

# Standardizing English 101 at Southern Illinois University Carbondale: Reflections on the Promise of Improved GTA Preparation and More Effective Writing Instruction



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**Abstract:** With a particular focus on the preparation of teaching assistants, this profile details the recent transition to a standardized English 101 curriculum at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC). More specifically, the profile details theoretical and practical incentives for the move, as well as political and logistical challenges encountered by Writing Studies staff in conceiving and implementing the new curriculum. The profile ends with a discussion of the perceived benefits of standardizing English 101 at SIUC and, presumably, by extension, in the context of similar institutional contexts.

## Catalysts and Contexts for Change

For some time, the Rhetoric and Composition faculty at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC) debated the question of whether or not to standardize their version of English 101—the initial phase of a two-course composition requirement—which serves approximately 2,500 undergraduates and employs approximately sixty Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) per year. [1](#) Finally, in the Fall of 2006, the initial version of a common syllabus began driving English 101 in support of its longstanding, overarching purpose: to familiarize students with various genres of public discourse, engaging them in an array of writing scenarios that, through attention to process, collectively seek to sharpen their rhetorical sensibilities and expand their repertoire of composing strategies. Indeed, the general purpose of English 101 had never been in question, for it seemed to function effectively as a broad introduction to concepts, skills and practices that would be revisited in variously focused, subsequent composition and writing intensive courses across the curriculum. What was in question was the extent to which that purpose was being realized in all the numerous sections of this foundational course—a concern that sparked our thinking about standardization.

Those Rhetoric and Composition faculty members who initially questioned the move to a standardized syllabus in favor of the status quo [2](#) (which recommended but did not mandate a given approach to English 101) felt strongly about the need for our incoming GTAs to think their way through the challenges of designing their own courses for the positive impact that doing so would have on their level of engagement and their development as writing instructors. In addition, for proponents of the status quo, the potential ills of indoctrination loomed large (see Welch; Martin and Paine 222), rendering a minimally restrictive model of preparation and oversight especially appealing.

In contrast, faculty members who favored standardization privileged a high level of continuity in instruction for purposes of more assuredly and regularly foregrounding “best practices,” and they fretted over expending English 101 instructional time waiting for new GTAs to find their way naturally toward these goals. The movement for change did acknowledge the crucial roles that teacher autonomy and the opportunity for pedagogical discovery play in a teacher’s development. Nonetheless, it chose to limit them initially, believing, as Kelly Kinney and Kristi Murray Costello do, “... that [a shared syllabus] is a responsible choice for a writing program staffed primarily by graduate students with limited exposure to rhetoric and writing studies and little experience in teaching process-based, genre focused composition.” Besides, though the GTAs would be required to follow a 101 curriculum created by instructors with a more specialized knowledge base and years of classroom experience, it was understood that subsequent course assignments would allow greater opportunity for autonomy and discovery. [3](#) In light of this gradual increase in autonomy as well as a growing sense of the profound influence they would have over the undergraduates they helped usher into the university (Nyquist and Wulff 34), the movement for change in the direction of a standardized curriculum banked on the assumption that, in the end, new GTAs might actually welcome a significant degree of direction.

Of course, the status quo never did assume that our incoming GTAs could design and execute a composition course

without any formal preparation. Indeed, for many years the SIUC Writing Program has flourished (and still does) on the foundation of an eight-day orientation seminar, or “Pre-Semester Workshop” (PSW),<sup>{4}</sup> that introduces GTAs to the objectives of English 101, familiarizes them with various strategies for teaching and assessing writing, involves them in grade-norming sessions, alerts them to on-campus programs and services that might impact their instruction, etc. In addition, GTAs in English at SIUC have, for years, been required to complete a graduate seminar in teaching composition. This seminar, English 502, builds upon the information and experiences constituting PSW as it introduces them to “best practices” and current theory in composition instruction, invites them to interrogate their instructional dispositions, and expands their repertoire of pedagogical methods. The vast majority meet this requirement during their first semester at SIUC while they are teaching English 101, the only exception being those who enter our program having completed such a graduate seminar elsewhere.

Although the status quo—through the PSW and English 502 and based on a set of department-sanctioned objectives for English 101 (see [Appendix 1](#))—advocated for certain types of assignments, models of assignment sequencing, methods of response and assessment, and strategies for teacher-student/student-student interactions, it did not impose genres, topics, or sequences of assignments, nor did it prescribe classroom activities at any level. Therefore, despite the fact that there was some effective teaching going on in English 101, there existed considerable disparity between the course’s numerous sections, as was substantiated through classroom observations, collection of example syllabi, and Core Curriculum assessment.<sup>{5}</sup> This disparity between sections ignited concern because, to some degree, it appeared to limit the potential for knowledge transfer between English 101 and other general composition courses and, as follows, between the general composition sequence and writing intensive courses across the curriculum (Nelms and Dively 223-224).<sup>{6}</sup> This disparity also weakened claims to a valid and reliable course assessment.

Another potentially undesirable situation existing under the status quo was that, during any given fall semester, many of our thirty-five or so new GTAs were initially very dependent in designing their courses on advice, assignments, and strategies provided by our sixty or so experienced GTAs. This state of affairs, in many cases, served the new GTAs well since our program was populated by many talented instructors and there were many successful model assignments floating around the GTAs’ offices. In other cases, however, the new GTAs were misled by individuals who, instead of consistently enacting approaches advocated by the program, were motivated by interests that did not coincide with program objectives.<sup>{7}</sup> Most of these cases were not spitefully motivated; for example, many of our graduate students in creative writing and literary studies wanted to teach composition by means of their primary passion—literature. Although our program objectives did not prohibit the occasional use of a literary work (e.g., a poem or short story to help introduce strategies for analysis), certain of these GTAs were overzealous in their use of such vehicles at the exclusion of public or academic expository discourse.<sup>{8}</sup>

Even when the new GTAs were not pressing the boundaries of genre expectations under the status quo, it seemed they were all too often settling for syllabi that did not fully address course objectives and/or did not effectively cohere. That is, for lack of time and knowledge about the kinds of assignments most conducive to achieving course objectives or about strategies for productively sequencing composition courses, some of them resorted to cobbling together a string of loosely related assignments simply because they were available from a peer at a moment of desperation and/or sounded “fun.” Of course, this situation did not result from a lack of effort in preparing these inexperienced GTAs, as is evidenced by the requirements of PSW and English 502, nor did it result from laziness on the part of the GTAs (after all, having never taught before, most were teaching two sections of English 101 and taking two graduate seminars). Rather, it resulted, at least in part, from a dearth of resources and opportunity to educate these new teachers *before* they entered the classroom<sup>{9}</sup>—coupled with an approach to teacher training that believed strongly in the power of an organically wrought sense of course ownership to compensate in significant ways for an initial lack of specialized knowledge in composition pedagogy.

As the previous paragraphs indicate, several perceived vulnerabilities in the status quo prompted our move to a standardized curriculum—a move we presumed in summary, then, would heighten potential for a valid and reliable course assessment; increase opportunities for knowledge transfer as subsequent courses could explicitly reference lessons and assignments that *all* 101 students had encountered; reduce the workload of inexperienced GTAs as they were acclimating to the many demands of graduate school; and channel 101 instruction more effectively in the direction of “best practices.” Even after the decision for change was made, however, the route traveled in implementing a common English 101 syllabus was rather convoluted as a result of staffing problems, political conflicts within the department and college, and the shuffling of administrative positions at both levels. As a result, the first phase of development occurred under the auspices of a literature professor who accepted a brief, yearlong stint as the Director of Writing Studies (DWS [SIUC’S equivalent to a WPA]) amidst shifting departmental and college dynamics. He was advised by a Writing Studies Committee of English Department faculty from various sub-disciplines, as well as by a newly appointed Assistant DWS, who had recently graduated with a PhD from SIUC in Rhetoric and Composition.<sup>{10}</sup> Together, these individuals implemented the initial version of SIUC’s standardized

English 101 curriculum.

During that transitional year (while I happened to be serving as the Director of Undergraduate Studies), I was teaching English 502 with a class of close to forty new GTAs (the unusually high number resulting from the staffing problems referenced earlier). From this position situated between the Writing Program Administration and the GTAs, I became aware of the angst experienced by both parties as they rode the transition to a standardized curriculum. A year later, as the newly appointed DWS, my perspective was enhanced as I worked (along with the Assistant DWS who was then beginning his second year in that position) to substantially revise the initial version of the common syllabus, as well as the PSW and English 502, both of which had not yet been retooled to support the new curriculum. Now, having completed almost four years as DWS, I reflect on our program's transition to a common English 101 syllabus with an elaborated sense of the challenges we faced, the advantages we immediately enjoyed, and the benefits we anticipate are yet to come. My hope is that these reflections will provide program leaders who are considering standardization with ideas for building a rationale and strategies for easing the transition.

## **The Continuum of Freedom and Control: Theorizing Our Way to Balancing the Interests of Undergraduates, GTAs, and the Writing Studies Office**

Wanda Martin and Charles Paine have aptly characterized the struggle that WPAs face as they work to manage the needs of all who are impacted by their approach to preparing and supervising GTAs:

On the one hand, we want to give these teachers—experienced as well as new ones—as much free rein as possible to discover and practice what works best for them and their students. ... On the other hand, we have our own beliefs about what constitutes good writing and good writing instruction, we want to articulate and practice a relatively coherent and stable philosophy of writing, and we are obliged to ensure a degree of consistency across all sections of first-year English. (222)

Elaborating on this struggle, they point to a tension that seems particularly relevant to the process of generating a standardized syllabus: The tension “between the institutional imperative to control the program—be in charge, know what’s going on in the classrooms, make multiple sections consistent in content and grading—and the human necessity of letting go to promote individual responsibility and prevent WPA heart attacks” (222). In the midst of our own grappings with institutional imperatives and the desire to promote some level of individual responsibility, a question that my assistant and I wrestled with for some time was one of just how strictly we wanted to control not only the parameters of the major essay assignments but also the day-to-day classroom activities. Similar to the process of assignment construction—which can be conceived on a continuum from “well-defined” or directed (i.e., all variables of the rhetorical scenario are specified) to “ill-defined” or open (i.e., few if any variables are specified) (see Carey and Flower qtd. in Dively 60-61)—the process of designing a standardized syllabus as we viewed it (standardization precluding utter freedom) evoked a continuum between “scripted,” where every assignment, activity, reading and word spoken by the instructor would be pre-determined, and “guided,” which would require instructors to make selections from menus of assignments, activities, readings, etc.

The analogy to assignment construction is instructive in that the advantages and disadvantages that characterize extremes of that continuum are applicable to those involved in syllabus construction. For example, directed assignments may prevent writers from capitalizing on their strengths and from harnessing the potential gains of sudden insight and serendipity. Thus, writers might not be able to realize their best efforts because they are compelled to write in an unfamiliar genre. Or, they might miss an opportunity for generating something fresh or special because avenues of thinking and research could be restricted from informing each other in ways that lead to discovery or illumination (Csikszentmihalyi and Sawyer 341). Applying this realization to teaching, successful instructors know that tight strictures on pedagogy might prevent them from employing activities or pedagogical strategies that mesh with their personalities and sources of confidence. Further, these instructors know that such strictures may prevent unanticipated convergences of phenomena that present opportunities for the kinds of energizing learning activities that move beyond the usual or mundane. We’ve all had the experience of a discussion assuming a life of its own, begging us to abandon our agenda for the moment to explore the possibilities of the unexpected. This is the hallmark of creativity, the willingness to break free from ruts in our thinking and practice so as to investigate new and promising pathways (see Ward, Finke, and Smith 111, 165-166). When such opportunities are stymied, the capacity for effective instruction is diminished.

As the previous paragraph suggests, certain manifestations of “scripted” syllabi could discourage if not prevent

shining moments associated with effective teaching, just as strings of directed assignments could tie composition students to what might feel like uninspired, unfulfilling bouts of drudgery. But, of course, directed assignments do have their purposes. Without some direction, students would likely choose the path of least resistance, sticking with what they know or what seems comfortable, not only because doing so is less taxing, but also because the risks for receiving unfavorable evaluations are lower. As a result, their development as writers could be arrested, their repertoire of strategies and skills remaining limited.

Just as direction has its place in the education of writers, so does it have its place in the education of teachers. Indeed, direction in the form of a standardized syllabus not only helps to ensure that instruction, on large scale, remains consistent with program objectives, but it also drives inexperienced instructors beyond their own comfort zones, *compelling* (rather than merely encouraging) them to experiment with models and strategies for effective composition instruction that are informed by scholarship in the discipline. In other words, they are obliged (not merely invited) to develop their “composition literacy” or knowledge of the academic community that informs their teaching (Griffith 4) so that their capacity to reflect critically on their pedagogical practices, to enact appropriate practices in future contexts, and to articulate the rationale behind those practices will grow.

Our own quest to negotiate the advantages and disadvantages of freedom and control left us with a syllabus that rested somewhere between the extremes of the “scripted”-“guided” continuum. Working with a Core Curriculum mandate that English 101 students compose at least six essays and opting for a portfolio assessment system, we settled for a list of five multiply drafted essays (four of them to be submitted in the portfolio for evaluation at semester’s end) and one timed (though not impromptu) essay in response to an argumentative text completed during the final exam period (see [Appendices 2–7](#)). Within these parameters, SIUC’s standardized syllabus prescribed the major essay assignments in a way that allowed the GTAs little room to alter them. While the assignments and the approach to assessment were stipulated so as to reflect core program values, the schedules of daily activities for each major unit enabled considerable flexibility (except for the first unit, which was highly regimented by class meeting for the purpose of providing a firm foundation as the new GTAs found their footing). For units two through six, however, instead of *daily* outlines listing assigned readings and approved activities (the latter in the order in which they should occur), the syllabus presented *unit* outlines that included weekly menus of suggested readings and activities specifically relevant to the assignment at hand.

The decision to prescribe the nature and sequence of major essay assignments was based on the premise that they are the cornerstone of any composition course and that at least this level of standardization would be sufficient for meeting many of the objectives we sought to achieve. Though we realized that prescription at the assignment and sequence levels might feel somewhat confining to students and GTAs, we worked diligently to counter this effect by foregrounding opportunities for choice throughout the course. More specifically, though the assignments were directive with regard to genre and general topic, students would be able to determine their own foci within these parameters (e.g., the particular event portrayed in the literacy narrative, the ad to be analyzed relevant to the ad analysis). As the course progressed, topics would become more broadly cast so as to allow for increasing freedom with regard to a particular focus and, thus, more intensive engagement with invention strategies. Moreover, the students would enjoy some degree of choice with regard to the essays they submitted in their final portfolios.

These elements of choice to be enjoyed by the students would potentially carry benefits for the instructors as well. Specifically, such freedoms would invite a reasonable variety of themes in the student writing that the GTAs received—a motivating factor when one is facing large stacks of essays to assess over a weekend. In addition, because there would exist a level of freedom relevant to the specific focus for a given assignment, the GTAs would experience the sense of engagement that comes with helping students locate controlling ideas that excite and challenge them. This sense of engagement would potentially intensify as the course progressed and the opportunities for student choice increased. But for the GTAs, freedom and choice would most readily be realized in the crafting of the units once they moved beyond the highly regimented first unit. Once beyond that unit, not only would the GTAs be able to select readings from the menus of suggested textbook chapters and model essays listed on the assignment handouts for each unit, but they would be welcome to introduce supplementary materials they presumed would be helpful in highlighting unit objectives. Moreover, they would be able to select the exercises and activities—whether drawn from the list of suggestions provided on the unit schedules or from their growing repertoire of ideas from English 502 and discussions with peers—that they felt would be most edifying for their students at given points in the unit. Theoretically, then, while the extent to which the syllabus was directed would undoubtedly feel somewhat limiting to students and teachers, the fact that the course was guided, as opposed to scripted, promised to help students and teachers realize at least some sense of ownership and the kind of growth that accompanies choice and experimentation.

Crucial to maintaining a productive balance of freedom and control—as the latter’s appearance is inevitably dominant in any standardized context—would be the solicitation of feedback from those who were actually delivering the

course and who could relay the reactions of those who were receiving it. Although my staff and I were committed to the idea of a standardized syllabus and the pedagogical principles on which the syllabus was based, and although we had devoted countless hours to designing the course and composing the assignments and the unit plans, we undertook this venture fully expecting that the syllabus would forever remain a work in progress. That attitude led me to craft a final assignment for English 502 that asked GTAs to critique the standardized syllabus by proposing an alternative assignment and/or arguing for an alternative assignment sequence. In addition to that gesture, at the end of each semester, my staff and I held informal focus groups for GTAs who were teaching the standardized curriculum. In the context of these meetings, those who responded to an open call would meet with me or a staff member to answer specific questions and voice their concerns about the common syllabus—feedback that would help us conceive possible revisions. After all, the GTAs would have first-hand knowledge of how students were reacting to the assignments; how difficult the assignments were to articulate; how effective the sequence seemed to be; how certain suggested readings, activities, and informal exercises served to engage or befuddle, etc. Not only did we stand to gain valuable information from these conversations, but also we believed that inviting this kind of feedback from the GTAs would help offset the negative effects of feeling “controlled.” If we actively sought their now experienced voices on pedagogical matters (and, indirectly, the voices of their students) and were open to implementing their suggestions, we figured that any resistance they harbored would become less intense, that their collective sense of investment in the course would deepen, and that their motivation levels would increase. And, of course, we assumed that the anticipated effects of such outreach—an even better course and more invested, motivated teachers—would be felt by the English 101 students.

Yet another consideration relevant to the continuum of freedom and control in the move toward a standardized syllabus centered on the nature and content of the PSW. Prior to the Writing Program’s adoption of the standardized syllabus, this eight-day orientation seminar offered an impressive variety of sessions, many of which were proposed and executed by experienced GTAs still in the program. The PSW, then, provided a flexible venue in which developing composition instructors could share what they were learning about and through teaching, with the opportunity to pursue areas of particular interest. Upon moving to the standardized curriculum, my staff and I wanted to preserve this aspect of the PSW to the degree that we could, but we also realized that standardization in the curriculum begged standardization in the PSW. In other words, with the continuity provided by the prescribed unit assignments, the prescribed sequence of units across sections of 101, and the menu of suggested readings and activities, would come the capacity—and, essentially, a pedagogical imperative—for gearing the PSW toward detailed preparation in teaching the components of the standardized syllabus. Without this change in emphasis, another potential benefit of standardization, the specificity and depth of instructor preparation that can occur when all are teaching the same material, could not be fully realized.

In an attempt to capitalize on the advantages that both approaches to the PSW could offer, we created a hybrid of sorts that demonstrates our attempts to balance between the extremes of freedom and control. The status quo had typically reserved space in the PSW for several sessions that tapped shared interests. In addition to those addressing institutional policies, procedures, and services, such sessions included, for example, introductions to strategies for designing and sequencing assignments and for responding to and assessing student writing. Obviously, the revised PSW would need to address such issues, but the relevant sessions could broach them with the standardized syllabus in mind.

More specifically, assignment sessions would focus not on how to craft a potential 101 assignment from scratch but, rather, on how to explicate, troubleshoot, and best prepare students for succeeding on the prescribed assignments. The response and evaluation sessions—rather than focusing on general strategies for assessing papers written in response to a 101 assignment that GTAs might or might not end up teaching—could engage GTAs with actual papers written in response to the assignments they *knew* that they *would* be teaching. Indeed, the revised PSW would be organized around units of the standardized curriculum, with two-hour sessions devoted to each. Further, the newly focused response and evaluation sessions would be supplemented with sessions on rubric construction that, again, could be tailored specifically to assignments on the common syllabus, compounding the potential for the new GTAs to begin internalizing criteria for assessing essays written in response to the prescribed assignments.

Not only would the standardized syllabus make for PSW sessions that offered the new GTAs more in-depth, immediately relevant training regarding assignments and response practices, but these benefits would be mirrored in the preparation of experienced GTAs who would be leading these particular sessions. [\[11\]](#) Before, experienced GTAs volunteered or were asked to cover PSW sessions with the expectation that they would depend largely on scholarship introduced in English 502 and their prior experience to independently generate content for their respective sessions. To be sure, these GTAs proved very capable and put together some impressive presentations and workshops. But with the PSW focused on components of the standardized syllabus, they would be able to capitalize on the intellectual benefits of collaborating on common, already generated material, and they would be assured of the continuity of their own sessions with those led by their peers, bolstering their confidence that they

were offering the new GTAs information that would effectively serve them. Add to this the fact that the GTAs leading these core sessions on assignment and response had already taught English 101 by the standardized syllabus at least once (in contrast to a system in which everyone seemed to be teaching 101 differently, albeit with some overlap), and the quality of pre-service preparation would stand a good chance of increasing. The preparation to lead the training sessions under the new system would promote greater control over the content of large portions of the PSW, but just as the standardized syllabus units provided for some choice and flexibility, so would the plans for the collaboratively generated training sessions to teach these units. Moreover, on the subject of freedom, the revised PSW would still include a batch of concurrent sessions for which GTAs could propose topics relevant to first-year composition instruction that were in keeping with their individual interests.

For all the advantages of moving to a standardized syllabus anticipated from the vantage point of the Writing Studies Office, it, too, was subject to tensions arising from the struggle between freedom and control. On top of dealing with some unrest resulting from the move toward standardization voiced by GTAs who had been in the program for a while, my office was forced to limit its pre-existing agenda to compensate for the heavy additional workload that accompanied standardization. After the time-intensive responsibility of conceiving a collection of assignments we could stand behind and a viable plan for sequencing them, we would need to devote considerable attention to drafting and revising the assignment handouts. Furthermore, we faced the challenge of vetting rhetorics and ancillary materials that would specifically support the syllabus—the considerable energy devoted to such committee responsibilities taking its toll on our available hours. But the controls on our time would not stop there; on the contrary, we quickly realized that the move to a standardized syllabus raised the temptation to plagiarize tenfold, as there would be numerous copies of essays written in response to the same 101 assignments lying around campus. [12] Consequently, we would need to revise the assignments every semester (for up to at least four years, when the first class introduced to the standardized syllabus had presumably graduated) to reflect different topics while maintaining the carefully designed sequence of genres (e.g., a literacy narrative could focus on different types of literacy from semester to semester; an ad analysis could focus on different categories of products or services, etc.). In addition, certain assignments (summary/response, synthesis) would require us to change readings that would provide content for those essays every semester, and, therefore, we would have to adopt a custom reader that we could tailor to the changing topics.

While these ongoing revisions to the standardized syllabus promised to consume much of our energy, the Writing Studies staff projected that these additional controls on our time would be compensated in that the instructional challenges faced by the GTAs when teaching a pre-existing syllabus that had been the focus of their training would be considerably fewer, and, as a result, the demands on the staff for extra classroom observations or one-on-one consultations would be reduced. More importantly, a reduction in these types of instructional challenges would heighten the instructors' confidence and, by extension, students' confidence in and contentment with their instructors. Predictions such as this one, and many of those discussed earlier in this section, cannot be verified in any absolute sense for the complexity of the constructs and for lack of comparative data prior to implementation of the standardized syllabus. But after its having been in existence for almost four years, anecdotal support for the standardized syllabus is mounting, motivating us to continue with our approach.

## **Reflections on the Move to Standardization at SIUC: What We Know, What We Sense, and What We Imagine**

Despite the early resistance of experienced GTAs to the announcement that we were moving to a standardized English 101 syllabus, the staff of newly minted PhDs and advanced GTAs who have assisted me over the past few years in keeping track of the accomplishments, difficulties, and dispositions of our GTA population at large have reported that any overt resistance to the idea of standardization has weakened. One reason for this might be that many of the original naysayers have graduated; another reason might be that those who are still around typically teach advanced writing or Core Curriculum literature courses, and, therefore, their attentions are concentrated elsewhere. Whatever the case may be with regard to the old guard, the classes of incoming GTAs who have entered our program since adoption of the common syllabus don't seem to be troubled by it, or at least they are not professing their discontent openly.

Even if they are troubled by the idea of standardization or certain aspects of our syllabus in particular, these points of resistance seem to be outweighed by the appreciation they feel for having the course figured out for them ahead of time. Maybe, as Sarah Liggett and Betty P. Pytlík observe, they foresee that, though appealing on some levels, the act of "learning to teach by teaching can be an inefficient and frustrating method of professional development" (xv). To be sure, it doesn't take long for these new GTAs to pick up on the fact that there is considerable planning

and stress involved in teaching, even with a standardized curriculum to guide them. In light of the common syllabus, because the assignments, sequencing, readings, and activities are already plotted for them, they have time to concentrate more fully on other aspects of instruction—such as lesson plan design, response, assessment, and classroom management. Furthermore, they have time to *reflect* on their teaching (Bamberg 151; Borrowman 4). Perhaps their anticipation of these benefits explains why, in recent years, when I've mentioned the history of the standardized syllabus while leading a PSW session or teaching English 502, I've commonly been met with exclamations of disbelief: "I can't imagine teaching 101 for the first time without having a standardized syllabus." Reportedly, members of my staff have heard echoes of this sentiment in various mentoring situations.

This positivity may be fueled by the knowledge that the syllabus has been revised in direct response to the feedback of GTAs who taught earlier versions of it—knowledge that we readily share with each new class of teaching assistants. More specifically, my staff and I switched the order of a couple of the assignments, changed the genre of one of the assignments to render the exercise more authentic, and reduced the number of subtasks involved in yet another of the assignments. In addition, we extensively revised the assignment handouts, editing context and toning down the register, so as to make them more reader-friendly. Though recent rounds of focus group conversations have not yielded any substantial suggestions for further improving the curriculum, we continue to invite feedback from the GTAs with the intent of strengthening their sense of ownership over English 101.

On the subject of PSW, though most of the incoming GTAs have nothing to compare it to, my staff members who attended or helped with the orientation before implementation of the common syllabus have reported over the last few years their appreciation for the tighter focus and depth of training that the new system enables. And because they have taught by the very same syllabus themselves, they feel especially self-assured in their abilities to introduce the units, help the incoming GTAs anticipate unique challenges posed by the various assignments, and share insights about activities and exercises that have proven helpful in their own 101 classrooms. Again, under the previous system, returning GTAs helping to initiate their new colleagues talked about first-year composition pedagogy theoretically or relevant to example materials, but not necessarily with the help of materials that those new colleagues would actually be using. Under the new system, returning GTAs are able to draw from their own experiences executing the syllabus as they tackle its various objectives in a way that the new GTAs view as directly and specifically relevant to what they'll be doing in the classroom. Of course, this similarity of experience can strengthen mentoring relationships, and, although such bonds were undoubtedly created under the status quo, before the standardized syllabus, the experiential distance between mentor and mentee was inevitably greater.

This similarity of GTA experience in English 101 across sections, and even years, presents various additional benefits that might be considered more practical or logistical in nature. Regarding one such benefit, though I have long been impressed with the willingness of our GTAs to cover classes for each other in the event of illness, conferences, family emergencies, etc., the continuity across English 101 sections clearly supports their altruistic tendencies. Now, a 101 instructor who is compelled to miss class can put out a call on the listserv used for Writing Studies communications, and, in many instances, within a moment's notice, can find several colleagues who are willing to step in immediately and cover the class meeting. And, importantly, since they are teaching or have already taught the standardized curriculum, they can do so knowing that they are well prepared to conduct a substantive class meeting, as opposed to simply monitoring a generic activity.

Not only can English GTAs readily stand in for each other on occasion, but the students themselves are in a better position, by means of the standardized syllabus, to help each other learn. Because all English 101 students are working on the same assignments, are covering mostly the same readings, and are on the same weekly schedules, there exists ample opportunity for cooperative learning beyond the classroom, even between students who are not assigned to the same section. Therefore, roommates, other dorm residents, sorority sisters and fraternity brothers, club or athletic team members—all who are enrolled in English 101 and, to some degree, who have already taken it—become potential resources of particularly germane information and assistance when instructors or 101 section-mates are not available.

The similarity in experiences across sections also holds advantages for English 101 students who seek assistance from the Writing Center and for the tutors who are working with those students. Since implementation of the common syllabus, training for Writing Center tutors has included familiarization with key components of the curriculum and practice conference sessions using papers written in response to that curriculum. Immersion in the specifics of the 101 syllabus and the fact that many of the students they are tutoring are studying the same genres and strategies at a given point in time ostensibly combine to deepen the tutors' knowledge base at a comparatively rapid pace and to reinforce their confidence. This situation promises to positively impact 101 tutoring sessions in ways that were not possible before there was a standard base of knowledge from which to draw.

Beyond the benefits for English 101 teachers, tutors, and students, the continuity in sections of this course can, as

well, aid instructors and students of English 102 (the second course in our required first-year composition sequence)—and, indeed, of all subsequent composition courses—in capitalizing on the potential for backward-reaching knowledge transfer. For backward-reaching transfer to occur, teachers must be able to make explicit for students, and students must be able to discern, how a concept, strategy or skill they are currently teaching or learning is similar to one they've encountered in the past (Perkins and Salomon 26). Since, under the standardized syllabus, all Writing Studies instructors have taught virtually the same English 101 course and all students have taken virtually the same course, there are numerous common examples and experiences that English 102 teachers can highlight to promote learning. Theoretically, to the degree that teachers of writing intensive courses across the curriculum have familiarized themselves with the standardized English 101 curriculum,<sup>[13]</sup> they can capitalize on the same potential for backward-reaching transfer as teachers in general composition courses.

Of greater certainty at this point, however, than concerted attention to knowledge transfer is the general attitude of the university community toward standardization of English 101—a positive attitude grounded primarily in the realization that the Writing Studies Office can articulate more definitively the specific genres, strategies, skills and readings that all English 101 students will be exposed to in that course. Prior to the standardized approach, lore that placed the course and its instructors in a questionable light proliferated. Of course, the standardized curriculum alone has not stopped the uncharitable chatter of those who don't understand or try to understand the research-based practices of our field or the nature of writing difficulties as matters that cannot be easily and forever "fixed." That being said, what the standardized syllabus does provide is a detailed accounting of what is supposed to be happening in every section on a weekly basis, and that detailed accounting renders it more difficult for critics to misconstrue or unjustly portray the nature of English 101 to those who are genuinely interested in learning about the course. To be sure, on more than one occasion when I was invited to speak with a given university constituency about the standardized curriculum, pieces of lore shared by the audience (e.g., "We don't understand why you don't teach grammar." "How come none of the writing assignments are academic in nature?") were readily dispelled by pointing to specific activities, readings, and assignments outlined on the common assignment handouts and unit schedules.

Also relevant to the attitudes of the university community at large is the issue of assessment. The Core Curriculum Executive Council regularly assesses English 101, and, during the early years of this process, the Director of Writing Studies and the English Department Chair were presented with the same critique: "There is too much disparity across sections of this course." Obviously the Council's concern was rooted in the desire for a reliable assessment and, by extension, the desire that all English 101 students were receiving similar educational experiences in the interest of laying foundations for individual progress, retention, and knowledge transfer. Since implementing the standardized syllabus, response from the Council has been decidedly complimentary relevant to these factors. Admittedly, Core assessment is largely impressionistic, based primarily on instructional materials provided by a sample of 101 teachers and on those teachers' analyses of their own performance and their students' work. As the university at large is in the process of ratcheting up its treatment of campus-wide assessment, English 101 stands ready to provide for a more valid and reliable assessment than was previously possible. Indeed, the continuity of content and structure across the many 101 sections and the greater control of pedagogical variables enabled by the common syllabus increase confidence in our capacity to evaluate students' performance (e.g., regarding attainment of objectives; any improvement, or lack thereof, in writing ability; transfer of knowledge to subsequent courses) relevant to particular constructs that are now more readily isolated for consideration.

It seems appropriate to end this profile by re-emphasizing projected benefits of the standardized syllabus that may contribute to the outcome most privileged by the movement for change—that is, improvement in the quality of first-year students' English 101 experience. As I noted earlier, there is no doubt that quality instruction was taking place in many 101 classrooms before the standardized syllabus was implemented. Many GTAs entered the halls of SIUC with keen instructional instincts, and the training our GTAs received in the PSW and English 502 strove to be thorough and current. Nonetheless, it seems clear that the turn toward standardization stands to more effectively support the numerous GTAs who begin the program with no experience and with undeveloped pedagogical inclinations.

Rather than having the new GTAs build a course in addition to managing all the other challenges of composition instruction (not to mention the challenges of the graduate courses they are taking), at least part of the work is already completed, and, thus, the threat of becoming overwhelmed or having to "shoot from the hip" in pulling the course together is lessened. Because 101 is plotted for the GTAs, we can be more certain that the assignments, activities, and readings that undergraduates encounter are collectively giving due attention to the entire set of 101 course objectives and that "best practices" are more consistently in play. In addition, pedagogical support from a community of peers who are teaching (or have taught) the exact same assignments, readings, and activities is abundant and substantive; furthermore, Writing Center tutors, having been trained on (or some even having taught) the same materials, are prepared to reinforce lessons at a very specific level. Though these and many other



complex factors that impact the quality of instruction and student performance are difficult to isolate for cause/effect analysis, it is not much of a stretch to imagine that the nature of preparation and support made possible by a standardized syllabus would raise the potential for effective pedagogy, particularly in courses that are being taught by inexperienced and/or apprehensive teaching assistants.

## Appendices

Because of their length, appendices are available on a [separate web page](#) (see links below). For printing, a [PDF version](#) is also available.

1. [Appendix 1: Overview of English 101 at SIUC](#)
2. [Appendix 2: Literacy Narrative](#)
3. [Appendix 3: Advertisement Analysis & Evaluation Assignment](#)
4. [Appendix 4: Summary & Rhetorical Analysis Assignment](#)
5. [Appendix 5: Literature Review Assignment](#)
6. [Appendix 6: Reflective Introduction and Portfolio Assembly Assignment](#)
7. [Appendix 7: Final Exam](#)

## Notes

1. English 101 classes are capped at twenty students, and, typically, new GTAs are assigned two 101 sections each. ([Return to text.](#))
2. “Status quo” in the context of this article refers to a long enduring approach to curriculum that resisted a common syllabus though the WPAs represented by this label enacted varying degrees of control on the curriculum and varying degrees of direction for the GTAs. ([Return to text.](#))
3. For example, when preparing to teach English 102 (which is focused more exclusively on argument than is English 101), GTAs will select from set menus of example assignments, and they will assume more responsibility for planning and sequencing assignments and activities, determining modes of assessment, etc. ([Return to text.](#))
4. The original manifestation of the Pre-Semester Workshop at SIUC was productively extended (from three to eight days) and substantively elaborated by a former Director of Writing Studies, Dr. Lisa J. McClure. ([Return to text.](#))
5. “Core Curriculum” in this context refers to the office that administers SIUC’s general education requirements, which call for twelve hours in “Foundation Skills” (including the first-year composition sequence), twenty-three hours in “Disciplinary Studies,” and six hours in “Integrative Studies.” ([Return to text.](#))
6. For an empirical investigation of the obstacles to knowledge transfer in this particular institutional context, see “Perceived Roadblocks to the Transfer of Composition Knowledge: A Pilot Study” (Nelms and Dively). ([Return to text.](#))
7. The ongoing professional development opportunities sponsored by the Writing Program, as well as the required classroom observations for new GTAs, represented worthy attempts to monitor the correspondence between program objectives and classroom performance. Of course, the task of verifying that approximately ninety GTAs are following program guidelines on a daily basis would be overwhelmingly time-consuming, if not impossible, as a result of staffing issues. Moreover, such extremes would likely prove oppressive and demeaning for the GTAs. ([Return to text.](#))
8. I was privy to this information as a regular instructor of English 502, a role that inevitably carries the status of pedagogical consultant in our program. ([Return to text.](#))
9. Of course, some programs manage to support and require completion of graduate courses in composition theory and pedagogy during the summer before GTAs begin teaching (e.g., Powell et al. 122, 124) and/or enjoy the luxury of introducing instructional responsibilities more slowly (e.g., Yancey 67). ([Return to text.](#))
10. The literature professor, Dr. Mark Amos, was assisted by Dr. C. L. Costello, who later became my assistant. Dr. Costello—now a Humanities instructor at Reading Area Community College in Reading, PA—had a large hand in developing SIUC’s standardized 101 curriculum. ([Return to text.](#))
11. I am assisted in planning and leading the PSW by a team of eight seasoned GTAs—two Administrative Assistants (PhD candidates in Rhetoric and Composition), two Instructional Assistants, and four small-group leaders who, based on their reputations as highly effective English 101 teachers, are asked to assume primary responsibility for introducing the new GTAs to the standardized syllabus. ([Return to text.](#))
12. I have no indication that SIUC encounters any more cases of plagiarism than comparable institutions, but I do

advise GTAs regarding at least a few suspected instances per semester over the expanse of our entire composition curriculum. Still, it seems likely that, once 101 students realize that they are encountering the same essay assignments across sections and that those same assignments were encountered by the classes that came before them, all the motivators that lead students to such acts in any instructional context would find an easier outlet in the context of a course following a standardized syllabus. Of course, rotating in multiple versions of the syllabus will not prevent student organizations from maintaining files of papers over the long term, individual students from having other students write essays for them, etc. ([Return to text.](#))

13. The Communications Across the Curriculum (CAC) initiative at SIUC has ebbed and flowed along with inconsistent financial support. Soon after the standardized syllabus was implemented, I participated in CAC forums across campus to explain the reasons for the change in approach, the nature of the curriculum, and the projected benefits of standardization at that level. ([Return to text.](#))

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