Converting Corequisite Writing Into a Model of Student Success

One of the greatest feats a college can achieve is student retention. Retention speaks to students' satisfaction with the educational value, instruction, and cost of the college. It means that students see the college as a place where they can grow and succeed during a pivotal part of their lives. Retention rates are also important because of state funding tied to these figures. In Kentucky, the legislature passed Senate Bill 153 in 2017, a new performance-based funding model for public postsecondary institutions that ties outcomes such as retention, completion, and degree production to funding in order to incentivize institutions to graduate more students (Kentucky Council, Who We Are).

To curtail the loss of students and funding, Kentucky's Council on Postsecondary Education implemented a student success objective that started in part to increase persistence and timely completion for students at all levels, particularly students who began in developmental education, with an aligned strategy to redesign the delivery of developmental education to reduce its duration and cost (Kentucky Council, 2016-2021 Strategic Agenda).

In my position as a writing instructor and the coordinator of The Center for Academic Success, a center that supports close to 20 percent of the approximate 1,400 freshmen students at Murray State University, I was asked to revamp the college's developmental education writing course. The main goal of this project was to find a way to better support developmental education students in their quest to graduate, particularly those students who scored below average on state benchmark placement tests.

I decided to follow a current trend in higher education and change the developmental course model to a corequisite model. Traditional remedial courses, often referred to as developmental courses or developmental education, are formatted as prerequisite, non-credit bearing courses to be completed before entering a credit-bearing gateway course such as English Composition I. A corequisite, on the other hand, is categorized as a credit-bearing course or supplemental instruction to be taken concurrently with the associated credit-bearing gateway course. The idea behind both course models is to improve students' skills and increase their chances of achievement in college.

The corequisite model is favored for several reasons. Placement tests can be inaccurate and students are often successful in the gateway course without the added time and money spent in the developmental education course. There is less opportunity for students to exhaust their financial aid, get overwhelmed, fail classes, or any of the infinite other reasons students leave college to pursue something else. Corequisites can also work alongside other initiatives, such as dual-credit programs.

In order to determine how to improve and redesign the corequisite program in my department, I looked to university data in hopes of collecting answers about how to implement meaningful changes. I studied the 2017 pass rates and retention rates of ENG 111 (a one-hour, credit-bearing corequisite course to the gateway course ENG 105). The pass rate was 66.7 percent, and the retention rate was just 33.3 percent.

With reflection, student input, faculty collaboration, and trial and error, the writing corequisites were redesigned with the following best practices in mind:

Choose clearly aligned writing objectives that are paired with ENG 105 and realistic for a 50-minute per week course while providing students with options. I thought about the question posed by philosopher and social scientist Herbert Spencer: "What knowledge is of most worth?" While writing involves a multitude of skills, the corequisite focused on the following topics: Generating a writing topic, writing thesis statements, organizing an essay, using credible sources and avoiding plagiarism, incorporating sources, elaborating and adding evidence to support a claim, quoting, paraphrasing, summarizing, formatting (MLA and/or APA), punctuation review, and revision and editing strategies. Students choose which topic to explore according to their writing needs and whatever content was being explored in the gateway course that week. Conference times were made available for students to discuss their writing and the progress they had made toward specific writing goals in the paired course.

Choose an effective class text and or supplement material. With so many online options, I didn't want to reinvent the wheel, but I also wanted to include my own knowledge and expertise in teaching strategies and pedagogy. I had students purchase an affordable Writing Handbook and posted my own notes and tips as "Help Pages" on the course's LMS.

Create meaningful, correlated learning checks and include multiple exposures to the content. In one activity I often use, I ask students to choose a weekly writing topic to explore using a collaborative notetaking strategy. I ask them to prepare a document or sheet of paper that includes three sections: (1) My Ideas/Notes, (2) My Partner's Ideas/Notes, and (3) Our Ideas/Combined Notes. If you are teaching online, Google docs or Jamboard can be used. In a traditional setting, a copied paper chart can be used. Allow 10 minutes at the beginning of class for students to group according to their writing topic and to discuss their individual notes. This is also a perfect opportunity to discuss notetaking strategies for beginning college students. What was important in the text? What additional information added to your understanding of the text? Highlight or circle what you and your partner found important. Combine your notes and your partner's. Prioritize or categorize your combined ideas. For an additional 10-15 minutes, they use the completed notes to take an individual 10-question Google quiz. Then the students take the same quiz in groups. Correct answers are immediately shown after submission for students to check their individual and group knowledge. Points are added to individual scores if the group answered correctly even though their initial answer may have been incorrect. The last part of the class is devoted to answering questions, explaining misconceptions, elaborating on specific topics as needed, or forming student groups according to specific ENG 105 sections to talk about upcoming due dates and assignments. After reading the content, discussing the content, and completing the individual and group learning checks, students show what they know through their writing in the gateway writing course. Ultimately, ENG 105 is where this assessment occurs.

The spring 2020 and fall 2020 ENG 111 courses of 68 students had a combined pass rate of 81.5 percent and a combined retention rate of 75 percent. This was in spite of remote learning occurring half of the year due to COVID-19 and the class being comprised of students scoring below the benchmark English score.

Conclusion

One important finding in my research has been that retention is an issue among students with developmental writing needs, and they will likely struggle to stay in school whether they take a prerequisite or corequisite course. And we must acknowledge that Kentucky colleges continue to inherit the K-12 achievement gap. Despite valiant efforts, in 2019, only 20 percent of Kentucky graduates met all four ACT College Readiness Benchmarks (ACT, Condition of College). However, as educators, we must avoid deficiency mindsets and consistently seek ways to design corequisite writing courses that not only help students meet learning objectives, but help them graduate. Corequisites can be one part of a system in place for incoming students that has the potential to be a fundamental ally to student retention.

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