

Strengthening Academic Writing

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Abstract

Underprepared students often need assistance building writing skills and maintaining confidence in their abilities and potential. The authors share the philosophy, pedagogy, and experience of freshman developmental education and the writing center at a four-year, private, not-for-profit urban college. They describe high-impact educational practices that support academic success and promote metacognitive skill development and academic self-efficacy. They also provide data gathered over a five-year longitudinal study. The developmental studies writing program is designed and its partnership with the writing center is designed to help underprepared students, in particular, creating a logical progression of classroom activities and support services. Learning activities are enhanced through technology to support developmental education and writing center sessions. The use of the writing center to support developmental education is to encourage and increase students' help-seeking behavior as they transition beyond the developmental level.

Thirty-four percent of all entering college students need at least one developmental course (Feldman and Zimbler, 2012). Specifically, underprepared students often need assistance building writing skills and maintaining confidence in their abilities and potential. Writing is a skill that continues to impact a student's future endeavors. That being said, the majority of developmental education instructors report that students lack the motivation to succeed (Feldman and Zimbler, 2012). So, how can instructors engage students in developmental writing and learning? At American International College, this is accomplished through the implementation of a developmental writing course that is fundamentally motivating. Thus, it necessitates a partnership between freshman developmental education and the support of the college writing center through face-to-face and technological instruction. The skills learned through this collaboration assist students in mastering and moving beyond remedial writing.

Background

American International College (AIC) is a 4-year, private, not-for-profit college located on 72 acres in an urban environment. The student body is comprised of approximately 1,500 undergraduate and 2,000 graduate students, 43 percent representing racial or ethnic diversity. AIC has a 14 to 1 student-to-faculty ratio and offers associate and bachelor's degrees, post baccalaureate certificates, master's degrees, post-master's certificates, and doctoral degrees.

Placement

The Developmental Education Department at American International College began assessing and analyzing all incoming freshmen students in 2010 with the goal of placing them in the appropriate level of writing courses. Prior to this period, advisors selected English courses for incoming freshman based on the Standard Aptitude Test (SAT) writing scores. In 2009, with assistance from the AIC English department faculty, developmental education faculty analyzed the rubric used by the Accuplacer's writing assessment program, Writeplacer. This was used in conjunction with the AIC English Composition I courses to determine a steadfast baseline. Presently, AIC uses three key areas of data to determine incoming freshman English placement: high school grade point average, SAT writing score, and Writeplacer score. The developmental education program has found that approximately 24-30 percent of incoming students place in the Foundations of Writing course. Developmental education does not place solely on one bad testing day or score, as it does not necessarily speak to a student's true academic abilities. The triangulation of the data helps to focus on the students who have demonstrated a real need to build their academic skills. (Note: Since the time this article was written, we have begun investigating how the new SAT scores

combined with the high school GPA and Writeplacer results will help us place incoming students in 2016).

Developmental English Course Overview

The developmental writing course at American International College is called Foundations of Writing and is a three-credit hybrid class that meets three times a week. We offer six sections in the fall and one in the spring. The class meets in an interactive Smart classroom with 20 computer workstations. We also use an iPad learning lab equipped with 18 iPad workstations. The students work on writing and grammar software as well as research for their final paper. Accordingly, students' skill deficiencies can be positively affected using technology while providing small scaffolding experiences (Bowen, 2012).

However, the use of technology is not the only learning mechanism to motivate developmental education students in the Foundations of Writing course.

Walker and Jorn (2009) found in their study that although students wanted to use technology, they also wanted to retain face-to-face instruction and interaction with their professors and staff. However, research states that lecturing as a type of face-to-face instructional technique, especially in a writing classroom, is one of the least effective teaching methods to motivating students (Fink, 2003; Sousa, 2011; & Price, 2013). The developmental educational experience in the course, alternatively from lecturing, focuses on peer-to-peer work, the use of adaptable writing and grammar software, and student-professor interactions regarding writing assignments. The instructors work with the students on brainstorming, writing, correcting grammar in context, and providing feedback. Also, the instructor monitors the students' writing through two interventions that provide instructional guidance: the classroom management system—Smart Sync—and face-to-face mentoring.

Developmental Education Passing Rate

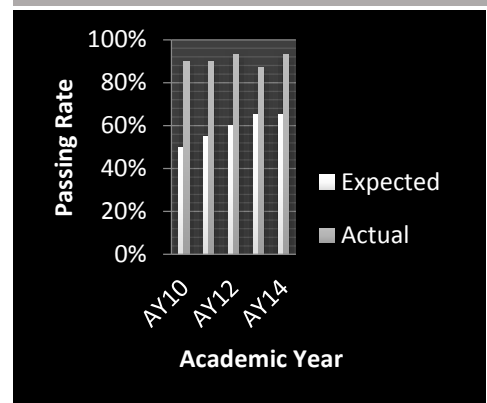
The overall passing rate for the AIC Developmental Education program is 91 percent from 2010–2014. According to the Title III grant Strengthening Institutions, each year the developmental education department had to meet a target goal that showed the minimum percent of students who reached proficiency and were released into English Composition One. The grant's baseline for developmental education in 2010 was 50 percent and incrementally increased each year to 65 percent for 2014. Refer to Table 1 for a more detailed demonstration of how the passing rate of developmental education students surpassed the grant's expectations each year.

Noonan Writing Center Overview

Students in developmental writing at AIC are further supported by the work of the Noonan Writing Center. The skills learned through this collaboration between developmental education and the center assist students in mastering and moving beyond remedial writing. As a comprehensive writing center staffed by certified peer tutors and paraprofessionals, the Noonan Writing Center is a free service that offers one-to-one tutoring and small group conferences on various aspects of the writing process by appointment or on a drop-in basis to all students throughout the college. Working with certified peer tutors and paraprofessionals, students receive face-to-face instruction through all stages of the writing process, from initial brainstorming to final revisions. The ultimate goal is to teach students how to prepare, write, and revise quality compositions.

Writing fundamentals covered include brainstorming, thesis development, outlining, organizing, formatting, structure, grammar, and mechanics. Additionally, the Noonan Writing Center conducts presentations and workshops

TABLE 1
YEARLY PASSING RATES OF
DEVELOPMENTAL STUDENTS



with the remedial writing students through technological instruction as a core part of their development. Topics are as follows:

- A Grammar & Style Refresher
- Brainstorming, Concept Mapping & Outlining
- Creating a Functional Outline
- Getting Started: Topics and Thesis Statements
- Effective Drafting Techniques
- Steps to Writing Well—MLA

Traditional PowerPoint presentations have been converted into Prezi, making them more interactive, novel, and engaging visually, a strategy that can lead to positive educational outcomes (Strauss, Corrigan, & Hofacker, 2011). Tutors provide the material in small segments, leaving time for questions and practice. It is essential that the material introduced is at a pace most conducive to learning at the remedial level. Presentations and workshops follow the syllabus, and professors schedule them at a time deemed most appropriate to the subject matter being covered. Again, it is with the student in mind that the course unfolds at a pace optimal to the learning goals set forth by the instructor. Students need to be active participants in their own learning (Strauss, Corrigan, & Hofacker, 2011).

CRLA Certified Tutors

Writing Center tutors receive International Tutor Training Program Certification (ITTPC) through the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA). The writing center director trains tutors to not only enhance the quality of work but to also provide the necessary interpersonal skills conducive to an encouraging, comfortable learning environment. Confidence building strategies are introduced during training and implemented during tutoring sessions. Staying positive and focusing on what is "right" with the paper allows for a foundation on which to build a student's skill set through practice and instruction. Overall, a positive experience with a writing tutor increases students' self-confidence and in turn their self-efficacy and help-seeking behaviors when it comes to utilizing the services provided by the writing center beyond their remedial writing courses.

Developmental Education and the Noonan Writing Center

Developmental Education and the Noonan Writing Center at American International College began their working collaboration in 2010 on a limited basis. During the first year, six sections of remedial writing were taught, and the writing center was only "officially" mentioned to students who demonstrated weakness in their writing. Primarily, the writing center was used as strictly an academic support to students who needed assistance. Nineteen unique visits by developmental education students were recorded by the writing center that year.

In 2011, developmental education added the Noonan Writing Center to the syllabi under the section entitled "Instructor Recommendations." The instructors were advised by the developmental education director to refer to the syllabus and mention the writing center when discussing assignments. The writing center director recorded 35 unique visits by developmental education students.

Subsequently, students who used the writing center were becoming more successful in their writing. In 2012, developmental education programming enforced the prior instructor recommendations for the writing center and added the writing center visit as part of the Foundations of Writing's final research paper. The rubric for the paper included the process of brainstorming, writing, and editing. In the developmental education research paper rubric, the director added a category for the writing center visit. Students were given 10 points for providing evidence that they attended a session with a writing tutor (the writing center

receipt). Instructors saw improvements in the writing of the research paper for the 69 percent of the students who followed the expectations of the rubric.

In 2013, the syllabus and the final research paper's expectations remained the same. However, developmental education instructors were advised to add the writing center visits to some of the paragraph and essay assignments. The syllabus also stated that some assignments required a visit to the writing center. Each instructor would use individual discretion and require the students to take their assignments to the writing center on at least four different occasions. The writing center receipt had to be turned in at the same time as the assignment. As a result, the writing center staff recorded ninety-eight visits for the fall 2013 semester. The instruction prompted an increase in repetitive visits to the writing center, resulting in the students becoming comfortable as frequent users of the resource.

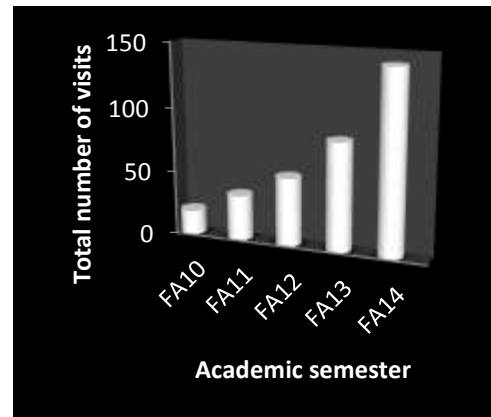
The most significant results that both the Noonan Writing Center and the office of developmental education take credit for was in 2014 when there was a substantial leap in visits to the writing center. The number of visits of developmental education students rose from 84 in 2013 to 141 in 2014. Programming for the developmental education instructors included training on how to become even more proactive with utilizing the writing center as part of the developmental English curriculum. Specifically, the course continued to require the writing center visits for most assignments and added another component to the instruction of the use of the writing center. The new instruction included that during one class period, while the class worked on their writing and interactive writing software, the instructors would take 2 or 3 students into the writing center. The students were shown where the writing center was located and given a tour of the facility, introduced to the CRLA-certified writing tutors, and shown how to make an appointment for an individual session. A course evaluation revealed that the students said they felt comfortable and confident about the procedures and the expectations of how to use the writing center for their assignments. They also stated they felt positive regarding future writing center visits. Significantly, there was a 642 percent increase in the visits of students utilizing the services for developmental writing over a five-year period. Refer to Table 2 for a more detailed description of the increase in developmental writing sessions.

The impact of the collaboration between Developmental English and the Noonan Writing Center has been positive for the freshman students who placed in Foundations of Writing. The students express an increase in self-confidence not only in their writing, but their willingness to use the writing center for support. The writing center has seen recurring visits by this student population beyond the fall semester. Students are using the facility for other courses beyond their English requirements. For future studies, we are tracking the incoming developmental education students, their use of the writing center, and their graduation rate.

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TABLE 2
DEVELOPMENTAL WRITING SESSIONS



Percent Increase

FA10-FA11 = 84%

FA11-FA12 = 51%

FA12-FA13 = 58%

FA13-FA14 = 68%

FA10-FA14 = 642%

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