



The Pathway to Academic Success Project Leads to Improved Student Writing

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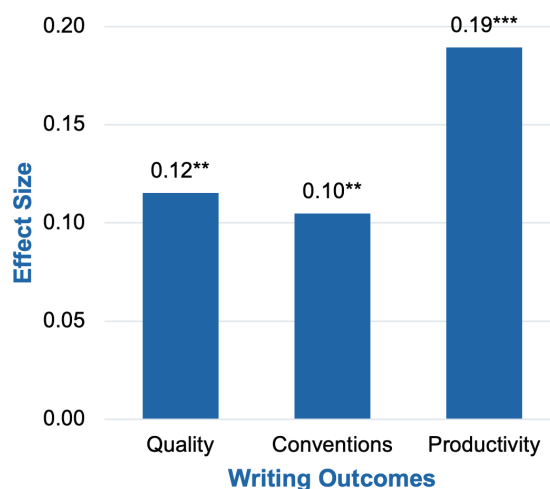
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The University of California, Irvine Writing Project's (UCI Writing Project's) Pathway to Academic Success project (Pathway) aims to improve students' academic writing through professional development for secondary English language arts (ELA) and advanced English language development (ELD) teachers. Based on evidence of Pathway's previous success in improving student achievement, in 2018 the UCI Writing Project received a federal Education Innovation and Research (EIR) grant to expand its capacity to deliver Pathway professional development to new sites and in new contexts.

In support of this grant, SRI International (SRI) conducted a random assignment evaluation of Pathway in grades 7–11, over the course of three school years (2019/20, 2020/21, and 2021/22). Despite disruptions to program implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic, we found that Pathway led to positive, statistically significant impacts on students' writing.

This study is the second independent evaluation of Pathway when implemented by expansion sites with UCI Writing Project support. Both studies have found positive and statistically significant effects on students' writing. The size, rigor, and independence of these studies provide a strong evidence base to support Pathway's effectiveness in improving secondary students' academic writing at scale and in diverse contexts.

Impact of Pathway on Students' Text-Based, Analytic Writing Quality, Conventions, and Productivity, Grade 7–11, in Effect Sizes



Note: Writing quality and conventions are measured by the Analytic Writing Continuum for Literary Analysis (AWC-LA). Writing productivity is measured by word count.

*** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.*

What Is the Pathway to Academic Success Project?

Over the course of a school year, teachers are expected to implement three Pathway-developed lessons or “tutorials” in their ELA or advanced ELD classes. In the fall, the first two tutorials introduce students to cognitive strategies for reading and writing. Then, in the spring, teachers use the third tutorial to lead students through revision of a pretest essay. Ongoing professional development supports teachers in using the tutorials and integrating use of the cognitive strategies for reading and writing throughout the year. Through the tutorials and the professional development, Pathway aims to increase the amount and quality of instruction focused on reading complex texts and analytic writing.

Ultimately, **Pathway seeks to prepare students to become strategic readers who can analyze and interpret complex texts and analytical writers who write well-reasoned arguments with textual evidence.** Because college and career readiness standards emphasize nonfiction texts, Pathway focuses on developing students’ skills in reading and writing about nonfiction.

“When you have someone bringing forth strategies that are effective, but also putting all those strategies together into a cohesive lesson plan with purposefully chosen texts and tools ... it reminds the teachers this is what it really looks like to have a ‘knock it out of the park’ lesson.”

—District literacy coach

Navigating Uncharted Waters: Pathway and the COVID-19 Pandemic

SRI conducted this impact evaluation over three school years, from 2019/20 through 2021/22, which were interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Pandemic-related disruptions included school closures; virtual and sometimes asynchronous professional development and classroom instruction; unusually high teacher and student absenteeism; and very limited access to substitute teachers, which impacted teachers’ release time to participate in professional development.

To help the expansion sites navigate these disruptions, developers at the UCI Writing Project had to adapt Pathway. They supported sites to provide the professional development in shorter increments that were more suitable to a virtual environment. They also developed new, online instructional resources that teachers could implement with their students in a virtual learning environment.

As a result of the disruptions and adaptations, Pathway implementation looked different than expected. Teachers participated in fewer total hours of professional development than planned, and fewer teachers than expected were able to implement all three tutorials in their classrooms.

Yet despite these interruptions, Pathway still effectively supported teacher instruction and student learning. This finding suggests that Pathway has the capacity to improve students’ academic writing even in less-than-ideal conditions.

In this EIR-funded study, SRI conducted a randomized controlled trial (RCT) in 46 schools in 8 districts across 7 states. We found positive and statistically significant effects of the program on students' writing.

Randomized designs are considered the “gold standard” for measuring program impact in education research. For this study, an RCT ensures that, on average, receiving Pathway professional development is the only difference between the Pathway schools and the comparison schools. At the start of the study, we randomly assigned the 46 schools to either the Pathway (treatment) condition or to the business-as-usual (comparison) condition. In the 23 schools assigned to Pathway, the UCI Writing Project or the expansion sites provided grade 7–11 ELA and advanced ELD teachers with Pathway professional development.

To measure impacts on students, SRI administered a 2-day writing assessment to grade 7–11 students in all 46 schools at the beginning and end of each school year. We gave students an on-demand performance

task like those on state assessments (e.g., Smarter Balanced ELA/literacy). On Day 1 of the assessment, during a single class period (approximately 45 to 50 minutes), students were asked to read literary nonfiction text and engage in some prewriting activities. On Day 2, also during a single class period, students were asked to write an analytic essay based on the reading.

To score the students' writing, we used the Analytic Writing Continuum for Literary Analysis (AWC-LA), which scores a holistic measure of writing quality, as well as measure of writing conventions. To assess writing productivity, or whether Pathway helped students generate more writing, we used a word count from the essays.

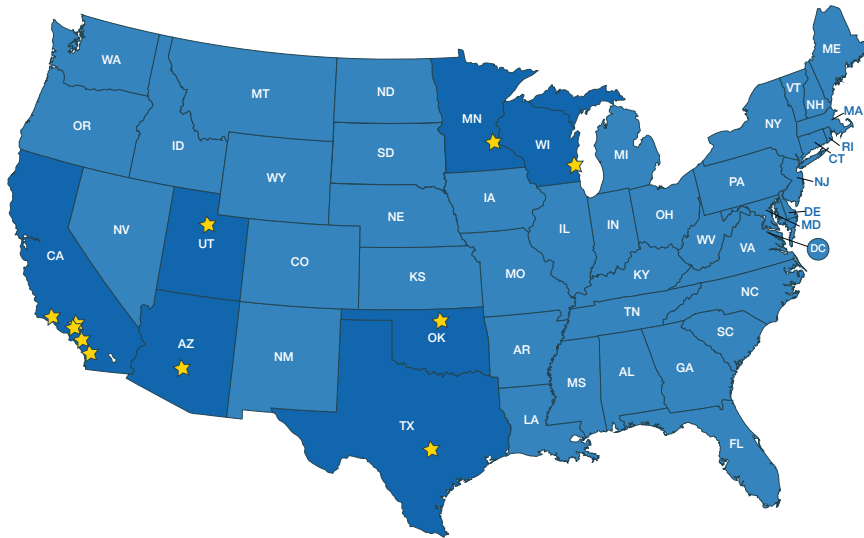
Pathway had a positive and statistically significant impact on all writing outcomes we measured (see graph on page 1 for effect sizes). Overall, these effect sizes are equivalent to moving a student from the 50th to the 55th percentile of achievement for writing quality, from the 50th to the 54th percentile of achievement for writing conventions, and from the 50th to the 58th percentile of achievement for writing productivity.

This is the second evaluation of Pathway when replicated by National Writing Project sites other than the UCI Writing Project. Both studies:

- Were conducted using random assignment and designed to meet the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) evidence standards.
- Used the Analytic Writing Continuum for Literary Analysis (AWC-LA) to assess impacts on student writing.
- Were conducted by SRI as an independent evaluator.
- Found positive and statistically significant effects on student writing.

The first study found that Pathway increased the performance of students in treatment schools by nearly a third of a standard deviation more than that of students in comparison schools (effect size = 0.32, $p < .001$) on the holistic measure of writing quality. This second study found that Pathway increased the performance of students in treatment schools by just over a 10th of a standard deviation (effect size = 0.12, $p < .01$) on the same measure of writing quality. For more detail on the first study, see Olson et al., 2020 and Woodworth et al., 2017.

UCI Writing Project Expanded Capacity to Deliver Pathway Professional Development. Pathway developers at the UCI Writing Project provided expansion sites with 2–3 years of professional development, instructional resources, and logistical assistance to support their ability to provide Pathway professional development in local districts.



Across two U.S. Department of Education grants—the 2018 EIR Expansion grant for this study and the 2014 Investing in Innovation (i3) Validation grant for the first study—the UCI Writing Project has trained 10 expansion sites to implement Pathway. These sites include local Writing Projects at the University of California, Santa Barbara; California State University, San Marcos; California State University, Los Angeles; University of California, Los Angeles; Arizona State University; Brigham Young University; Texas State University-San Marcos; University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; University of Minnesota-Twin Cities; and Oklahoma State University.¹

¹ The UCIWP and all expansion sites are affiliated with the National Writing Project, a network of 175 local Writing Project sites based on college and university campuses across the country. At the core of Writing Project work is developing and supporting teacher-leaders who in turn engage in professional learning with their peers.

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