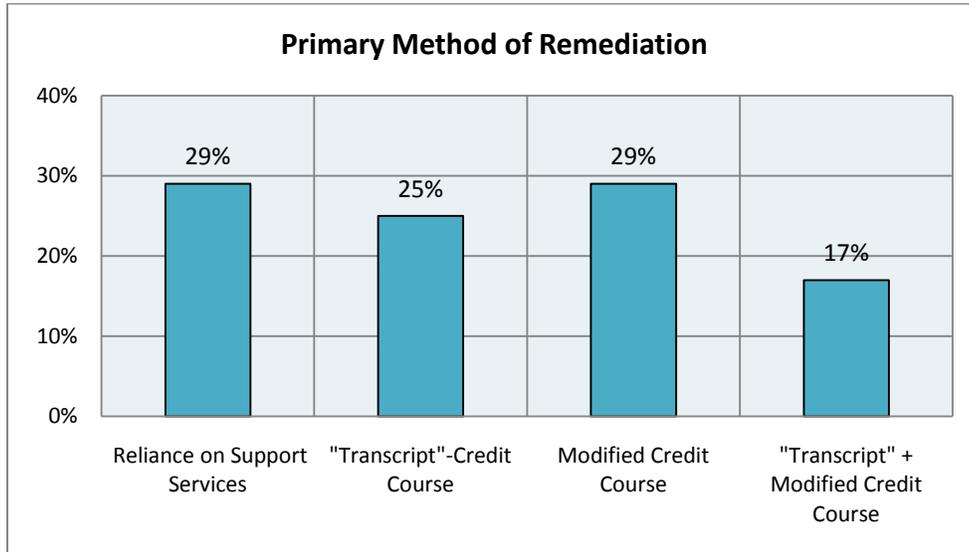
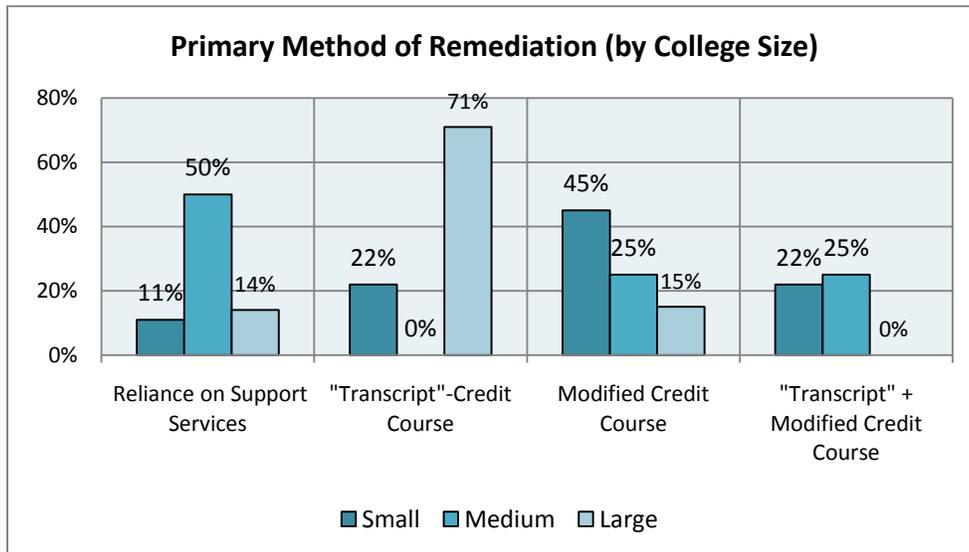


Figure 10. Distribution of Remediation Methods by College Size



Level 1 Communications Courses

For the purposes of this Report, Level 1 refers to college-level language courses (often designated as “English” or “Communications” courses) through which students earn credits toward postsecondary program completion. All 24 colleges reported the mandatory requirement

of at least one Communications (or English) course in either most (46 per cent) or all (54 per cent) postsecondary programs. A further comparison of this data, based on “College Size”, yielded the following table:

Table 4. Mandatory Level 1 Communications Courses Based on College Size

College Size	Mandatory Level 1 in Most Programs	Mandatory Level 1 in All Programs	Total
Small	67%	33%	100%
Medium	25%	75%	100%
Large	43%	57%	100%
All	46%	54%	100%

The following graphs represent the percentage distribution of mandatory Level 1 language courses across the college system (Fig. 11), and based on three categories of college size (Fig. 12).

Figure 11. Mandatory Level 1 Communications Courses at Ontario Colleges (n = 24)

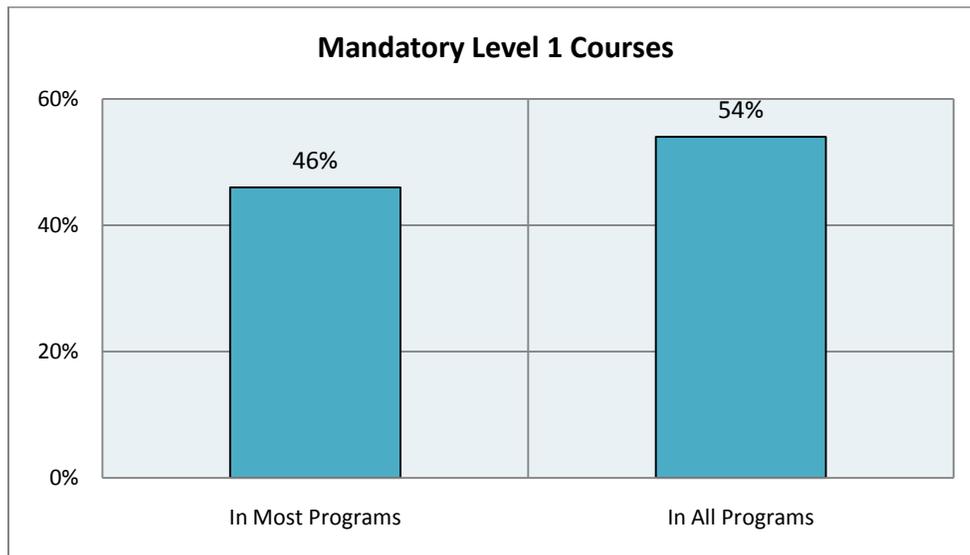
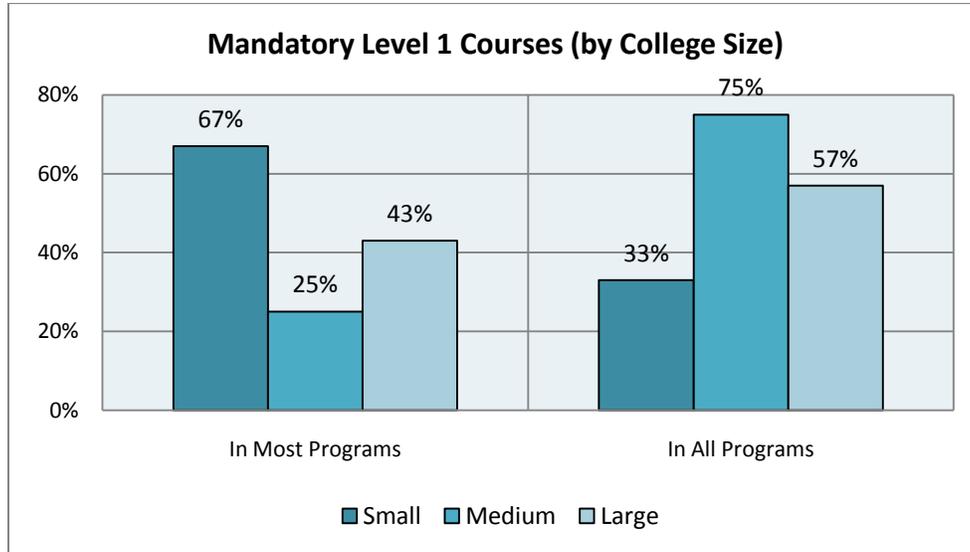


Figure 12. Distribution of Mandatory Level 1 Communications Courses by College Size



Level 2 Communications Courses

For the purposes of this Report, Level 2 refers to advanced and/or or program-specific language skills development beyond Level 1 Communications (or English) courses. All colleges required at least one mandatory Level 2 Communications course in some (21 per cent), most (63 per cent) or all (16 per cent) postsecondary diploma programs. A further comparison of this data, based on “College Size”, yields the following table:

Table 5. Mandatory Level 2 Communications Courses Based on College Size

College Size	Level 2 Required in <i>Some</i> Programs	Level 2 Required in <i>Most</i> Programs	Level 2 Required in <i>All</i> Programs	Total
Small	22%	67%	11%	100%
Medium	38%	50%	12%	100%
Large	0%	71%	29%	100%
All	21%	63%	16%	100%

The following graphs represent the percentage distribution of mandatory Level 2 language courses across the college system (Fig. 13), and based on three categories of college size (Fig. 14).

Figure 13. Mandatory Level 2 Communications Courses at Ontario Colleges (n = 24)

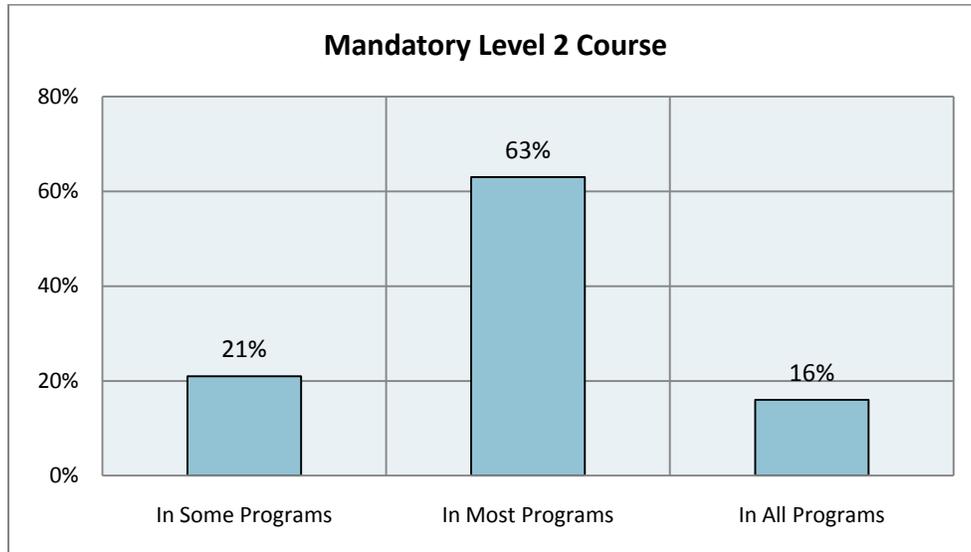
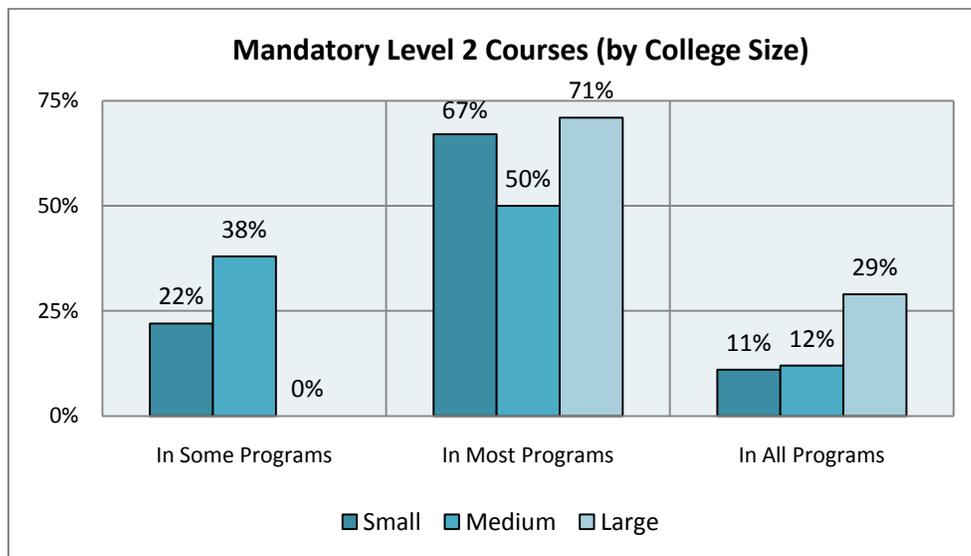


Figure 14. Distribution of Mandatory Level 2 Communications Courses by College Size



Other Postsecondary Communications Courses

OntarioLearn.com

In addition to college-based Communications courses, a web-based distance-education delivery model for Level 1, Level 2, and program-specific Communications courses was available to the 22 English-language Ontario colleges through OntarioLearn.com, an MTCU-funded service through which colleges develop, deliver, and share on-line postsecondary credit courses. Colleges may select and approve equivalencies in course credits based on learning outcomes posted through OntarioLearn.com Course Information Sheets. Students register through flexible (usually monthly) intakes, and must be enrolled in postsecondary programs at Ontario colleges to take advantage of OntarioLearn.com. Learning in this virtual classroom environment is facilitated by an instructor who is available to answer questions, encourage discussion on course topics, and provide feedback.

In 2009-2010, five colleges (Algonquin, Durham, Loyalist, Mohawk, and Seneca) accounted for 80 per cent of enrolments in OntarioLearn.com. Specifically with respect to Level 1 English/Communications courses, Communications 1 (hosted by Cambrian) was recognized as a Level 1 equivalency at 17 Ontario colleges, while Communications 1 (English) (hosted by Algonquin) was recognized as an equivalency at 13 Ontario colleges. In 2009-2010, 1,350 students in Ontario postsecondary programs enrolled in OntarioLearn.com Level 1, Level 2, and/or Program-specific Communications courses, with an overall success (Pass) rate of 85.4 per cent and a (term-over-term) retention rate of 88.6 per cent.

English as a Second Language

Ontario colleges offer a wide range of programs for L2 students, i.e., students for whom English is a second language. ESL programs may be characterized as preparatory language acquisition programs for pre-admission purposes, and/or language remediation programs for post-admission upgrading and/or placement purposes. Depending on regional and demographic characteristics, colleges deployed a wide range of courses, programs, and services designed to address the multi-dimensional and multi-faceted language needs of L2 students who, at some institutions, represented significant proportions of the student population. There is also evidence that the two French language colleges offer some FSL programs to varying degrees.

Across the province, colleges and programs also reported a wide diversity of instruments employed to assess the language proficiency level of L2 students. Some of the most widely used commercially available instruments included:

- TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). Available in both paper-based and internet-based forms, TOEFL measures the ability of non-native speakers of English to use and understand English as it is spoken, written, and heard in college and university settings. This test also emphasizes integrated skills, and provides information to institutions about students' ability to communicate in an academic setting and their readiness for academic coursework.

- IELTS (International English Language Testing System). This test measures the ability to communicate in English across all four language skills – listening, reading, writing, and speaking – for people who intend to study or work where English is the language of communication.
- CELBAN (Canadian Language Benchmark Assessment for Nurses). This is an assessment tool designed to assess the English language proficiency of internationally-educated nurses who are applying for licensure in the nursing profession in Canada. CELBAN has been recognized by nursing licensing bodies across Canada.

Other Language Related Activities

While this Report is focused primarily on post-admission practices for students enrolled in postsecondary programs, many colleges reported a range of preparatory academic upgrading activities that bear some relevance to this inventory of language-related practices at Ontario's colleges. These activities included upgrading courses, services, and programs for adult learners; students entering through non-traditional pathways; occupation-specific language training; and ESL courses. "Other" language-related activities also included various institutional and/or systemic research-related activities and practices. The following list describes the programs most widely reported at Ontario colleges:

Academic & Career Entrance Certificate Program

College preparatory and upgrading courses and programs for adult learners and students entering through non-traditional pathways were delivered primarily through ACE, an MTCU-funded program delivered through a network of support organizations, overseen by the College Sector Committee for Adult Upgrading. All 24 Ontario colleges offered ACE programs leading to certificates recognized by college admissions officers as equivalent to an OSSD. Established in 2004, ACE is specifically designed to meet the entrance requirements for apprenticeships as well as for many postsecondary college programs, utilizing a combination of self-directed study and teacher contact. It replaced the Basic Training for Skills Development (BTSD) program, established in the mid 1960s. An assessment at intake determines the academic level of entry into the program. In terms of preparation for college, ACE reports a success rate of 80 per cent, defined as successful completion (by ACE graduates) of one term of postsecondary studies and enrolment in a second continuous term at an Ontario college. ACE credits its success rate to (a) ACE learning outcomes tied directly to Ontario college postsecondary learning outcomes, (b) a minimum grade of 70 per cent required to pass an ACE course, and (c) flexible intake and a learn-at-your-own-pace delivery model. In collaboration with OntarioLearn.com, ACE is now providing its services through distance learning.

Particularly noteworthy for the purposes of this Report, (especially with respect to remediation/upgrading options), is the fact that students may be enrolled concurrently in both ACE upgrading programs and postsecondary programs at Ontario colleges.

Occupation Specific Language Training

With a focus on raising the language skills of immigrants, and with funding from Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 13 Ontario colleges currently offer free occupation-specific language training courses to newcomers who have training or experience in a specific occupation or sector but need to improve their communication skills. Students must have language proficiency at Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) levels 6 to 8 in at least one language skill area (or Niveaux de compétence linguistique canadiens of 6 to 8 for courses taught in French), and be permanent residents or protected persons. Occupational areas include: Business, Health, Human Services, Construction Trades, Automotive Trades, and Technology. While these courses may be characterized as non-postsecondary language upgrading programs, they nevertheless represent a contemporary dimension of language-related services delivered at some Ontario colleges.

Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada/ Cours de langues pour immigrants au Canada (LINC/ CLIC)

Funded through the Department of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), LINC offers free language training for permanent adult residents with landed status who are not Canadian citizens. This pre-admission preparatory language acquisition service, which utilizes the Canadian Language Benchmarks, is currently delivered at eight Ontario colleges, including Algonquin, Boréal, Centennial, Conestoga, Fleming, La Cité, Mohawk, and Sheridan.

Research Activities

Formal Institutional Language-Related Research

More than half (54 per cent) of Ontario's colleges reported conducting some type of formal language-related research activity through which empirical evidence was gathered and correlated with variables related to student success, attendance, grade averages, retention, etc. This percentage also included colleges conducting pilot studies on the effectiveness of various aspects of language-related practices, especially in the areas of best practices related to assessment instruments and methods of remediation. In the context of College Size, language-related formal research was occurring at 44 per cent of Small colleges, 38 per cent of Medium-sized colleges, and 86 per cent of Large colleges. The following graphs represent the percentage distribution of formal language-related research activities across the college system (Fig. 15), and based on three categories of college size (Fig. 16).

Figure 15. Distribution of Formal Language-Related Research at Ontario Colleges (n = 24)

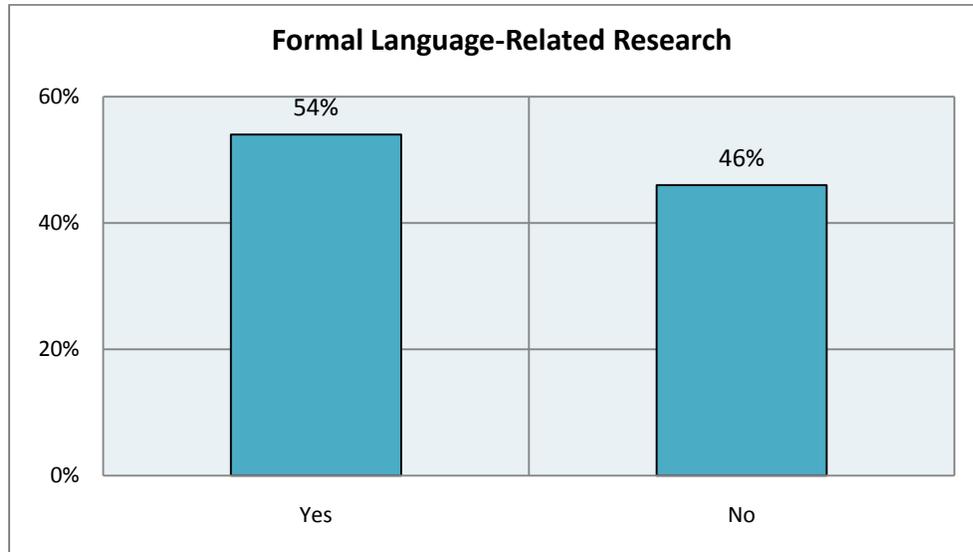
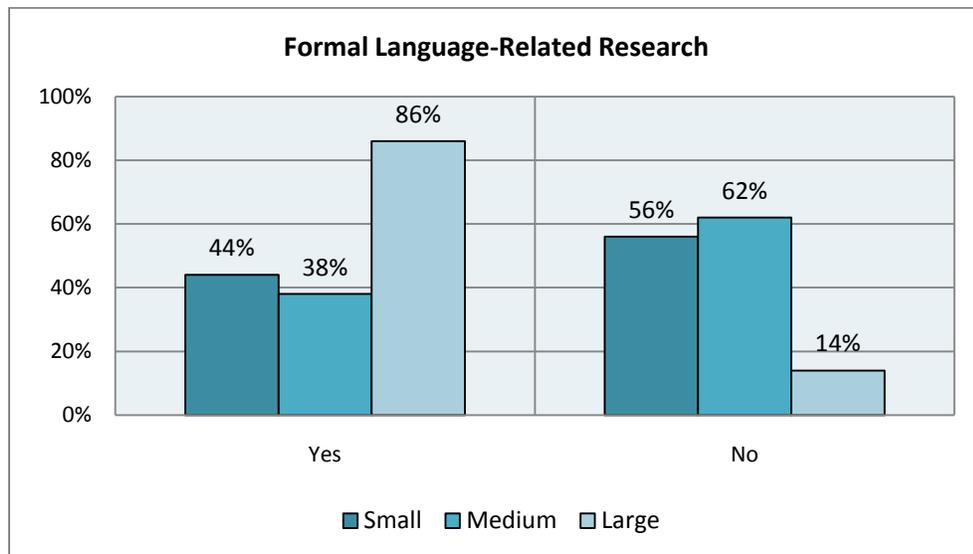


Figure 16. Distribution of Formal Language-Related Research by College Size



College English Project

The mission of the College English Project (CEP) was to work toward aligning practices, including assessment and remediation, in order to support a seamless transition for students from secondary school English courses to college English/Communications courses. The methodology employed in this study consisted of gathering and correlating information on the English pathways taken by students in secondary school, the English level at which they were placed in college, and their level of achievement in their first-semester English course. In this project, data on college English courses were sub-categorized into Remedial-level English/Communications courses and Level 1 English/Communications courses. Under the leadership of Seneca College, the College Mathematics Project continues to collect data on secondary school achievement (and we request information on all subjects from Grade 9 to 12, but not all colleges provide the Grade 9 and 10 courses), as well as first semester college achievement. Currently there is data for six colleges for Fall 2006, 11 colleges for Fall 2007, 24 for Fall 2008 and, in process, 24 for 2009.

Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks

Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (CCLB)/ Centre des niveaux de compétence linguistique canadiens (CNCLC) is the centre of expertise in support of the national standards in English and French for describing, measuring, and recognizing the second language proficiency of adult immigrants and prospective immigrants for living and working in Canada. Beginning in 1992, CCLB/CNCLC has been tasked with providing a common method for describing second language learning proficiency of adult ESL/FSL learners in Canada. CCLB/CNCLC promotes and supports the recognition and use of the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) as a practical, fair, and reliable national standard of second language proficiency in educational, training, community, and workplace settings. The CCLB/CNCLC provides a descriptive scale of communicative proficiency in English (or French) as a Second Language, expressed as benchmarks or reference points covering four skill areas: reading, writing, speaking, and listening, and use real life language tasks to measure language skills. The CCLB/CNCLC provides a framework of reference for learning, teaching, programming, and assessing adult ESL/FSL in Canada; a national standard for planning second language curricula for a variety of contexts; and a common "yardstick" for assessing the outcomes.

Colleges Integrating Immigrants to Employment (CIITE) Project: Phase 2 Final Report: Language Proficiency (Assessment) (2007)

Led by CON*NECT Strategic Alliance, the 3-phased CIITE project was designed to improve the pathways for Internationally Trained Immigrants (ITIs) to gain access to programs and services in the Ontario college system. Of particular interest to this current Report, Phase 2 of the CIITE project included an extensive review of language assessment processes, instruments, and benchmarks. In conjunction with the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (CCLB), CIITE developed and piloted a protocol for implementing the Canadian Language Benchmarks in 31 postsecondary programs at seven Ontario colleges (Algonquin, Centennial, George Brown, La Cité, Mohawk, Seneca, Sheridan) in order to assess CLB's suitability for system-wide adoption for postsecondary placement. This study concluded that the CLB "be adopted at Ontario

colleges as a language proficiency framework” and recommended that the college system support the development “of a new CLB-based test appropriate for use in postsecondary environments”. Currently, a language proficiency assessment instrument based on the CLB is being developed, with planned validation at several Ontario colleges to examine its feasibility as a consistent and systemic measure of literacy for academic purposes at Ontario colleges.

III. Discussion

The purpose of this Report is to provide an empirical snapshot of current practices related to the post-admission literacy needs of students enrolled in postsecondary programs at Ontario's 24 colleges. Section I (Introduction) presented general background information, a literature review, and a description of the methodology and conceptual framework employed in gathering data. Section II (Findings) described the data in terms of the frequency and distribution of practices and activities both across the system and within three observable categories defined by college size. Section III (Discussion) provides an analysis of current practices within the context of the conceptual framework (Assessment, Remediation, Level 1, Level 2), the research literature, and the chronology of previous reports on language proficiency at Ontario colleges.

Assessment

A key assumption underlying this project is the correlation between the persistently high college dropout rate and the level of academic under-preparedness characteristic of a significant proportion of beginning students, including language challenges faced by students arriving from non-traditional pathways, adult learners, and L2 students. The literature is replete with studies supporting the need for early identification and upgrading for students who are "at risk" of not completing their postsecondary programs because of deficits in academic preparedness, especially with respect to language deficits (Andres & Carpenter, 1997; Beck & Davidson, 2001; Boylan, 1999; Fisher & Engemann, 2009; Griswold, 2003; Kozeracki, 2002; McCarthy & Smuts, 1997). The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario echoed this concern, noting in its most recent annual report that "policy initiatives aimed at increasing postsecondary attainment must focus on identifying and implementing appropriate early intervention strategies" (2010, p. 36). Roueche and Roueche (1994b) similarly noted that "colleges must require entry-level assessment of *all* entering students to determine if skill levels are adequate for college-level courses. Test data should be used to keep students from enrolling in classes where they have no chance of success and to place them in classes where their skills could be developed to appropriate levels" (pp. 3-4).

Clearly, an effective process of assessing the language proficiency levels of incoming students is an essential component of any strategy to address this critical issue of student attrition at Ontario colleges. However, only 62 per cent of Ontario's colleges reported any formal assessment process for incoming students, while only 21 per cent of colleges required formal literacy assessment in *all* of their postsecondary programs. Formal testing in *most* or *all* programs was primarily a characteristic of Large colleges (86 per cent), while no formal assessment at all was reported at about half of the Small (56 per cent) and Medium-sized (50 per cent) colleges. Clearly, the formal assessment of language proficiency was neither a universal priority nor a consistent practice either across the Ontario college system or across all college programs.

Formal Assessment Methods/Instruments

The *methods* and/or *instruments* employed in language assessment for the purpose of placement were also not consistent across the province. Among those colleges that conducted formal assessment, 33 per cent relied solely on the analysis of student *writing samples*, 20 per cent relied solely on some form of *computer-based* assessment, while 47 per cent employed *multiple measures*, usually a combination of writing sample and computer-based assessment. The following paragraphs describe these varying assessment methods and instruments in further detail.

Writing Sample

Among the colleges that conducted formal assessment, the majority (86 per cent) employed *writing samples* either solely (33 per cent) or in combination with other measures (47 per cent). The most common manifestation of this method required students to write a *persuasive essay* in response to a single prompt or, in some cases, to a selection of prompts. Time allotments for students to produce their writing samples ranged from 50 to 75 minutes, and student writing samples were predominantly hand written, with the exception of one college (George Brown) where students were given the option of using computers customized for this task, or at those colleges that employed a computerized essay grading system such as *WritePlacer*, which required computer-entered writing samples.

In order to facilitate placement and timetabling, writing sample assessments had to be completed and graded prior to the first or second week of classes, and colleges reported a wide range of “turnaround times” for grading writing samples and informing students of their assessment results, ranging from on-the-spot grading and reporting to periods of up to seven days. In most cases, graders (full-time teachers, part-time teachers, and/or individuals hired for their specialized skills) received on-going training and calibration, and papers were usually graded through a double-blind process, with third reads as required.

Rubrics were commonly employed in assessing writing samples, but exhibited varying cut-off points (benchmarks) for placement purposes, as well as a wide range of performance levels (from 4 to 10) and evaluation criteria (such as focus, content, organization, development, style, voice, vocabulary, sentence variety, grammar, and/or mechanics).

Computer-based Assessment

Only 20 per cent of colleges that conducted formal assessment relied solely on computer-based assessment instruments, with another 47 per cent employing multiple measures that included some form of computer-based assessment. The most commonly used computer-based instruments were the *Accuplacer Reading Comprehension* and/or *Accuplacer Sentence Skills* tests. These commercially available products (from the U.S.-based College Board) have the benefit of relative cost effectiveness and virtually immediate turnaround time, but their perceived effectiveness is premised on the assumption that competencies in reading comprehension and/or sentence skills are legitimate proxies for language proficiency in general and writing

competency in particular, a premise not universally supported in the literature. For example, Driver and Krech (2001), in their comparative analysis of computerized placement versus traditional writing samples, noted that “what is easiest to measure – often by means of a multiple choice test – may correspond least to good writing, and . . . choosing a correct response from a set of possible answers is not composing” (p. 17). Similarly, Brown (1978) noted that multiple choice tests “require a passive, reactive mental state when actual writing requires and fosters a sense of human agency, an active state” (p. 3).

It is noteworthy that four colleges (Centennial, Confederation, Fleming, Mohawk) were also pilot testing the *WritePlacer* instrument, a computer-based method of assessing student writing samples. Results of these pilot tests were not available for inclusion at the time of writing this Report, but merit further attention since the logistical problems associated with traditional non-computerized grading methods were reported as daunting and expensive considerations by many respondents. On the other hand, the norming and calibration process for teachers involved in grading writing samples was reported by some colleges as a valuable exercise in professional development, especially for teachers scheduled to teach communications courses.

Multiple Measures

Across all three categories of college size, *multiple measures* were the most common method of assessing the language competencies of incoming students. Of those colleges that conducted formal language assessment, 47 per cent reported using multiple measures, usually in the form of writing samples combined with computer-based reading comprehension and/or sentence skills tests. Across the province, however, variation was observed in the step-wise order in which tests were administered, the weighting and priority given to different measures, and the cut-off levels (benchmarks) used for placement purposes. Only three colleges (Centennial, Mohawk, Seneca) reported *speaking and listening* measures as part of their suite of language assessment processes.

This approach of using *multiple measures* in language assessment was highly supported by the literature (Breland, 1996; Driver & Krech, 2001; Greenberg, 1992; White, 1998). White (1998), for example, noted that the “results of a careful multiple-choice test, when combined with the results of a single essay test, will yield a fairer and more accurate measure of writing ability than will either test when used by itself” (pp. 240-241). Driver and Krech (2001) similarly concluded their comparative analysis of language assessment methods by recommending “a combination of tests as the most accurate measure of students’ placement needs” (p. 19). However, they also noted that, because of the expense and logistical demands of using multiple measures, this practice might not be practical for many institutions.

Overall, the findings of this Report reflected the consensus in the research literature that language assessment can pose significant challenges, especially in terms of consistency across a complex system such as Ontario’s colleges comprising 24 autonomous institutions serving diverse geographic and demographic constituencies. Kingsbury and Tremblay (2009), for example, in their recent study of language assessment practices across Quebec’s system of colleges, noted that the “critical first point of tension” (p. 1) in language assessment involved a lack of common expectations, terminology, and benchmarks in defining language competency.

While a concern for language quality was present in most institutional policies, colleges “do not all share the same definition of language mastery. . . . [There is] a lack of univocal understanding of what exactly is being evaluated or how the evaluation must be carried out” (p. 1). Furthermore, the concept of language mastery was open to interpretation both across and within the institutions surveyed by Kingsbury and Tremblay:

For some, language mastery refers to spelling, grammatical correctness, or vague terms such as language basics or mechanics; for others, it involves additional elements of textual organization, persuasive argument, appropriate use of evidence; yet others refer to content-related elements and vocational-specific language skills. (p.1)

It is noteworthy that the need to assess *all* of these dimensions of language proficiency have been a recurrent theme throughout the chronology of reports on language practices at Ontario colleges examined in the introductory section of this Report (Hill, 2003; Pascal, 1990; Rowen, 1997; Rowen & Graham, 2000; Tilly, 1998).

Significantly, Kingsbury and Tremblay (2009) concluded their analysis of language competency assessment practices in Quebec with the observation that the single element most often mentioned by the college teachers surveyed in their study was “the ability to transpose one’s thoughts into writing” (p. 1). This focus on the centrality of *writing* as the critical skill in academic settings was also well supported by the literature (Airasian, Engemann, & Gallaher, 2007; Barakett & Cleghorn, 2000; Bartlett, 2003; Fisher & Engemann, 2009). “Writing”, noted Eric Schneider, “is the edifice on which the rest of education rests” (in Bartlett, 2003, p. 7). The U.S. National Commission on Writing (2003), in speaking of “the need for a writing revolution” (p. 1), also called for “a new commitment to measuring writing quality, insisting that assessment composed only of multiple choice tests was not adequate to this demanding task. . . . An authentic assessment of writing depends on requiring the student to produce a piece of prose that someone reads and evaluates” (p. 29). Similarly, the National Commission on Writing recommended that postsecondary institutions:

place writing squarely in the centre of the school agenda and that policy makers provide the resources required to improve writing. . . . The reward of disciplined writing is the most valuable job attribute of all: a mind equipped to think. Writing today is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many. Writing can help students seize opportunities, imagine endless possibilities, surmount life’s difficulties (pp.11, 26).

In the current Ontario context, this emphasis on assessing *writing* as the critical modality in language proficiency was clearly reflected in the finding that 80 per cent of colleges currently conducting formal assessment relied either solely, or in part, on writing samples that provided direct, authentic, performance-based measures of student proficiency in a mode of communication that is critical for success in postsecondary education. Kingsbury and Tremblay (2009) emphasized “this inseparable link between evaluation of learning and evaluation of

language, [and noted] that students who demonstrate a lack of language mastery are already being punished when it comes to disciplinary competencies” (p. 2).

The widespread use of rubrics and grader calibration reported at Ontario colleges is also well supported by the literature (Engemann & Gallagher, 2006; Hunter et al., 1996; Linn & Miller, 2005; Moskal, 2000). For example, Engemann and Gallagher (2006) noted that “rubrics are particularly effective” (p.38) and “can be highly reliable when graders are extensively trained in the application of the measures” (p. 36), reflecting a practice that was widely reported at Ontario colleges that conducted formal assessment of student writing samples. However, Engemann and Gallagher also noted that “inter-rater reliability among teachers requires an investment of time through professional development” (p. 40).

Overall, the extent and diversity of current *assessment practices* at Ontario colleges suggests that, while a significant degree of activity is occurring in this field, and while many of these current practices are supported by the literature (multiple measures, focus of writing modality, use of rubrics, training and calibration of graders, etc.), there are, however, neither shared policies and practices, a consistent provincial strategy, nor a universal commitment across the Ontario college system with respect to formal assessment of language proficiency. Certainly, questions arise regarding the logistics, timing, and costs of universal language assessment of all incoming college students, but the necessity of such a commitment is a recurrent theme in the literature (Carini et al., 2006; Colton, 1999; Kozeracki, 2002; Moore & Carpenter, 1985; Perin, 2002; Phipps, 1998; Weissman, 1997). Roueche and Roueche (1994b), for example, noted that “skills assessment and placement should be mandatory, with test data used to place students in appropriate classes” (p. 3).

Remediation

The literature overwhelmingly indicated that “at-risk” students who participated in some form of academic intervention, variously termed *remediation*, *upgrading*, *developmental*, *foundational*, and/or *supplemental* language instruction, achieved higher grades and retention rates than students who required but had not participated in such interventions (Fisher & Engemann, 2009; Marshall, 2008; Martin & Arendale, 1992; McCarthy et al., 1997; Wallace, 2009; Weissman, 1997). Stated bluntly, remediation for at-risk students “increases academic performance and retention” (Martin & Arendale, p. 3).

Whether based on pre-admission screening, post-admission informal classroom assessment, or post-admission formal assessment for placement purposes, all Ontario colleges reported the implementation of some form of remedial, upgrading, developmental, foundational, and/or supplemental instruction for students who were “at risk” due to language deficits, although the extent and diversity of those practices varied widely across the system. The methods of addressing the remedial needs of students with language deficits were categorized, for the purposes of this Report, into three delivery models: (a) primarily through *Support Services* (29 per cent), (b) primarily through “*Transcript*” remedial courses that did not grant credits toward program completion (25 per cent), and (c) primarily through “*Modified*” *Level 1* postsecondary Communications credit courses (29 per cent). At 17 per cent of Ontario colleges, language

upgrading relied primarily on a combination of “Transcript” remedial and “Modified” Level 1 courses.

Support Services

While all Ontario colleges reported the availability of Support Services, 29 per cent reported a reliance on Support Service as their primary method of addressing the language deficits of “at-risk” students. These support services fell under the auspices of various institutional departments/services, with titles such as Learning Centre, Student Support Centre, Student Success program, Help Centre, etc. In terms of college size, reliance on support services was the primary remediation method of 50 per cent of Medium-sized colleges, while only 11 per cent of Small and 14 per cent of Large colleges relied on Support Services as their primary method of language remediation.

With few exceptions, student participation in this method of language remediation was predominantly a voluntary activity for students, with both drop-in and scheduled appointments available, usually during regular school hours, and usually with additional hours of service added during times of peak demand such as mid-term and examination periods. All colleges reported the use of Peer Tutors who were often trained, paid, and/or fulfilling clinical placements as part of their postsecondary programs. Support centres usually provided a range of services, including generic assistance (learning strategies, time management, study skills), program-specific assistance (individual help with assignments/projects), as well as more specific language-related assistance (essay editing, citation formats). Additionally, half of Ontario colleges reported some form of dedicated “writing centre” staffed by part-time and/or full-time personnel with some form of specialization in communications. Examples of colleges employing dedicated language-focused support services and/or personnel included:

- Boréal: Writing Technologist
- Canadore: Writing Help Desk
- Conestoga: Communications Specialist
- Durham: Academic Writing Service, three full-time Writing Specialists
- Fanshawe: Learning Centre, English Technologist
- Georgian: Writing lab
- Humber: Writing Centre, full-time Coordinator
- Loyalist: Academic Writing Centre, full-time Manager
- Mohawk: Communications Centre
- Northern: Communications Specialist
- Sault: Faculty-led writing workshops and tutorials
- St. Lawrence: Writing Centre

At least one college (Loyalist) offered, with demonstrable success, an intensive *pre*-semester (summer) remedial course, a method of supplemental instruction that also found support in the literature (Maggio et al., 2005; Raab & Adam, 2005). For example, Raab and Adam (2005) found that students who had completed a remedial summer course *prior* to enrolment had retention rates of 79 per cent compared to the overall institutional average of 68 per cent.

Additionally, all colleges reported a wide range of supplemental language-related resources and activities, including workshops, tutorials, computer-based learning tools, web-based resources, etc. Significantly, all colleges also reported high levels of student usage of support services for these purposes. Also noteworthy, 29 per cent of Ontario colleges reported some form of formally organized activity, delivered through their support services, dedicated to further developing their students' oral language skills. These activities employed various formats and titles such as Chat Sessions (Cambrian), Let's Talk Club (Centennial), Conversation Partners (Conestoga), Conversation Club (Durham), Conversation Circles (Fanshawe), Book Club Discussions (Humber), and Conversation Club (Mohawk).

Significantly, at least three colleges (Cambrian, La Cité, Lambton) had, or were in the process of implementing, policies that required students needing additional language support to be formally "contracted" to participate in support service activities as part of their Level 1 Communications course, with grades assigned (as incentives) for successfully completing this additional mandatory component of their Level 1 Communications programs. This mandating of remedial assistance is also well supported in the literature, as described below.

"Transcript" Remedial Courses

One quarter of Ontario colleges relied primarily on remedial or upgrading courses through which students earned credits that were recorded on their official *transcripts*, but which did not count as credits toward postsecondary program completion/graduation. An additional 17 per cent of colleges employed *both* "Transcript" courses and "Modified" Level 1 credit courses. Based on college size, "Transcript" remedial courses were rarely employed at Small (11 per cent) or Medium-sized (0 per cent) colleges, but represented the primary remediation delivery model at the majority (71 per cent) of Large colleges.

"Transcript" remedial courses focused mainly on the *mechanics* or *basics* of language proficiency (such as vocabulary, grammar, sentence skills, paragraph development), and often included a verbal "conversation" component. This model of language remediation was typically characterized by smaller class sizes (ranging from 25- 28), additional scheduled hours (from 1 – 8 extra hours), pedagogical accommodations, individualized assistance, and teachers with specialized skills. Examples of pedagogical accommodations included intensive focus on writing tasks, repetition of fundamental principles of good writing, and multiple writing assignments with prompt feedback. As one administrator described it, the essence of remediation is "write, write, write". Students could be enrolled in these courses based on a number of factors: pre-admission screening, program-specific requirements, recommendations of Level 1 Communications teachers based on informal in-class assessments, or through an institutional placement process based on formal assessment of language proficiency.

Of the colleges that employed this delivery model, approximately 50 per cent designated "Transcript" remedial courses as *mandatory pre-requisites* (based on formal assessment) prior to entry into Level 1 postsecondary Communications credit courses, while students in other colleges had an *option* as to whether or not to enrol in these courses. However, with respect to

mandatory versus voluntary participation in upgrading courses, the literature strongly supported policies that *mandated* “at-risk” students to receive the assistance they needed, usually as a pre-requisite for enrolment in postsecondary Communications credit courses (Carini, 2006; Kozeracki, 2002; Marshall, 2009; Moore & Carpenter, 1987; Perin, 2002; Weissman, 1997). For example, Moore and Carpenter (1987) noted that:

Academically deficient students have already demonstrated that their academic skills are below the minimum required to succeed in college-level course. It follows that, to correct those deficiencies, some type of remediation must take place Even open-door institutions have a right and a responsibility to set minimum standards that students must meet in order to take courses, enter programs, and fulfill degree requirements (p. 103).

In some cases, transcript courses served the general population, while in other cases remedial classes were streamed, or “sheltered” (Seneca), based on language competency and/or cultural heritage. Some colleges, particularly those with large ESL populations, reported significant diversity in the numbers of courses, variety of delivery models, and organizational structures related to “Transcript” remedial courses. In some cases, “Transcript” credits were also recognized as “equivalencies” (i.e., counting as postsecondary program credits) for students enrolled in certain designated *Foundations Certificate* programs at some colleges (Centennial, George Brown, Sault, Seneca).

One of the often reported drawbacks of this model, however, was the fact that students enrolled in “transcript” remediation courses became “out-of-sync” or “off-cycle” from their cohort in terms of program mapping, and, consequently were required to complete (and to pay for) the additional mandatory credit course (Level 1 Communications) at some point in their academic program in order to graduate. In this context, Perin (2002) suggested the benefits of “mainstreaming of remedial course either organizationally within the college or programmatically within students’ own course selections” (p. 7). This model of programmatic *mainstreaming*, or *concurrent remediation*, is characterized, for the purposes of this Report, as a “Modified” Level 1 Communications course.

“Modified” Level 1 Communications Credit Course

The use of a “Modified” Level 1 Communications course addressed some of the concerns associated with the “Transcript” remediation model described above. In the “Modified” Level 1 remediation model, students who required additional remediation/upgrading were enrolled in a Level 1 Communications course where they could work toward a postsecondary credit while *concurrently* receiving modifications such as additional hours, smaller class sizes, pedagogical accommodations, and/or teachers with specialized skills. “Modified” Level 1 courses were reported by 29 per cent of Ontario colleges as their primary method of remediation, while an additional 17 per cent employed *both* “Modified” and “Transcript” courses to address the language needs of “at-risk” students. Based on college size, almost half of the Small colleges (45 per cent) and 25 per cent of Medium-sized colleges relied primarily on this model; only one Large college (Fanshawe) relied primarily on a Modified Level 1 model of concurrent remediation, employing pedagogical practices that allowed students to receive individualized

assistance and targeted practice in writing skills while simultaneously earning credits toward postsecondary program completion.

“Modified” courses addressed the same Learning Outcomes as regular Level 1 Communications courses, but differed primarily in the *delivery* method, with more individualized assistance, flexibility, and pedagogical accommodations resulting from smaller class sizes, one or two extra scheduled hours, and teachers with specialized skills. Additional opportunities for computer-based lab work were also characteristic of this model. However, some of the drawbacks reported by colleges included the perceived social stigma of placement in a “modified” course, and the challenges of motivating “at risk” students, already struggling with heavy workloads, to take advantage of the additional hours and accommodations provided for language upgrading.

In the context “Modified” Level 1 credit courses, some colleges reported the use of *English for Academic Purposes (EAP)* as a “remedial” course for ESL students, usually in the form of a sheltered “Modified” Level 1 credit course with the usual characteristics of extended hours, smaller class sizes, and specialized teachers. Some stakeholders suggested that EAP for non-ESL students might be a topic for further investigation. Certainly this has been proposed in the literature as a possible remedial model for *all* students. Wilkinson and Silliman (2009), for example, noted that “Students’ success in school depends upon proficiency in academic language, the language of classroom instruction. Whether English is the first or second language, academic language proficiency is a critical competence for students” (p. 1). Similarly, Beletzan (2009) noted the “multi-dimensional potential” of EAP as an institutional resource, and recommended “a paradigm shift in the EAP profession from preparatory service provider in marginalized non-credit programs to cross-disciplinary centre of expertise . . . drawing EAP programs from the periphery toward greater engagement with the academic community” (pp. 34, 26). Table 6 summarizes the key aspects of each of these three models of remediation.

Table 6. Three Models of Remediation

Support Services	Transcript Credits	Modified Level 1 Credits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsibility of various institutional departments/services • Referred to as Learning Centre, Student Support Centre, Student Success program, Help Centre, etc • Student participation usually <i>voluntary</i>; occasionally mandated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usually the responsibility of Communications, Language, or ESL departments • Students earned “credits” that were recorded on their official <i>transcripts</i>, but which did not count as credits earned toward postsecondary program completion/graduation • Usually focused on 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usually the responsibility of Communications or Language departments • Students worked toward a postsecondary credit while <i>concurrently</i> receiving modifications • Typically characterized by smaller class sizes, additional scheduled hours, pedagogical

Support Services	Transcript Credits	Modified Level 1 Credits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No credits awarded for participation • Included drop-in and scheduled appointments • Widespread use of Peer Tutors • Range of services: generic assistance (learning strategies, time management, study skills); program-specific assistance (individual help with assignments/projects) • Often included dedicated “writing centre”, usually staffed by part-time and/or full-time personnel with some specialization in communications • Wide range of supplemental <i>language-related resources</i> and <i>activities</i>, including workshops, tutorials, computer-based learning tools, web-based resources, etc • Often included some activities focused on <i>oral language skills</i> 	<p><i>mechanics</i> or <i>basics</i> of language proficiency (such as vocabulary, grammar, sentence skills, paragraph development)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often included a verbal “conversation” component • Typically characterized by smaller class sizes, additional scheduled hours, pedagogical accommodations, individualized assistance, and/or teachers with specialized skills • Could be mandatory or optional, depending on college/program requirements • Wide diversity in numbers of courses, variety of delivery models, and organizational structures • Sometimes served the general population, sometimes “streamed” or “sheltered” based on language competency and/or cultural heritage • Drawbacks: students became “out-of-sync” or “off-cycle” from their cohort in terms of program mapping; students usually required to complete (and to pay for) additional mandatory course 	<p>accommodations, individualized assistance, and/or teachers with specialized skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drawbacks: some perceived social stigma of placement in a “modified” course; challenges of motivating “at risk” students, already struggling with heavy workloads, to take advantage of the additional hours and accommodations • Usually mandatory based on formal assessment and/or program requirement

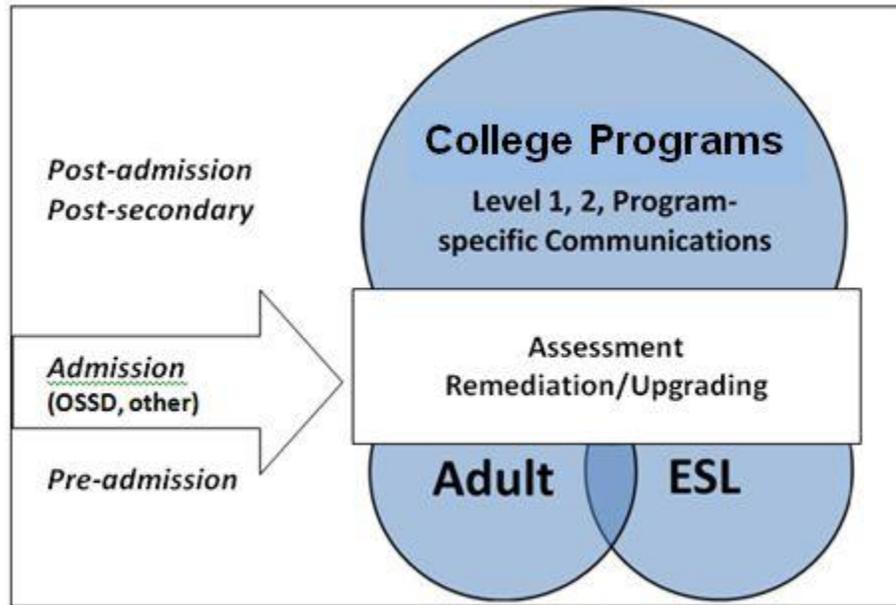
On the whole, with respect to these models of *remediation*, Ontario colleges reported a range of methods that, within budgetary and timetabling constraints, focused on providing more *individualized* and *intensive assistance*, whether through one-on-one support services, or

through various models of classroom delivery that employed smaller class sizes, more hours of instruction, pedagogical accommodations, and/or specialized teachers. Such *student-centred* approaches to language remediation were well supported in the literature, which documented the benefits of *smaller classes* in terms of more flexibility and individualized assistance, greater student engagement, more active learning, and more formative feedback (Beatty-Guenter, 2007; Braxton & Milem, 2000; Gilbert, 1995; Keup, 2006; Roberts-Miller, 2004; Shults, 2000). Specifically in terms of class size, some studies suggested that writing-intensive classes should set limits at “ideally 20 students and no more than 25” (UNCA, 2004, p. 2), while others promoted classes of *fewer than 20* students, especially in the context of language remediation (Follman, 1994; Haswell, 2006; Horning, 2007; Knight, 1991; Maggio et al., 2005; Marshall, 2009; McCusker, 1999).

However, while *student-centred* approaches (in the form of smaller classes, pedagogical accommodations, individualized assistance, etc.) characterized most remedial models, the landscape of remedial and upgrading practices was complicated to some extent by the overlapping array of postsecondary, *pre*-postsecondary, and *non*-postsecondary services addressing the multi-faceted language needs of a heterogeneous contemporary student population that included adult learners, L2 students, students arriving through non-traditional pathways, identified groups with special needs, etc. For example, with respect to L2 students, in 2009-2010 the most common “Other” languages reported by new Ontario college students included Arabic, Chinese, Spanish, Korean, and Farsi. Further illustrating the overlapping array of language services, ACE provided, in 2008-2009, *non*-postsecondary preparatory language “upgrading” courses for several thousand students who were *concurrently* enrolled in postsecondary programs.

Furthermore, funding support from a variety of provincial and federal sources, along with restrictions in eligibility criteria in terms of student access (based on second language needs, age, special demographic qualifications, etc.), resulted in examples of overlapping delivery models serving both pre- and post-admission students, in both preparatory language acquisition courses and postsecondary language upgrading courses, within the context of college programming. Figure 17 graphically illustrates the *overlapping range of service providers* addressing the language needs of students who require additional support in order to find success at Ontario colleges, and in the workplace beyond.

Figure 17. Overlapping Delivery of Language Remediation/Upgrading Services to Students in Postsecondary Programs at Ontario Colleges



Level 1 Communications Courses

All 24 Ontario colleges reported *mandatory* completion of a Level 1 Communications course as a requirement for postsecondary program completion/graduation in *all* (54 per cent) or *most* (46 per cent) of their postsecondary programs. In terms of college size, mandatory Level 1 credits were required in *all* programs by 33 per cent of Small colleges, 75 per cent of Medium-sized colleges, and 57 per cent of Large colleges.

The form, content, and delivery of Level 1 Communications/English courses represented the *most common aspect* of any language practice encountered during the preparation of this Report. Level 1 courses consistently delivered a suite of Learning Outcomes addressing the *generic skills* and/or *basic mechanics* of language (vocabulary, sentence skills, grammar, paragraphs), as well as *critical thinking* and/or *persuasive writing* skills (comparative essays, persuasive essays, critiques, research reports, documentation). Most colleges also reported that Level 1 Communications courses specifically addressed *verbal skills* through a range of tasks (discussions, oral reports, presentations, debates, mock interviews). Level 1 Communications courses also represented the primary vehicle for delivery of MTCU *Essential Employability Skills* requirements with respect to the two language-related Learning Outcomes identified in the Introduction.

Most colleges also reported flexibility in attending to *program-related* topics, outcomes, and tasks (technical writing, business writing, incident reports, memos, letters, resumes,

presentations) within the parameters of Level 1 Communications courses. Notably, the ratio of program-related components incorporated into Level 1 Communications courses was usually lower at colleges or in programs that required further Level 2 program-specific Communications courses.

Additionally, some colleges (Boreal, Cambrian, La Cité, Conestoga) reported the benefits of high levels of *collaboration* between language teachers and program coordinators in supporting program-related relevance in learning outcomes, topics, tasks, and assignments. Across the system, 30 per cent of Ontario colleges also reported the delivery of *program-specific Level 1* Communications courses (Algonquin, Conestoga, Durham, Georgian, Lambton, Sheridan, St. Clair).

Finally, it was consistently reported that the *assessment* of student learning in Level 1 Communications courses was achieved through a combination of formative in-class activities and assignments, combined in varying proportions with summative end-of-term final exams graded by classroom teachers. However, it was also noted in the Findings section that some form of formal “Exit” testing occurred at only 25 per cent of Ontario colleges, usually through a formal assessment component that was incorporated into the final exam of a Level 1 Communications course, and that mirrored the expectations of entry-level assessment criteria. Only four colleges (Fanshawe, Fleming, Humber, Mohawk) reported rigorous formal practices in exit assessment that not only mirrored entry-level criteria, but also replicated the formalized processes of double-blind grading; scoring rubrics; and trained, calibrated graders.

Level 2 Communications Courses

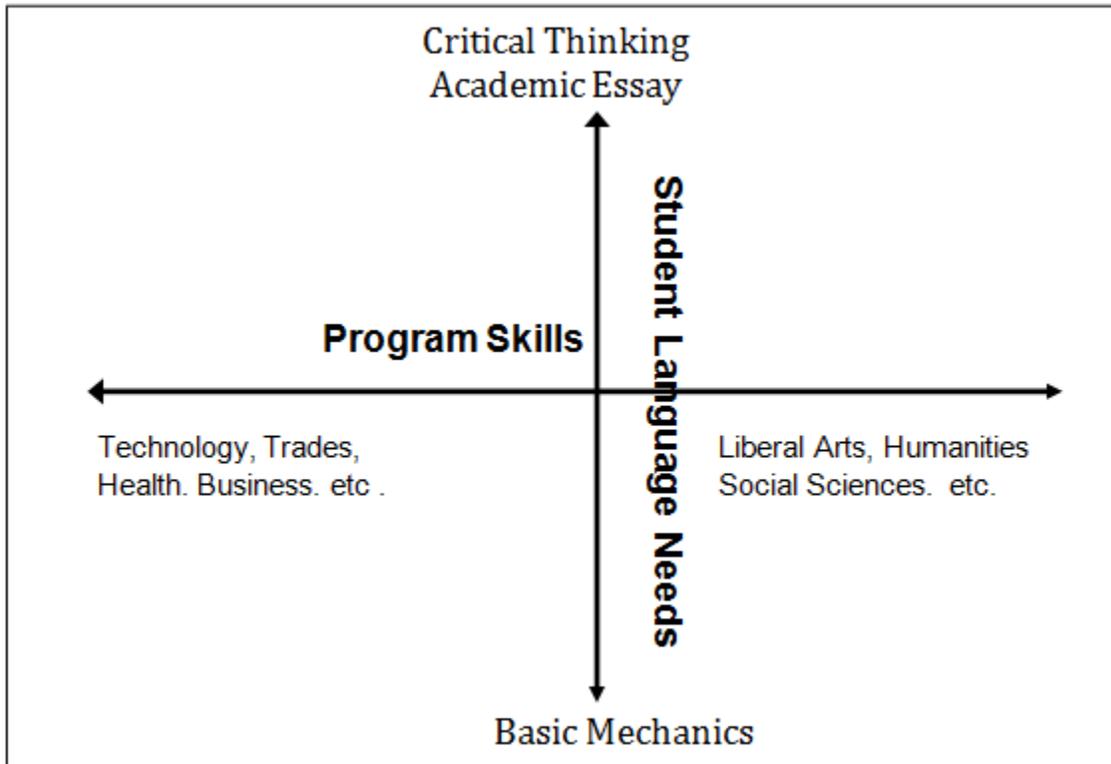
While 54 per cent of Ontario colleges reported mandatory Level 1 Communications requirements in *all* of their postsecondary programs, only 16 per cent of colleges subsequently required a mandatory Level 2 Communications course in *all* programs. Overall, 63 per cent of colleges required a second level course in *most* programs, and 21 per cent in *some* programs. In certain cases, Level 2 courses focused on *advanced* communications skills related to academic writing, research reporting, critical/persuasive writing, documentation, etc. In other cases, Level 2 Communications courses focused on developing specific program-related *vocational* communication skills through program-specific topics, tasks, and assignments related to report writing, technical writing, incident reporting, business presentations, memos, oral presentations, and other occupation-specific communications skills and activities. Some aspects of Level 2 Communications courses addressed specific *employment-related* communication skills (such as field reports, clinical placement reports, job search skills, resumes, letters of application, interview techniques, handling of difficult customers, etc.) that were delivered either as integral components of Level 2 courses or as stand-alone courses, such as Georgian’s second level Comm@Work communications course. A high level of collaboration between communications teachers and program coordinators was also reported by many colleges as a critical factor in the effective delivery of Level 2 communications courses.

At some colleges, certain postsecondary programs also required additional Level 3 (or in some cases Level 4) Communications courses, always with a focus on program-specific

communications skills such as, for example, Professional Writing, Oral Presentations, Broadcast Reporting, Journalism, Visual Analysis, Wired Communication, etc.

Overall, Level 1, Level 2, Program-Specific, and further levels of communications courses addressed a wide range of student communications needs (ranging from basic mechanics of language to demonstrations of critical thinking and persuasive argumentation) and/or a wide range of program-specific communications skills serving all facets of the college environment, including Liberal Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, Health, Business, Technology, etc. Figure 18 graphically represents the learning outcomes addressed by these Communications courses in terms of two dimensions of learning skills outcomes related to (a) *student language needs* and (b) *program-related* communications skills.

Figure 18: Two Dimensions of Language Proficiency (Student Language Needs/Program Skills) Addressed in Level 1 and/or Level 2 Communications Courses



IV. Conclusion

The purpose of this Report was to provide a comprehensive empirical snapshot of *current* literacy-related practices at Ontario colleges. The ladder curriculum framework proved to be a useful instrument for gathering and reporting information on current practices, for both individual colleges and across the system. The Introduction, Findings, and Discussion sections of this Report situated current practices within the context of a) the research literature on best practices in postsecondary literacy education, and b) the recurring themes and proposals articulated throughout a 20-year chronology of studies specifically related to literacy at Ontario colleges.

With respect to LEVEL 1, LEVEL 2, and Program-related Communications courses, this Report illustrates a significant degree of commonality across the system in terms of learning outcomes, delivery methods, terminology, and adherence to MTCU requirements regarding generic communications skills and essential employability skills. However, with respect to the ASSESSMENT and REMEDIATION steps of conceptual framework, this Report presents a landscape characterized by a wide range and diversity of activities, terminology, methods, benchmarks, instruments, service models, delivery agents, and measures of effectiveness. This is significant in light of a recurring proposition, in the context of the chronology of Ontario studies and the research on postsecondary literacy practices that *common system-wide approaches* to these issues can produce positive outcomes, for a wide range of stakeholders, with respect to:

- facilitating communication among practitioners and administrators;
- providing a common framework for interpreting and reporting learner achievements;
- permitting evidence-based decision-making at both the college and system level;
- providing common measures of effectiveness and accountability across the system; and
- establishing portability and transferability of assessment scores and achievement results, thus enabling students to move from college to college without undergoing unnecessary re-assessment or logistically challenging requests for “equivalencies”.

However, one of the major paradoxes inherent in the information gathered during the preparation of this project was the ongoing and widespread tension between individual institutional autonomy and pan-system consistency; while colleges recognize the need for more systemic coherence and coordination in policies and practices, at the same time “they want to maintain their full and complete autonomy when it comes to language evaluation” (Bartlett, p. 4). All contributors to this Report recognized some potential benefits of common approaches; however, many institutions are heavily invested in their current, and often well-established, practices. The challenge is to reconcile these divergent approaches and practices for the sake of all stakeholders.

The following questions are offered, therefore, as a guide to assist in clarifying and responding to these various issues at both the local (college) and system levels.

Assessment

- To what extent can/should Ontario colleges implement *mandatory assessment* of language proficiency of all incoming students?
- How practical or feasible are the current assessment instruments within the time and budgetary constraints of post-admission, pre-course timelines?
- Which assessment methods and instruments (or combinations) are most effective in identifying “at-risk” students?
- What *benchmarks* most accurately reflect the expected entry-level literacy competencies for incoming college students?
- Should the same assessment methods/instruments be employed for all students (L1, L2, adult, non-traditional)?

Remediation

- To what extent can/should Ontario colleges implement mandatory remediation for students based on assessment scores?
- What are the essential characteristics and components of successful remedial practices?
- To what extent can colleges provide a holistic approach, employing multiple strategies to make remediation a comprehensive program that encompasses more than just tutoring and skills development?
- Are the goals and objectives of remedial programs clearly defined and understood by all participants and stakeholders?
- What are the pros and cons of the three remediation models, reported by contributors, currently employed across Ontario’s college system: (a) Support Services, (b) “Transcript” courses, and (c) “Modified” Level 1 Communications courses?
- With respect to adults, L2, and other non-traditional students, to what extent can/should alternative service delivery models (such as ACE, ESL) be employed in the delivery of language remediation for students enrolled in postsecondary programs?
- To what extent can/should English for Academic Purposes programs be expanded to serve non-ESL students?
- To what extent are the following questions used productively in evaluating the effectiveness of remedial education:
 - Do students successfully complete remediation programs?
 - Do students move successfully from remediation to college-level courses?
 - Are remedial students persisting and reaching their academic goals?

- To what extent can/should Ontario colleges employ more inter-institutional collaboration in studying, sharing, and replicating best practices and ideas in language proficiency?

In conclusion, a *laddered curriculum* framework defines the vision that this Report brings to the challenge of addressing the multi-dimensional demands associated with literacy practices across the Ontario college system. The findings suggest a sense of urgency with respect to the need for concerted and coherent action in addressing the language needs of all contemporary students enrolled in Ontario colleges. In the words of Roueche and Roueche (1994a), “the at-risk student population will not go away; addressing its challenges should not be postponed and cannot be ignored. Discussions about ‘how best to do it’ should be replaced with ‘beginning somewhere and doing it now’” (p. 3). It is hoped that this Report, in describing the extent and variety of current practices related to language proficiency, and in raising timely and pertinent questions concerning these practices, will act as a catalyst for productive discussion and fruitful developments as Ontario colleges work to fulfill a shared vision of helping all college students achieve success through enhanced literacy.

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Appendix A

Individuals Consulted in the Preparation of this Report

The following individuals provided valuable information, insights, and feedback during the preparation of this Report (in alphabetical order).

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- Janice Burk, Coordinator of Languages & Communications, Sault College
- Cheryl Cote, Health & Community Studies, Algonquin College
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- Dr. Ursula McCloy, Research Director, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario
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- Jeff McNab, Registrar, Loyalist College
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- Margaret Whetstone, Decision Support Lead, Ontario College Application Service
- Deb Wilkin, Manager, Centre for Academic Excellence, Fanshawe College
- Laura Wocks, Distance Education Program Consultant, Continuing Education, Fanshawe College

Appendix B

Questionnaire Used in the Preparation of this Report

Item	Response Parameters
<p>Assessment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does your college conduct <i>post-admission</i> literacy assessment of newly admitted students? If YES, is this assessment mandatory or optional? What instrument(s) do you use? What modalities are assessed? (reading, writing, sentences, other) 	Yes /No Mandatory/Optional [provide sample(s)] Specify
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is your cut-off level? (i.e., what is your “definition” of minimum college-level literacy?) 	Quantitative and/or qualitative indicators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Approximately how many students are assessed? Approximately what percentage of newly admitted students? 	# of students %
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are all programs/divisions involved, or only selected areas? Exemptions? 	Specify
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does your college conduct “exit test” or “post test” assessments? If Yes, what instrument(s) do you use? When are “exit tests” conducted (end of term, end of program)? What are the consequences of “failing” the exit test? 	Yes /No [provide sample(s)]
<p>Evaluation/Grading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> When are students assessed? 	Dates/cycles
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How are the assessments evaluated/graded? 	Description of process
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Turnaround time? 	# days
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the faculty role in evaluation? 	Description of process
<p>Curriculum/Program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you provide formal curriculum for students who do not meet the cut-off level? 	Yes /No

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are students/courses designated as “Remedial”? • Is there a formally laddered curriculum? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is formal curriculum mandatory or optional? • Credits granted? • How many sections? Levels? • How many students? 	Mandatory/Optional Yes/No # sections/levels # students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the nature/content of “remedial” literacy curriculum? 	Provide samples of curricula, resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the nature/content of “regular” first year college communication/ literacy curriculum? 	Provide samples of curricula, resources
<p>Other literacy services:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What other literacy support services does your college provide (tutorials, learning centres, computer-assisted)? • Approximately how many students access these literacy services? 	Descriptors # students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Please describe any linkages to other literacy initiatives inside or outside of the college (LBS, etc)? 	Descriptors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are post-admission domestic (L2) students included in the same assessment process? 	Yes /No
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does your college conduct self-evaluations of literacy curriculum, programs, support services? • If so, what criteria are used? 	Description of instruments, process, criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does your college collect demographic profile data on students in literacy programs? If so, what variables are included? 	Description of instruments, variables, process
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does your college finance remedial literacy programs? • What other costs are associated with literacy programs? 	Specify
<p>Additional comments: Please identify your role/position. Briefly describe your level of satisfaction, preferences, etc. with current practices. What’s working, not working, areas of improvement?</p>	

