A Response to “SIMS at Saint Mary’s: A View from Outside,” by George Gadda.

*This response was composed by Professors Rosemary Graham, Sandra Grayson, Carol Beran and David DeRose, all of whom have served as Director of Composition over the past fifteen years.*

It has recently come to our attention that a document titled “SIMS at Saint Mary’s: A View from Outside,” prepared as part of the Program Review for Studies for International and Multilingual Students by George Gadda, is being circulated around the College. This document is being presented as evidence to support the continued existence of the SIMS Program. But it is also being used to promulgate false claims about and unfounded accusations against the English Department, the Composition Program and even, in a very personal way, the current Director of Composition. This document also makes serious allegations about the placement practices used by the Composition Program, calling them “irresponsible” and suggesting that they are in violation of accepted practice within the profession. These allegations are demonstrably untrue and must be answered.

George Gadda was brought to campus to evaluate the SIMS Program, not English Composition. He had no contact with members of the English Department or Composition Program. Yet nearly a third of his evaluation of SMS is devoted to his judgments about Composition. The conclusions he presents appear to draw heavily on the self-study presented by the SIMS program. That self-study also made false statements about the English Composition Program. At the request of the Program Review Committee, we have addressed those false statements in another document. Parts of it are included in this response. (The full text of the letter to the PRC can be requested of the Director of Composition).

We will proceed by identifying and then correcting the false and/or misleading statements in Gadda’s report. Some require more explanation than others.

1. “[M]ost mainstream writing instructors have very little explicit knowledge of the grammar of English . . .” (1).
   
   - While this statement is not directly related to issues at Saint Mary’s, it’s worth pointing out that on the first page, Gadda makes this rather startling categorical pronouncement for which he offers no evidence.

2. “The students were also unanimous in their perception that the courses they had taken in SIMS were more demanding—and that their instructors were more available and supportive—than the English 3, 4, and 5 courses and instructors their friends and roommates had experienced” (2).
It would be helpful to know what question elicited this unanimous “perception” that SIMS courses were more demanding and SIMS instructors more available and supportive than English instructors. Nowhere in Gadda’s seven-page report does he compare the content and structure of SIMS courses with the content and structure of the English courses he suggests are less-demanding. Nowhere in his report does he cite a single formal student evaluation that addresses these issues. Instead, he relies on what students said about what their “friends and roommates” said they experienced. This is hearsay; citing hearsay in a formal review is unprofessional.

3. “As I said to several people during my campus visit, I found it counterintuitive that instructors teaching mainstream writing courses at Saint Mary’s would not be eager to shift students with language needs they were not equipped to meet to a unit where they would receive instruction tailored to those needs; this is a common desire of mainstream writing teachers at all levels” (5).

The Composition Program has always readily shifted students with the “language needs [it was] not equipped to meet” to the SIS/SMS/SIMS Program. Our concern has been with the inappropriate placing of native English speakers—from countries such as England, Canada, and Australia—in SIMS classes and with the inappropriate placing of U.S. born and educated students in those classes.

Among the students the SIMS Program and Gadda claim belong in SIMS are members of what current parlance calls “Generation 1.5.” These students are “U.S.-educated English language learners. . . . Some . . . immigrated to the United States while they were in elementary school; others arrived during high school. Still others were born in this country but grew up speaking a language other than English at home. They may see themselves as bilingual, but English may be the only language in which they have academic preparation or in which they can read and write. . . . They are usually less skilled in the academic language associated with school achievement, especially in the area of writing” (Harklau, 1).

In Generation 1.5 Students and College Writing, ESL specialist Linda Harklau rejects the notion that Gen 1.5 students belong in classes “designed either for international students who have learned English formally, are literate in their native language, and are accomplished students in their home countries; or for ESL students who have had limited exposure to English and to U.S. culture and education. Neither of these options is a good fit for generation 1.5 students” (2).

It is the position of the English Department and Composition Program that English 3, “Practice in Writing,” is the appropriate place for Saint Mary’s “Gen. 1.5” students. Developed in the mid-nineties, the English 3 curriculum was designed with Saint Mary’s unique population of under-prepared students in mind. (As a Catholic college in California, Saint Mary’s has served Spanish-speaking bi-lingual students for decades.)
course provides the kind of instruction called for in *Generation 1.5 Students and College Writing*. Faculty teaching English 3 “promote academic literacy” and are “aware of students’ prior academic literacy experiences.” They “help students develop critical literacy” and, from years of experience in small classes, know how to “recognize [the] diverse needs” of their students.

- Regular program reviews and repeated assessments of English 3 demonstrate its effectiveness.

- For years, international students from English-speaking countries such as Canada, Australia and England have been routinely and inappropriately placed in SIMS classes. These students traditionally enter Saint Mary’s through the Office of International Student Programs which has then sent them to SIMS for writing placement. Despite describing itself as a program for students “whose native language is not English,” and in clear violation of policy, SIMS faculty directed these native English speakers to enroll in SMS courses.
  
  - Mixing native English speakers with English Language Learners has resulted in students being placed in the wrong level of writing class. In one recent instance, a native of Australia was placed in SMS 4. When this came to light, he was transferred to English 4 where, due to deficiencies in his preparation, he struggled. Had this student been placed through the Composition program he would have started in English 3, where he would have received the remedial writing help he needed.

4. “Everyone I spoke to at Saint Mary’s commented on the current acrimonious relationship between SIMS and the English Department. As an outsider I can’t comment on the rights and wrongs of this situation, especially when I didn’t meet with anyone from English during my visit. I can observe, however, that this impasse should not be allowed to continue, and that the current plan for placing students into freshman writing courses based solely on SAT, ACT, AP, and IB test scores—a system put in place to sidestep the acrimony—should be seen as a stopgap for this year only” (6, emphasis added).

- Gadda’s assertion that the Composition Program’s decision to change its placement policy was “put in place to sidestep the acrimony” with the SIS/SMS/SIMS Program is incorrect. The decision to use standardized test scores was undertaken carefully and based on the analysis of three years of internal Saint Mary’s data. The primary motive was the concern that the way we were doing things—letting anyone with a 500 in Critical Reading start in English 4—was not always catching students who needed the extra support a semester in English 3 provides. By broadening the factors we use to place students (using the SAT Writing as well as Reading score), we have increased the number of students starting in English 3. The English Department committed itself to monitoring this new placement policy over the next three years.
5. “The system in place for 2009-2010 is not responsible. It contravenes the Conference on College Composition and Communication guideline that students should not be placed in writing classes without the evaluation of a current writing sample.”

- Gadda’s charge that our placement policy is “not responsible” is a serious one that requires a lengthy, detailed response. He alludes to—but does not quote (or cite a document title)—a Conference on College Composition and Communication “guideline” which our practice allegedly contravenes.

- As stated above, the decision to change our placement policy was a careful one undertaken after extensive research into practices at other institutions, validity studies conducted by the College Board, position statements of the CCCC and other bodies, consultation with assessment experts, and most importantly analysis of Saint Mary’s own data on the test scores, placement and success rates of its own students. The data analysis was conducted by the Director for Institutional Research on behalf of the Composition Program.

- In “Writing Assessment: A Position Statement,” the CCCC states these guidelines for “Assessment for Placement”:
  
  o Placement criteria in the most responsible programs will be clearly connected to any differences in the available courses.
  
  o Decision-makers should carefully weigh the educational costs and benefits of timed tests, portfolios, directed self placement, etc.
  
  o Students should have the right to weigh in on their assessment.

  - Students are notified of their placement when they register for orientation. They are informed at that time that they may take an optional placement test if they feel their SAT scores do not reflect their true ability.

  - Incidentally, the Director of Composition personally notified a large number of students whose scores put them on the “borderline,” to make sure they were aware of the optional test. Many, whose scores would place them directly in English 3 chose to stay there where they would get a full semester of intense, language-based instruction.

- The CCCC Position Statement also states:
  
  o If for financial or even programmatic reasons the initial method of placement is somewhat reductive, instructors . . . should create an opportunity early in the semester to review and change students’
placement assignments, and uniform procedures should be established to facilitate the easy re-placement of improperly placed students.

- Composition Faculty administer a diagnostic writing test on the first day of class as a “double check” on the score placement.
  - If students are placed according to scores on such tests, the ranges of placement must be revisited regularly to accommodate changes in curricula and shifts in the abilities of the student population.
  - We have done this initially and will continue to do so.

- Nowhere in “Writing Assessment: A Position Statement” does the CCCC state that “students should not be placed in writing classes without the evaluation of a current writing sample” (Gadda 6).

6. “[The current Composition Placement Policy] uses as a placement test SAT Writing, which was conceived and developed (by a committee I chaired) as part of an admissions test . . .”

- Last year the College Board released the findings of its most recent validity study. The study covered all three of the SAT tests but found that the Writing test was the most predictive of college success of all three tests. Nowhere in this validity study does the College Board suggest that the SAT should not be used in making placement decisions.

- While the SAT Writing test may have been developed as an admissions test, it is widely used by colleges and universities to guide student placement in writing courses. It is even used at the University of California to determine placement.

- Saint Mary’s chooses to use BOTH the Critical Reading and the Writing scores, thereby getting an expanded view of the students’ verbal skills.

7. “Because no one will be scrutinizing writing samples for non-native language features—not even the 25-minute SAT Writing samples available electronically—many multilingual students who would profit from SIMS classes will probably never find their way to them.”

- Gadda is incorrect. The Director of Composition does scrutinize the electronic writing samples. This summer—the first under the new policy—some of these showed “non-native language features” and were referred to the SIMS Director for placement.

8. “. . . it might be well for Saint Mary’s to consider placing academic authority for freshman composition in an entity outside the English Department. . . . English faculty who teach literature or critical theory often have little interest in or engagement with the
teaching of academic writing . . .”

• No comment.

9. “One of those issues might be the syllabi currently used in English 4 and 5 courses, which SIMS instructors told me they’ve requested repeatedly but never received.”

• This is one of the oddest statements in the document. The common syllabus for English 4 and the course outline for English 5 are available for anyone who wishes to see them. They are posted (with free take away copies) outside the Composition Office. We also keep a collection of individual instructors’ syllabi on hand for reference. We have no record of any such requests, let alone “repeated” requests.

10. “Another might be the extent to which the current courses, especially English 4, help students meet the writing challenges of their other courses, especially their seminars. (This issue surfaced and resurfaced in my conversations with staff members involved with tutoring and counseling.)

• Here—as elsewhere—Gadda writes as if charged with evaluating the Composition Program rather than evaluating SMS. Here—as elsewhere—he relies on hearsay to make judgments about our program’s practices.

11. “It should allow students 50 or 60 minutes to write. Each student essay should be scored independently by two trained readers who have first reviewed sample essays that exemplify the levels of achievement defined by a scoring guide. Those readers should encounter the student writing without names; they should judge the prose without any information about who the writers might be. Ideally, they should also have a designation that supplements their holistic scores by indicating their judgment that this essay has the kinds of language feature that signal the need for specialized instruction of the kind that SIMS provides, and as preparation for scoring they should have reviewed sample essays that clearly show those features. (That “E” or “NNS” or “L” designation would lead to examination of the student’s admission file, but the initial identification of the need for language-focused instruction should be made on the basis of the student’s writing only.) Each scoring session should involve several readers, so that there would always be readers to resolve discrepancies when the two original readers disagree.”

• This is a lengthy description of the standard way to conduct a timed writing test. The Composition Program follows this method when it tests and has done so for thirty years.

12. “The 2009-2010 policy allows students to contest their automatic placements by writing an essay on campus. Rather than allowing the process of assigning and evaluating those essays to be controlled by the director of freshman composition—whose impartiality many question—the college should take the opportunity to pilot a new procedure, based on the guidelines above.”
12. a. “According to many with whom I spoke, the current impasse arises in part from the unilateral authority Saint Mary’s apparently gives to the English Department’s director of freshman composition—or that the current director has taken.”

- This kind of personal attack, based entirely on hearsay, has no place in a professional evaluation.

Sources Cited and Consulted


Gadda, George. “SIMS at St. Mary’s: An Outside View.”
