Course Design

Swimming in the Deep End: Data-Driven Retention and Success with Corequisites English 1101 (Success Academy Section) and GSU 1010

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Course Descriptions

At Georgia State University (GSU), like at most other institutions, corequisite courses must be taken simultaneously—the information in one is necessary to the full understanding of the other. However, the corequisite pairing we describe here has a unique history; we paired a GSU 1010 course, part of the larger Freshman Learning experience, with English 1101 in an ad hoc manner.

The GSU 1010 course provides students with essential information about the academic demands of the university, its rules, procedures, resources, and academic, social, and personal survival skills that contribute to academic success. The GSU 1010 curriculum encourages students to establish supportive relationships with peers and faculty and to become an integral part of the academic community. In addition to offering the necessary information and skills to navigate the university, GSU 1010 also exposes students to the academic field of their choice through an examination of the general area of study and related principles. The course's learning outcomes align with the following themes: Academic Life, Community Life, Personal Life.

English 1101 is designed to increase the student's ability to construct written prose of various kinds. The course focuses on methods of organization, analysis, research skills, and the production of short expository essays. Readings consider issues of contemporary social and cultural concern. A passing grade is a C. By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Engage in writing as a process, including various invention heuristics (brainstorming, for example), gathering evidence, considering audience, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading.
2. Engage in the collaborative, social aspects of written composition, and use these as tools for learning.
3. Use language to explore and analyze contemporary multicultural, global, and international questions.
4. Demonstrate how to use composition aids, such as handbooks, dictionaries, online aids, and tutors.

5. Gather, summarize, synthesize and explain information from various sources.
6. Use grammatical, stylistic, and mechanical formats and conventions appropriate for a variety of audiences, but in particular the formal academic audience that makes up the discourse community with which you will also become more familiar in this course.
7. Critique others' work in written, visual and oral formats.
8. Produce coherent, organized, readable compositions for a variety of rhetorical situations.
9. Self-reflect on what contributed to the composition process and evaluate one's own work.

As originally conceived, GSU 1010 serves as an orientation course, designed to help students succeed in all the courses they take during their first semester of college work. This course serves as a college primer, presenting students with typical "what you need to know to succeed in college" information. We argue, however, that GSU 1010 is an important corequisite for English 1101, particularly for students entering GSU through the summer Success Academy (SA) program. When GSU 1010 is part of the SA curriculum, the focus of composition instruction is adjusted to include mentoring and research support tailored for students deemed underprepared for college success. We argue that the success of SA courses depends in large part upon the 1010 course's emphasis on mindset growth, academic grooming, confidence building, and community development. The English department seeks ways to ensure that English 1101 curriculum can reflectively help develop topics covered in the orientation course. Conversely, learning support offered in the 1010 courses enhances the quality of instruction in composition classes. When English faculty began adjusting 1101 courses for SA students, we leveraged the one-hour 1010 course content to augment and correlate curriculum. For instance, students participate in mindset growth mentoring sessions in 1010; we saw this requirement as an opportunity for extended instruction in 1101 and added writing assignments, in-class activities, and course readings related to mindset growth. By claiming GSU 1010 as a corequisite for 1101 SA sections, the English department increased the efficacy of both courses.

Institutional Context

Recognized in 2020 by *US News and World Report* as #2 in Most Innovative Schools and #3 in Best Undergraduate Teaching (tie), Georgia State University, located in metro Atlanta, has radically overhauled advisement criteria, curriculum, and support services to better meet the needs of our urban students. We are ranked 25th in the country for social mobility and follow-

ing the 2015 merger with Georgia Perimeter College, GSU now serves 53 thousand students at the downtown R1 university campus and perimeter college campuses. To streamline consolidation and the transfer process from the community college campuses to the four-year undergraduate program downtown, we combined the GSU and Perimeter catalogs and mission statements. Despite initial growing pains, the university's comprehensive plans to retain students and ensure progress towards degree have been widely heralded and imitated (see *New York Times* articles such as "Economic Diversity and Student Outcomes at Georgia State University" and "Data-Driven Innovation in College's Reinvention"). In Fall 2019, GSU set institutional enrollment records, admitting the most qualified and diverse freshman class to date. Students currently represent 49 states and more than 160 nations and territories. At the downtown campus, 4,600 freshmen entered the university with an average high school grade point average of 3.53. An additional 3,300 freshmen enrolled at the GSU perimeter college campuses. These combined totals yield the largest class of students in GSU history. They now have access to student success programs which means "these 8,000 freshmen will enter Georgia State with the best opportunity in school history to be successful," according to Timothy M. Renick, Senior Vice President for student success at GSU; "[t]hey will join a university at which students are graduating at record rates, in record time, and enjoying unprecedented success in careers after graduation." Of note, since consolidation with Georgia Perimeter College, graduation rates at Perimeter campuses have nearly tripled ("Georgia State Sets a Record").

First-Year Programs (managed by the office of Student Engagement) is largely responsible for the recent growth. This initiative cast a wider recruitment net by focusing on student training in financial literacy, providing retention grants, and creating early alert systems (particularly useful for first-generation students). The university now relies upon predictive analytic advising, College to Career course designs, adaptive learning software, the creation of freshman learning communities and meta-major programming, leadership training, and the formation of a Success Academy (SA) to help students meet their goals. SA students, who enroll in courses the summer before their first year of college, benefit from university cohort housing, in-residence mentoring, and tailored social events. Most importantly for this study, SA requires the pairing of core courses and GSU 1010, an "introduction to the academy" seminar. In the English department, these corequisite writing courses dovetail in ways that increase access and retention of students, many of whom are first-generation college attendees and all of whom are determined to be "at risk" for dropping out during the first year of college. Of note, the GSU downtown campus abolished learning-support classes and basic writing instruction in 1997.

While course pairing and Freshman Learning Community cohorts are not unique to GSU, the use of predictive analytics allows us to shape curricula and services to design a bridge program that addresses the specific needs of SA students. Curricular adjustments include scaffolded assignments, shorter paper assignments, and generous revision opportunities. Despite these changes in pedagogy, the curriculum in SA classes is credit bearing and maintains the same high expectations as traditional 1101 courses. The recent addition of a university Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) grounded in College to Career curriculum ensures that summer SA students are prepared for the academic courses and activities they will encounter in the fall semester.

In 2014, the SA program invited just under 100 students to pilot the program. Since then, the SA cohort has grown to over 500 invited summer students who are carefully selected through analysis of freshman index scores. Most colleges use index scores (or a similar admission system) to determine a student's ability to perform college-level work, acknowledging that traditional admission standards favor students from robustly funded educational programs (Fussell). The SA program extends admission to students who fall below GSU's index score requirements. GSU calculates admissibility through consideration of two factors: a student's GPA in college prep high school courses and official SAT and/or ACT scores. The average ranges for admissible first year students are: HS Core GPA 3.2-3.7; SAT (Verbal and Math only) 950-1160; ACT (Composite) 20-25. Participants in the summer program take just seven credit hours—math, English, and a freshman orientation course—instead of the fifteen hours most students take during their first college semester. Students who complete the summer program with a 2.0 or better then matriculate into that year's freshman class. In 2018, the SA program was extended to two-year Perimeter College campuses and is now integral to how students (who are identified as those needing additional resources and a more scaffolded approach to course work) experience their first college semester at both the four-year and two-year campuses.

At the program's inception in 2014, the English 1101 course remained identical in every way to credit-bearing courses offered in the fall semester. We quickly learned, however, that the SA students who benefit from administrative support services would also benefit from a revised 1101 experience. English 1101 instructors convened a committee to review ways to adjust pedagogy to meet both student needs and course goals, as well as combine the course with existing GSU 1010 instruction. The revised composition course paralleled the content and goals of the traditional 1101 course (available in the supplementary materials), with teacher-led changes in delivery and pedagogical methods. Additionally, English faculty had little experience in the space of "administrative/orientation" teaching. In order to pair these two classes, English 1101 needed

to learn to cooperate with the orientation course leaders. Eventually, English Writing Center tutors were assigned to teach the 1010 course, which helped us gain additional insight into how best to tailor the composition course to correlate with 1010 content.

The campus-wide First-Year Book program provides another initiative connecting the corequisite courses. This program aims to promote academic discourse and critical thinking, provide an introduction to the expectations of higher education, integrate an academic and social experience into the campus community, raise awareness and tolerance of cultural likenesses and differences, and create a sense of community. The annual book selection, chosen by a committee composed of interdisciplinary teachers and SA administrators, is distributed without charge to all incoming first year students, who are asked to participate in events related to the book and attend convocation featuring the author as the plenary speaker. English 1101 courses integrate the selection into class curriculum, and the writing program administration (WPA) team creates accompanying in-class, collaborative, and research/exploration assignments. The First-Year Book is integrated into the GSU 1010 course as well. While the discussions in GSU 1010 focus on the global and broad themes of the book, the English course drills down to more nuanced issues, asking students to craft compositions that not only reflect upon the selection's themes, but also analyze how those ideas resonate with local circumstances and GSU community exigencies. Past selections include *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* by Bryan Stevenson; the *March* trilogy by John Lewis; Wes Moore's *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates*; and Warren St. John's *Outcasts United*.

Once the revised English 1101 course reflected the goals of the First-Year Program, the students' productivity and final grades improved. Additionally, students rated their satisfaction with courses higher. After linking the two courses, students became more engaged, and the faculty looked forward to teaching (and began requesting to teach) the course. Pairing SA university support services and teacher-adapted curriculum (in conjunction with larger GSU initiatives created for all students) set the stage for student success and retention.

Theoretical Rationale

Alice Myatt explains that most scholarship on writing program collaboration focuses on university and high school pairings or community and writing program initiatives. She instead calls for complex collaboration partnerships, challenging representations from "higher education, administration, organizational studies, and business management, WPAs and WCAs" to seek ways "to add to or expand the research and scholarship connected to complex collaborative ventures that cross (or even transcend) boundaries" (3). In spite of

initial turf wars and faculty resistance to big data, the SA and English department venture at GSU answers this call.

While faculty who work in the humanities have long valued the importance of data, facts, evidence, and research (see *A Changing Major,* ADE report), their appreciation of data differs from higher administration's affinity for facts and figures. Coverage of innovative university initiatives like recent ones at GSU frequently include phrases like "big data," "data-driven outcomes," and "student success built on data analytics." Recruitment and retention programs, while extremely successful, are often created in the administrative world, void of input from the very faculty who are charged with implementation. Despite resistance to big data language, many faculty members are fundamentally committed to teaching in programs designed to improve retention, close equity gaps, decrease time to graduation, or improve the success outcomes for students with lower achievement indicators. Unfortunately, the vision of student success is often bifurcated from the start: faculty believe students achieve success by time spent in the classroom, and university administrators know success can be engineered outside of that traditional space—and they have the data to prove it. GSU has made crucial internal changes to encourage faculty to get to the business of effecting change. The university found that when faculty are asked to play an active role in strategic visioning, teachers are more likely to buy into innovative programming and, therefore, student success measurably increases (St. Amor).

In "Demands for Partnership and Collaboration in Higher Education: A Model," Amey et al. provide a series of questions designed to promote key elements of educational collaborations. Addressing these questions is necessary to evaluate the efficacy of collaborations:

- What was the impetus to initiate the partnership? the reasons for joining? the antecedents (Gray; Russell and Flynn)? state, federal, or institutional policies?
- What is the context of the partnership? What are the economic, political, and sociocultural circumstances? What is the motivation for each partner to participate?
- How is the partnership understood by others, and what is the role of leadership in framing the partnership for constituents? How do the institutions involved and their members make sense of partnership (Watson)? Who is communicating with members about the partnership (Fullan)?
- What are the outcomes, benefits, and costs of the partnership? What kinds of assessment and benchmarking data about the partnership

are gathered? Are goals and objectives revised appropriately? Do the data feed back into the partnership process (Kotter and Cohen)?

- What is required to sustain the partnership? If it is decided to continue the partnership, how will this be accomplished (Amey and Brown)? What resources are needed? How will they be garnered? If the partnership is to be dissolved or dramatically changed, who will manage this process and communicate it to others? (9)

This self-inquiry is critical to sustaining mutually beneficial partnerships, particularly in student success initiatives like the ones fostered at GSU. SA relies upon cooperation at multiple university, college, and department levels; yet, each entity needs to maintain their individual identities and purposes, receive credit for their participation in the larger project, and feel empowered as a stakeholder (see Currie and Eodice; Harrington et a.).

The decision to adopt English 1101 as a possible extension of the university-level programmatic aims for SA required a shift in thinking about the role of faculty and departments. When English set to work with the SA program, the collaboration necessitated ceding some ground in the composition classroom and allowing the goals of the SA program to have equal weight with course outcomes. This corequisite pairing allowed GSU to reimagine the first year writing space, expand our reach into the mentoring and student success areas of education, and maintain the same level of writing instruction rigor across all first year writing classes. Achieving student success and raising the national reputation of GSU as a leader in student retention required gathering experts with differing areas of expertise from across the terrain of the university. The resulting complex collaborations (as defined by The Research Group on Complex Collaborations) occurred because the various stakeholders worked "across organizational, epistemological, and interest boundaries in order to create an emergent outcome" ("About Us"). The process of collaboration was not difficult to establish; however, the act of fostering genuine belief in the benefits of student learning that has its foundation established by an administrative program required a shift in the writing program's theoretical point of view. The current complex collaborations between SA administrators and teachers in the various core disciplines relies upon trust and respect, working together to achieve larger goals that aren't attainable by one entity.

University staff and support service team members (working on 12-month contracts and therefore available to summer SA students) are integral to complex collaborations; they ensure opportunity and equity for all incoming students. First-Year Programs created a unique combination of academic and administrative services associated with the GSU 1010 orientation course, including: weekly workshops, one-on-one advising appointments, academic coaching,

and targeted skills-based tutoring sessions. While some support features exist for students entering in the fall, SA students receive an increased level of attention. The corequisite pairing adds an additional academic layer to tracking and monitoring student progress, and most summers, 100% of the 1101 courses taught in the summer are designated SA sections.

The corequisite pairing inherently fosters cross-campus collaborations in other ways as well. For example, the Writing Center and Writing Program move beyond siloed positions and instead partner for the benefit of both programs. The inclusion of the Writing Center pedagogy with the mentoring programs offered by the SA resulted in mentoring sessions grounded in the theories and best practices established by the tutors and faculty who run the program. SA mentoring and study sessions reflect the learning goals set forth at the direction of our department's Writing Center. Through this collaboration, English was able to inject the administrative student success program with writing center and composition theory. Directors of these programs adjust staffing over the summer to make sure the Writing Center tutors and departmental advisors are prepared for SA students during critical times. In addition to meeting the needs of students, faculty in both programs receive summer funding. In "Crafting Collaboricity: Harmonizing the Force Fields of Writing Program and Writing Center Work," Michelle Miley and Doug Downs explain "through overlapping fields, and our shared goal of a campus writing community, our interactions affect not only each other's programs but also the people within each of the fields of influence" (40). This cross-campus collaboration is amplified when we layer other vested and funded university initiatives aimed at student retention and success, such as the College-to-Career QEP, the Humanities Inclusivity Program (HIP), and Center for the Advancement of Students and Alumni (CASA) integrated endeavors.

The intentional cohorting of GSU 1010 and English 1101 became standard practice when the 2014 retention and graduation rates data illustrated the success of the program. By its second year, SA students had an 83.2% one-year retention rate, compared to 81.2% rate of non-SA students. The four-year graduation rate for SA students was 21.3%, just 8 points lower than for traditional students. The curriculum revision in 1101, the pairing with GSU 1010, and a suite of services offered at the programmatic level helped these SA students perform at, or just below, traditionally matriculated students by the end of the first year.

While the supplemental materials offer the standard SA syllabus for English 1101, teachers certainly may (and do) adapt the standard curriculum to merge with their individual teaching strengths and the needs of a particular cohort of students. Michael Harker, Associate Professor specializing in composition theory and literacy studies, regularly requests to teach the SA courses. Most

recently, he adapted the syllabus to include a focus on "Rhetoric, Literacy, and Family," an 1101 course designed to meet students where they are upon entering GSU, and to introduce students to an R1 university learning environment. Pedagogically sound, this class design tweaks the standard English 1101 syllabus to reflect student demographics, teacher interest, and local program exigencies. Harker explains,

> When I teach undergraduate composition courses (SA or Honors) I rely heavily on ideals communicated in GSU's strategic plan, emphasizing that GSU is an R1 school with certain expectations for decorum, attendance, integrity, and work ethic. It sounds tough, intimidating, maybe even cruel, but on the first day—and throughout the semester—I repeatedly remind them that if they find the readings difficult or the assignments time consuming, they're in the right place. I allow them to revise multiple times and work with them individually when it comes to certain issues, but ...I think both the larger institutional climate and the back-channel PR instructors do for institutions is so important. If students sense that you don't trust, admire, or respect the institution, they won't either. All students need to see the instructor believe in more than the course they're teaching. I think this 'move' is critical when it comes to SA courses. This isn't possible at institutions that don't message as effectively as GSU. (Harker)

We applaud and welcome adaptations to the standard syllabus because those faculty-created changes reflect a sincere enthusiasm for the course and how it functions within the larger university success initiative. In early critical reflections of student success programs from across the country, critics noted the lack of cohesion between the results hoped for by administrators and the progress students made in their coursework. As Vincent Tinto, Distinguished University Professor at Syracuse, points out success initiatives fail to improve student experience "in large measure because most innovations have sat at the margins of the classroom and have failed to reach into the classroom to substantially improve the classroom experience" (4). Courses adapted to local needs and specific student demographics put into practice the First-Year Programs' tools and opportunities, ensuring academic success happens in the classroom. By creating a pedagogical approach to success initiatives through the vehicle of a course, and then pairing that course with academic spaces, students benefit from both the administrative efforts and the faculty expertise needed to move beyond the barriers that most commonly prohibit student success.

Critical Reflection

With the large and growing number of SA sections each summer, teacher training for this course is vital, particularly when the bulk of those instructors are graduate teaching assistants (see Wallis and Jankens; Estrem and Reid). Instructors must see their role as both academic coach and teacher, especially as students in the summer cohort often are not prepared for the rigors of independent college living. Gaining admission despite low Freshman Index scores, SA students know they have been invited to participate in this course because they are not competitive with students who enter college through regular admission processes. Even though the program has adopted more welcoming and encouraging student labels ("early college adopters" and "academy students"), summer SA students are well aware that their summer work determines their ability to matriculate in the fall. The students are also sometimes less enthusiastic about starting college in the summer, when their friends may enjoy a two-month vacation from school or earn money to defray college costs. Some students have cried openly when they performed poorly on an assignment, fearing they will fail and get kicked out of school before the freshman year officially begins. Making sure instructors are aware of this student perception is crucial. Low Freshman Index scores may also be symptomatic of larger learning or readiness issues. A student may not yet be emotionally ready for collegiate work nor attained the required personal and interpersonal sense of responsibility necessary for academic success. While the programmatic activities and the orientation course aims to address some of these issues, instructors of English 1101 often encounter these issues first, as Harker explains,

> This class remains the most rewarding and memorable course I've taught since coming to GSU in 2010. I'm not sure why, but I think it has something to do with the fact that a lot of SA students arrive with a chip on their shoulders because they don't want to be there (or think they shouldn't be there.) It's something special to see that burden/anxiety/resentment—it's different for each student—slowly dissolve over the period of a semester and be replaced with the disposition/perspective I'm trying to impart: undergraduate scholar at an urban research university. (Harker)

Corequisite courses help to demystify the college experience for students and then assist them in campus participation; however, from a training and mentoring perspective, it is sometimes difficult to prepare instructors for the wide variants in student preparedness and behavior. Generally, students who participate in the SA program go on to complete their degrees at the same rate

as traditional student cohorts. However, to date, we have no comprehensive study of the effect on student learning when the suite of services and the tailored academic programming abruptly ends after one short summer term. We need to investigate if and how SA students struggle once they no longer receive individualized and constant attention.

Both English 1101 staff, teacher-mentors, and administrators now recognize that university initiatives provide unique opportunities for partnership. This intentional collaboration, described by Myatt as "imposed on units in the manner of top-down directives" has led over the last few years to interesting invitational partnerships, whereby "units seek out or accept opportunities to join or partner with others" (4). At the start of the SA program, our English Department was given little to no information about the new cohort of students, how the program might function, and what role we should take in helping to ensure the success of these students. In fact, we were told directly to make no adjustments to the English 1101 course, as it should not in any way appear as remedial. We quickly learned that curriculum adjustments and conscious pairing with GSU 1010 courses provided an expedient way to ensure students not only passed their classes, but also to prepare them to make the leap into the academic deep end. While GSU has a stellar reputation as an innovative university (demonstrated in the data), we still have difficulty "assessing and comparing each party's contributions, gains, and competencies in the collaboration process" that led to this national phenomenon (Jap 87). However, we do know that the efforts made by instructors willing to reinterpret their roles as teacher-mentors and cooperate to create pedagogically sound corequisite courses ensured that students were ready to swim.

Note

The College to Career initiative is Georgia State University's Quality Enhancement Plan, a requirement of SACSCOC accreditation process. www.collegetocareer.gsu.edu

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