

**A Pilot Study of AcademicMerit's  
Suite of Three Online Tools**



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### Introduction

During the 2009-10 school year, and after several years of pilot-testing, AcademicMerit, LLC, based in Portland, Maine, field-tested Literary Companion®, its suite of online tools designed to link student learning, instruction, and assessment in vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and written analysis in the context of literature instruction.

Dr. David L. Silvernail, director of the Center for Education Policy, Applied Research, and Evaluation at the University of Southern Maine—with more than 30 years of experience conducting similar studies and research on a variety of programs, including 10 technology-based programs—supervised this field test, collected and analyzed data, and prepared a report.

In summary, the evidence from the field test of Literary Companion was very encouraging. Teachers reported that the program and its various components were easy to learn and use, and that the program improved and/or enhanced their curriculum and instruction. Most importantly, teachers felt that the program improved their students' learning. Thus the evidence from this field test indicated that Literary Companion was an effective suite of online tools for improving both instruction and learning.

Based on the results of this field-test, AcademicMerit more recently collaborated with the Maine Learning Technology Initiative (MLTI) to conduct a large-scale pilot-study of all three of its products—Literary Companion, Assessments21®, and FineTune™—again overseen by Dr. Silvernail. The purpose of this larger study was two-fold: to examine the perceived value of all three products by teachers to leverage technology to enhance learning and instruction, in general, and to examine the merits of these programs as a model for linking professional development and formative assessment to help schools align with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

Targeting specifically English Language Arts in grades 7-12, AcademicMerit's three offerings are designed to be complementary to each other—and to follow a general progression from professional development to assessment to content-rich learning and instruction:

- **FineTune** is an online professional-development tool designed to support teachers in their evaluation of student writing using a five-category rubric that assesses students in the areas of thinking, content, organization, diction and syntax, and mechanics. Teachers

score actual (anonymous) student essays, and then receive an immediate comparison of their scores and the scores of a panel of seasoned teacher-readers.

- **Assessments21 (A21)** is an online delivery system for classroom-based common assessments in reading comprehension and written analysis. A teacher assigns a short story, poem, or non-fiction text in one of four levels of difficulty, and then the students take the assessment entirely online. The reading-comprehension scores, which are generated automatically, are each aligned with a particular CCSS anchor standard; students' essays are scored by FineTune-trained teachers using AcademicMerit's Centralized Online Scoring System™.
- **Literary Companion (LC)** is a suite of tools that provides text-specific learning material and formative assessments as a means of deepening students' understanding of classic and contemporary literature. Students engage in in-depth study of ten passages chosen from throughout the text, as they take formative assessments in vocabulary, reading comprehension, and written analysis. A built-in set of final assessments at the end of each text provides summative assessment.

This report describes the results of the field-test of these three program offerings.

## **Research Design**

The study sample consisted of Grade 7-12 Maine English Language Arts teachers. The developers of AcademicMerit solicited volunteers to participate in the study, and initially 33 teachers agreed to implement one or more of the three components of the program. A majority of these teachers had earned a master's degree (70%) and taught English courses (60%) and approximately one-half (47%) had been teaching English classes for 5-10 years. Two-thirds (62%) indicated they planned on using the program in non-honors level courses.

Twenty-two teachers from the original sample completed the program and submitted pre-post surveys. Eleven teachers chose not to complete the program for various reasons, or did not complete both of the study surveys.

The primary research tools used in the study were two surveys. The pre-survey collected demographic information on the sample of teachers and their students, and baseline data on teaching and assessment practices of the teachers. The post-survey asked teachers about their experiences and solicited their evaluations of the three tools in the suite.

## Findings

The evidence from the pre-survey revealed that a majority of the study sample (79%) used diagnostic test scores, such as NWEAs, to determine the performance levels of incoming students in reading comprehension and written analysis. However, over 75% of the teachers indicated that the greatest barriers to assessing performance levels were: (1) the limitation of the current data in terms of instructional value; and/or (2) the limited time they have to review available data. In addition, most teachers indicated they did not have sufficient time to create, administer, and score pre-assessments.

Teachers reported similar problems with post-unit assessments. Two-thirds reported they administer vocabulary assessments, three-quarters administered reading comprehension assessments, and approximately one-half assign a cumulative written analysis. At the same time, many of these same teachers reported that they do not always have sufficient time to create, administer, and grade these assessments. In fact, a very large majority of the teachers indicated they would find great value in having online programs to complete these assessments.

Table 1 reports teacher assessments of the availability of these potential online tools. As may be seen from the data, clearly the teachers in this study believe online assessment tools would be very valuable to their teaching.

**Table 1**  
**Teacher Assessments of Value of Online Assessment Tools**

Online Programs	Assessment			
	Very Valuable	Valuable	Somewhat Valuable	Not Valuable
1. Program that created, administered, and scored vocabulary assessments	45%	48%	7%	0%
2. Program that created, administered, and scored <u>text-specific reading-comprehension assessments</u>	52%	41%	7%	0%
3. Program to score and comment on students' written responses to <u>text-specific writing prompts</u> .	31%	41%	17%	11%
4. Program that allowed your students to rewrite their essays after they had been scored	76%	21%	0%	3%

Over 90% of the teachers reported having an online program available to them that would create vocabulary assessments, text comprehension assessments, and allow students to rewrite scored essays, would be “Valuable” or “Very Valuable.”

Turning to the first tool in AcademicMerit’s suite, Table 2 conveys teachers’ assessment of FineTune (FT), the online professional-development tool for teachers. As evidenced in the table, an overwhelming percentage of the teachers (91%) found great value in the program. It helped them strengthen their own evaluations of student writing, and helped them in aligning their evaluation of student writing with national standards.

**Table 2**  
**Teacher Assessment of *FineTune (FT)***

FT Characteristics	Teacher Rating				
	Extremely High	High	Moderate	Somewhat Low	Low
1. Value of FT as professional development tool for strengthening your evaluation of student writing	62%	33%	5%	0%	0%
2. Value of FT as professional development tool for aligning your evaluations of student writing with CSS	48%	43%	9%	0%	0%
3. Rating of FT to other professional development aimed at strengthening your ability to evaluate student writing	43%	48%	9%	0%	0%

Table 3 provides the teachers’ ratings of the Assessments21 (A21) portion of the three-part study. A majority (86%) of the teachers reported using the A21 assessments with grade 8-10 students, and approximately 80% of the teachers gave “High” or “Extremely High” ratings to all of the key characteristics of the program. This included helping the teachers assess reading comprehension and writing (82%), differentiating instruction (78%), and helping them with providing useful assessment data for informing their instruction (82%). Additionally, teachers rated the program “High” in helping them measure student growth (77%), and measuring student

performance relative to national standards (77%). Overall, all of the teachers rated the A21 assessment tool as “Good” to “Excellent”, with over 90% indicating they thought it was appropriate both for early-course performance assessment and for common assessments.

**Table 3**  
**Teacher Assessments of Assessments21 (A21)**

A21 Characteristics	Teacher Rating				
	Extremely High	High	Moderate	Somewhat Low	Low
The value of A21 assessment data for informing my instruction	23%	59%	14%	4%	0%
Helping assess reading comprehensive & writing of my students	14%	68%	14%	4%	0%
Helping me differentiate instruction	23%	55%	18%	4%	0%
Vehicle for administering common assessment	55%	32%	13%	0%	0%
As means of determining students' abilities at beginning of course	32%	50%	14%	4%	0%
Helping measure student growth	18%	59%	18%	5%	0%
Helping measure student performance relative to CCSS	18%	59%	14%	9%	0%

Turning to the teachers' post-assessments of Literary Companion (LC), a large majority of the teachers (91%) used the program with 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students. Forty-five percent (45%) reported they used LC primarily in class, with another 41% indicating they used it both in class and as some homework.

Table 4 reports teacher ratings of different components and characteristics of LC. Eight out of ten teachers gave “High” or “Extremely High” ratings to the fact that LC enhances learning *during* instruction, and that the writing assignments in each passage strengthens students' performance on the final essay. As one teacher remarked, “The final essays...were excellently written by my students, and I think that their performance was enhanced by the

writing they did on passages 1-10, as these introduced them to themes that were valuable for the final.”

**Table 4**  
**Teacher Assessment of *Literary Companion* (LC)**

LC Characteristics	Teacher Ratings				
	Extremely High	High	Moderate	Somewhat Low	Low
1. Builds students’ text-based vocabulary	10%	48%	33%	0%	9%
2. Reading comprehension questions enhance students’ understanding of text studied	11%	52%	33%	2%	2%
3. Written interpretation sections enhance students’ understanding of the text studied	0%	33%	52%	10%	5%
4. Saves time in creating, administering, and grading quizzes	41%	27%	27%	0%	5%
5. Writing assignments in each passage strengthens student performance on final essay	19%	62%	10%	5%	4%
6. Strengthens reading, writing, analysis skills measured by A21	5%	21%	58%	5%	11%
7. Enhances learning and instruction during a literature unit	15%	65%	5%	0%	15%
8. Pedagogical emphasis on formative assessment throughout literature unit	5%	62%	19%	5%	9%

Another teacher remarked, when describing the writing rubric, “[It] is something that I will use with my students next year. It provides students and me with an incredible amount of targeted information to help improve their writing.”

Two-thirds of the teachers gave equally high ratings to the reading comprehension questions, the ability of the program to save them time in creating, administering and grading quizzes, and the pedagogical emphasis on formative assessments throughout literature units. And, finally, over one-half of the teachers gave “Moderate” ratings to other aspects of the program.

## Summary

The evidence from this survey-based study clearly indicates that teachers gave all aspects of AcademicMerit's suite of tools high ratings. Typical teacher overall evaluations included comments such as:

*"I would welcome the opportunity to use both LC and A21 assessments with my upcoming ninth grade class. My English department is already discussing widespread use of the A21 rubric for scoring student work."*

*"I enjoyed matching my scoring to that of AcademicMerit's scores and reading their reasoning. This made me more confident in scoring the writing of my own students. I feel that a tool like this has many uses and is a powerful tool for all teachers."*

*"I am budgeting AcademicMerit in for next year and I cannot wait to have the chance to use it all year.... I think the opportunity to measure growth will be far improved that way."*

A small number of teachers reported some struggles with the program, but a very large majority of the teachers successfully used the three tools, and found them to be very helpful in improving their instruction and student learning. And many found the alignment of the program with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) valuable. Thus, based on the evidence from this sample of teachers, it is clear that AcademicMerit's suite of three online tools was very beneficial to teachers in helping them improve reading comprehension, vocabulary development and writing. In addition, the program is seen by the users as beneficial in linking professional development and assessments.