



# General Education Pathways to Success: The Impact of GE Pathways on Student Writing

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## Abstract

General Education (GE) programs are often criticized for having weak unifying values, and are viewed as a random selection of courses by students. Creating coherence across the GE curriculum to make it more meaningful to students is a priority nationwide and in the California State University (CSU) system. At CSU Fullerton, we developed and implemented a GE Pathways pilot program aimed at unifying GE courses around four themed “pathways”. Impact of the GE Pathways on our students was examined. In particular, we assessed student writing skill development associated with the GE Pathways. Mixed yet interesting results were observed, which helped us reflect on the design and delivery of our GE Pathways.

## GE Pathways at CSUF

Four Pathway in lower division GE courses

- AY14-15: **300** (7% of entering freshmen) enrolled in GE Pathways



Designed to provide:

- More clearly defined and coherent initial GE experience
- Integrated curricular and co-curricular activities
- A sense of belonging among students who share similar interests

Pathway Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) aligned with GE learning goals:

- GE Program Learning Goal 3: “Students will communicate competently and ethically, both orally and in writing.”
- Pathway SLOs: “Students will be able to communicate clearly, effectively, and persuasively on issues of (pathway theme), orally and in writing.”

## Rationale for GE Pathways

- GE courses are not perceived as valuable by students as major courses (Warner & Koeppl, 2009).
- GE course selections by students are not very intentional or meaningful.
- Coherence across the GE curriculum is a priority for the CSU (O’Donnell et al., 2011).
- GE Pathways, if well designed, can integrate curricular and co-curricular elements, and thus help students make connections among the GE courses.
- Anecdotal evidence suggests that GE Pathways lead to higher student retention (Flaherty, 2014).
- Few documented studies on the impact of GE Pathways on student learning.

## GE Pathways Writing Assessment (Fall 2014)

**ENG 101:** Sections taught by GE Pathways faculty only

- Required course for most freshmen
- Each section enrolls both Pathways and non-Pathways students
- Comparable demographic composition (gender, URM status) and prior academic achievement (academic grouping index) between Pathways and non-Pathways students

Embedded **Pre- and Post-writing assignment:**

- An essay responding to published articles related to the Pathway theme
- Published articles collectively selected by the Pathways faculty
- Assignment instructions comparable across instructors
- Designed to minimize interruption to regular learning and teaching activities

Student essays graded using a **uniform rubric:**

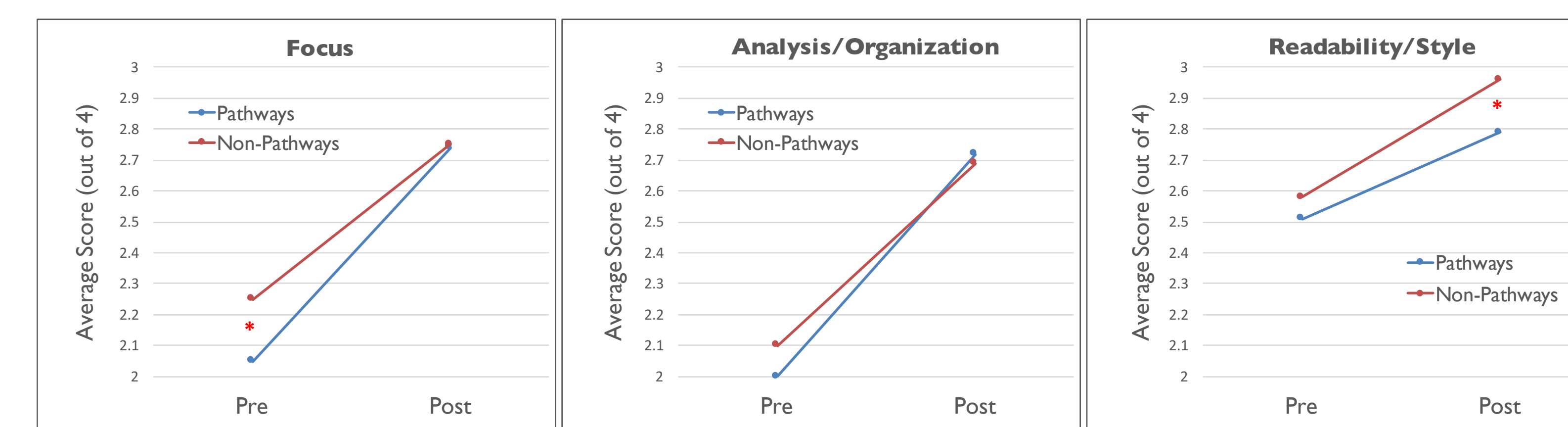
- 3 criteria: Focus; Analysis/Organization; Readability/Style
- 4 point scale: Below Basic; Developing; Proficient; Advanced
- Inter-rater reliability achieved through 2 faculty rubric calibration sessions

## Results

**All students:** Significant Pre→Post improvement on all criteria



**Pathways vs. non-Pathways:** Pathways students improved more on “Focus”, and less on “Readability/Style”



No significant differences between Pathways vs. non-Pathways students in:

- Course grade
- GPA
- Retention (registration status for Spring 2015)

Students and faculty seem to **feel positive** about the Pathways (self-report):

### Student Quote:

“I liked that we focused on one major theme throughout the whole semester. The classes had a coherent theme, and connected to each other.”

### Faculty Quote:

“Although I teach English 101 every semester, I found that teaching Pathways really required me to focus on other aspects or writing... Students were active in discussions and participated due to those changes or additions...”

## Conclusion & Discussion

- **ENG 101:** Effective in helping students develop writing skills in general.
- **Pathways:** No significant advantage based on data collected
  - Intentional “themes” may have helped students become more “Focused” in their writing.
  - Emphasis on “themes” may also have “distracted” students from paying adequate attention to “Readability/Style” issues.
- No “clean” treatment vs. control study design.
- Sufficient effort to highlight the themes and connections between courses?

## Acknowledgement & Notes:

- The authors wish to acknowledge the support of the Provost’s office, and the participation of the GE Pathways faculty and students.
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