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Upgrading to Credit-Bearing Courses: Redesigning Curriculum with Students First

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ABSTRACT

Students who take remedial courses are often prevented from continuing their education because the classes do not count toward their degrees, so they lose financial aid. They also suffer from stigma and disengagement while taking classes that label them as underprepared for college-level work. To reduce such negative effects of developmental education while promoting retention, we redesigned our reading and writing courses. Elevating the rigor and better addressing the needs of our students as college-level readers and writers, our courses now earn college credit. In this article, we describe the rationale for the course restructuring, detail the steps we took to obtain credit, and discuss the challenges. Evidence suggests that these changes have positively influenced student effort and engagement while continuing to tackle student deficiencies.

Introduction

According to Complete College America (2011), approximately 40% of all students entering college require some form of remediation. Historically, colleges have enrolled students in non-credit-bearing classes to focus on the skills they need to develop. Students who place into these developmental classes are expected to successfully complete them before moving onto the next developmental course-sequence or a credit-bearing course that counts toward graduation. The findings in this report as well as the Department of Education's January 2017 report, *Developmental Education: Challenges and Strategies for Reform*, indicate that "traditional developmental course-taking can increase students' time to degree attainment and decrease the likelihood of completion" (Schak, et al., p. 7).

Unfortunately, faculty who do not teach developmental classes may brand students as underprepared or non-college ready when they see remedial classes on schedules or transcripts. In an effort to understand faculty perceptions about students we serve in our department, we offered an anonymous survey in Fall 2017. Faculty responded that students are largely unprepared and lacking skills, and some expressed frustration that these students were allowed to take their classes.

At our institution, many students take developmental education classes. 34.7% of our students are first-generation, and 18.5% are underrepresented minority students, with both groups heavily represented in these classes. In the past, students would take as many as 18 credits of classes that did not count towards graduation, extending their time until graduation and using up financial aid. Many students stopped receiving financial aid because, although the classes they took counted toward their GPA, they did not count toward their degrees, so they failed to make adequate progress toward graduation.

In an effort to reduce the stigma of developmental education and how it negatively impacts student retention, we remodeled the course-taking sequence of reading and writing courses in our department, reducing the number of non-credit course offerings. This change decreases the possibility that students will have to take two semesters of non-credit bearing classes, which would have put them in jeopardy against which the Department of Education's report warns. The report also suggests, among the reforms recommended, that curriculum changes incorporate high impact practices that promote higher expectations that will allow students to strengthen their metacognitive skills.

Students in greatest need of support and practice to achieve proficiency become discouraged when they must enroll in non-credit bearing courses and frequently do not continue to matriculation (Education Commission of the States, 2010). Complete College America's 2012 report, highly critical of remediation, recommends changes in developmental curriculum to "start students in college-level courses" with built-in support, and "embed needed academic help in" gateway courses (p.12). They suggest we view remediation not as a "pre-requisite" or pre-college program, but a rigorous, college-level course that carries credit towards graduation.

We decided to move toward earning credit-bearing status for the following reasons:

1. Ethical argument: Students accrue debt for non-credit bearing courses that do not apply toward graduation. They often cannot continue into a second academic year because, even if they performed well in the classes they completed, those classes did not count as credit toward degree completion.
2. National best practices: Universities across the country are moving away from traditional developmental instruction to more challenging courses worthy of college credit.

For those considering attempting to modify existing noncredit courses, we offer a description of our process, the arguments we made, challenges we faced, and the results.

Literature Review

Mitigated Financial Hardships

The financial cost of non-credit courses impacts students' ability to graduate, as they accrue debt but not credits toward graduation. American college students and their families spend a reported \$1.3 billion per year on remedial courses (Jimenez, Sargrad, Morales, & Thompson, 2016). This curricular structure creates hardship for many students who are accepted to the university but then scheduled into courses below the 100-level that do not qualify as contributing to progress toward graduation. The lack of such progress limits their financial aid, so many are unable to return the following semester. Replacing non-credit bearing developmental courses with college-level, credit-bearing classes will ensure that students' tuition dollars impact their degrees.

Adopting Best Practices

Nationally, universities are replacing the non-credit bearing remedial courses with more challenging credit-bearing courses. For example, the University of Tennessee-Martin (Huse, Wright, Clark, & Hacker, 2005), Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne Webb-Sunderhaus & Amidon, 2011), or more locally, Shippensburg University undertook such a process in their writing courses. Shippensburg now offers ENG 113: Introduction to Academic Writing to serve the same population.

Improved Course Completion and Retention

Students who do not receive credit for classes prolong graduation times and are more likely to drop out. According to Complete College America, only 35.1% of students who take remedial classes graduate with a four-year degree within six years, compared to 55.7% of students who do not need remedial classes (2011). The Department of Education's January 2017 report, *Developmental Education: Challenges and Strategies for Reform*, argues that non-credit-bearing classes "can increase students' time to degree attainment and decrease the likelihood of completion" (p. 7). Although students *need* the additional instruction to prepare them for their other courses, the time and money they spend in non-credit bearing classes delays and can even prevent graduation. If they earned elective credits that could count towards graduation, the developmental courses would not set them behind.

Students in greatest need of support and practice to achieve proficiency become discouraged when they must enroll in developmental courses and frequently do not continue to matriculation (Education Commission of the States, 2010). A briefing from the National Governors' Association (2011) affirms that incentives need to be adopted to move these students through developmental courses to improve retention and graduation completion rates. By offering minimum general education credit to students who successfully complete work in writing-intensive instruction for varied purposes and audiences in both informal and formal assignments, retention may be stimulated.

Raised Graduation Rates for Underrepresented Minorities

Black and Hispanic students, while underrepresented at four-year institutions, are overrepresented in developmental education, with black students "more than twice as likely to enroll in remediation" compared to their white counterparts (Zaback, Carlson, Laderman, & Mann, 2016, p. 7). Black and Hispanic students are more likely to be enrolled in more than one developmental course, as well (Zaback et al., 2016). Because underrepresented minority students are overrepresented in remedial college courses, they are too often delayed in or even prevented from graduating. It is thus crucial to revise remedial classes so that all students can stay on track by earning credit for their hard work. Many colleges across the country, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities, have used such curricular restructuring to achieve success (Miners, 2010).

Heightened Rigor

More than thirty years ago, composition scholars argued for the importance of having students in basic writing classes engage in authentic intellectual work (Bartholomae, 1986). Remedial courses are increasingly being replaced by college-level courses that include high-level writing and critical thinking tasks. In a study of developmental writing courses in community colleges, MacArthur and Philippakos (2013) developed a curriculum focusing on teaching five genres of writing, revamping the course from one that had focused mainly on grammar and paragraph writing in the past to concentrate instead on strategies for planning, drafting, and revising full-length essays. Likewise, faculty at the University of Tennessee at Martin enhanced their 080 and 090 developmental courses into credit-bearing 100 and 110 courses. Due to the pressure to eliminate developmental courses while continuing to serve the needs of underprepared students, curriculum writers shifted the focus of the class from looking for errors to giving challenging writing tasks, such as full-length papers. Although the curriculum was more challenging than in the previous iterations, smaller class sizes and built-in supports like

mandatory writing lab helped students better adjust to college writing as they progressed through the course sequence (Huse et al., 2005).

Course Redesign and Process

Prior to our quest for credit-bearing status, we offered two non-credit bearing writing classes and two non-credit bearing reading classes. We restructured our courses and increased the demands through greater rigor, higher expectations, high-impact practices, and more comprehensive, metacognitive assessment.

In Spring 2017, we submitted our initial proposals for our new credit-bearing reading and writing classes, College Writing Enrichment (ENRICH 101) and Reading Your World (ENRICH 110). Both were accepted as experimental courses for Fall 2017 and Spring 2018, meaning that students enrolled in those sections received credits toward graduation.

However, in order to gain permanent credit-bearing status, we needed to demonstrate to various university committees how these courses would benefit the university. In addition to updating our experimental course proposals, we were required to verbally defend the courses. Since our department taught almost exclusively non-credit courses, there were many questions as to whether or not these courses were college-level work deserving of credit.

We argued that the new, credit-bearing courses would

1. Improve course completion
2. Foster retention
3. Raise graduation rates
4. Mitigate financial hardships

Our proposed curricula required a number of revisions, such as added justification for credit-bearing status and streamlined learning objectives. Following these modifications, the university curriculum committee awarded both courses credit-bearing status effective Summer 2018. Following that, we deactivated the former courses.

College Writing Enrichment (ENRICH 101)

Before Fall 2012, students at our institution were required to take at least two credit-bearing first-year writing courses, English 101 and then English 201 or an approved equivalent course. Since 2012, students have been required to take only one credit-bearing first-year writing course, English 101. To construct an appropriate foundational course, the English department condensed and elevated English 101 to make it more rhetorical in its focus and to address some of what was accomplished in English 201. For example, a new student learning objective is that students will be able to “read, select, and use evidence critically to formulate and support arguments.” However, many students would be better served if they were encouraged or required to take two credit-bearing, foundational writing courses prior to subsequent writing experiences in their majors. Thus, we transformed our developmental, non-credit-bearing course, Writing 2, into Enrich 101 to serve as a prerequisite for English 101 for those students who do not meet the criteria to start directly in English 101.

The master course syllabus for Enrich 60 was created in 1984 and had not been updated since then. The original learning objectives for Enrich 60 addressed primarily sentence-level mechanics. For example, they required mastering writing complete sentences.

These were no longer the appropriate prerequisites for English 101, as they predate most of the scholarship on developmental writing. Not a single goal required the students to go beyond writing a paragraph. The learning objectives of the new course, Enrich 101, reflect current best practices in addressing key areas of college-level writing and will more effectively support current students' preparation for English 101.

In addition to eliminating and replacing Writing 2 with College Writing Enrichment, we eliminated Writing 1, a remedial course offered in summer to conditionally-admitted students who were deemed (based on placement testing) not ready for Writing 2. By removing Writing 1 and Writing 2, we eliminated the possibility that students will take two semesters of non-credit bearing writing classes.

To provide college-level rather than remedial writing experience, we increased rigor in the course by requiring more sustained practice in generating and revising text in ways that demonstrate awareness of writing for multiple purposes and audiences. With goals in mind of creating texts and artifacts, incorporating evidence, and applying critical analysis to reading and writing as problem solving, we required the following in all sections:

- Exposing students to a variety of genres and texts including narrative, argumentative, descriptive, and research-based writing
- Coordinating literacy activities (i.e., critical thinking and collaborative work)
- Modeling, facilitating, and providing feedback on brainstorming, pre-writing, drafting and revising
- Exploring distinctions and connections between claims and evidential support
- Engaging in metacognitive reflection into students' writing progress to recognize positive gains and address areas of need

Additionally, to ensure we meet our goals, we added course assessment and survey components. The department requires an ePortfolio model containing sample student assignments as well as a student-written reflective essay explaining progress towards proficiency related to learning outcomes for the course. Faculty participate in annual course assessment by reviewing sample ePortfolios from each section. We conduct norming sessions with anchor ePortfolios using department-developed rubrics. Additionally, the department uses a pre-post instrument to measure student attitudes on engagement, confidence, self-efficacy, and motivation. The writing faculty in the department review and discuss the results, making adjustments to methods and learning outcomes as needed. This is largely an informal process that can include communication with members of the English department as individual instructors improve their course materials.

Reading Your World (ENRICH 110)

Students whose reading placement criteria fell below a determined cutoff were required to enroll in a one or two-sequence developmental reading course, Reading 1 and/or Reading 2. The master course syllabi for Reading 1 and Reading 2 were created in 1987 and had not been updated since then. The course-taking sequence for reading was reconstructed and the reading curriculum was redesigned to enhance rigor and provide college credit.

Reading Your World (Enrich 110) was designed as a credit-bearing course to replace Reading 2. Reading 1, which was only offered in the summer and counted as the prerequisite for

Reading 2, was deactivated altogether. Those enrolled in Reading 1 were conditionally admitted students participating in the six-week educational opportunity program. Our new curriculum format, which eliminated the developmental reading sequence, not only created an opportunity to retain and better support students who assessed at the mid to lowest levels of reading, but also improve course completion, continuation, and graduation rates.

Reading Your World moves beyond skill-based instruction toward a multidimensional approach that leads to what Gilles and Pierce (2004) refer to as creating a space for talk around literacy, with a focus on active engagement and student-centered instruction. Literacy is a way of making meaning and interpreting the use of text, through reading, writing, and communicating. In this course, students are given the opportunity to view literacy as more than just the written word and to develop “an understanding of literacy as a social and cultural practice” (Hull & Shultz, 2002, p. 21). As a result, these literacy practices help to create a culture that is a supportive and engaging environment conducive to learning and making meaningful connections to enhance reading comprehension skills so that students are more likely to succeed.

The course also incorporates high impact practices that promote higher expectations that will allow students to strengthen their metacognitive skills by understanding and “monitoring learning success” (Weinstein, Acee, & Jung, 2011, p. 47). In addition, the course helps students develop and practice skills that will transfer across disciplines (i.e. into general education, their majors, and minors). As a result, sustained literacy practices (modeling reading, writing, communicating, and storytelling) that are required in all sections of the course, can help motivate students to do the following:

- Strengthen comprehension
- Express individual literacy and critical thinking skills
- Access prior knowledge to improve comprehension by making meaningful connections to text
- Synthesize material and take notes
- Identify and provide supportive information and details to justify an argument
- Engage in reflective, intentional processing about learning by articulating an understanding of purposeful reading or ways of reading
- Reflect about, make personal connections to, react to, write about, and discuss assigned readings as well as other topics generated from the discussions
- Provide an effective oral and/or written response/reflection to certain questions based on information presented by the author
- Access, analyze, evaluate, and effectively utilize information regarding multi-media sources to research and present ideas

Similar to the writing curriculum, the reading curriculum has incorporated course assessment measures and a pre- and post-survey to measure student attitudes on engagement, confidence, self-efficacy, and motivation. The department uses an ePortfolio model containing sample student assignments, including various artifacts, and a sampling of students' written reading response reflections, as well as a final reflective essay to demonstrate proficiency and achieved learning outcomes for the course. The reading faculty participate in annual course

assessment and review three randomly selected ePortfolios from each section. The reading faculty review the results and make adjustments to methods and learning outcomes as needed.

Conclusion

Although our curricular restructuring has been recently accomplished, and we don't yet have empirical data to offer, assigning credit to our courses has positively impacted students' perceptions of the courses, and it has added visibility to the work we do in our department, all of which reduce the stigma surrounding developmental education and tackle the biases held by faculty. Preliminary survey and course assessment data suggest that students find the courses to be useful in improving their skills. For example, although one student in Enrich 101 reported that his original thoughts about needing to take the course were negative, he described learning helpful writing techniques and recognized his growth as a writer. Another student wrote about how much more confident she felt about taking English 101 after first completing Enrich 101. Similarly, a student in Enrich 110 stated that she enhanced her reading skills and comprehension within other courses. Another student commented on finding a passion for reading.

Additionally, faculty who teach Enrich 101 and 110, as well as undergraduate teaching assistants, report improved engagement and effort because the class counts toward graduation. By replacing non-credit-bearing reading and writing classes with these more rigorous counterparts, we continue to address student deficiencies while better preparing them for the demands of college.

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Biographies

Cassandra O'Sullivan Sachar is an Assistant Professor of Writing in the Department of Academic Enrichment at Bloomsburg University. She earned her Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership from University of Delaware. Her research interests include providing meaningful feedback, utilizing metacognitive revision to promote writing achievement, and working with at-promise students.

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Ted Roggenbuck is an Associate Professor of English and Director of the Writing and Literacy Engagement Studio at Bloomsburg University. He is a Co-Editor for *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship* and has recently co-edited with Karen Gabrielle Johnson *How We Teach Writing Tutors: A WLN Digital Edited Collection*.