Rethinking First-Year Writing through Co-Requisite Instruction

Pilot Team:
Director: Rebecca Brittenham, Associate Professor of English
Co-Director: Lee Kahan, Associate Professor and Acting Chair of English
Nancy Botkin, Senior Lecturer in English
Clayton Michaels, Lecturer in English
Joshua Rubin, Director of the Writer's Room
Julie Wells, CLAS Advisor

Abstract
We seek to pilot an "enhanced" version of ENG-W131 that will improve time-to-degree and student persistence without sacrificing program rigor. Under the current system, 70% of IU South Bend students have to complete a two-semester composition sequence (W130/W131). This pilot would enable the more motivated of these students to complete their writing requirement in one semester. W131 Enhanced sections will meet an additional period each week with a supplemental instructor or peer mentor, who will provide tutoring that helps students complete the upcoming assignments. To reduce the start-up work for the first year, the Pilot will initially use experienced tutors as supplemental instructors. It will then transition to peer mentors, with the ultimate goal of incorporating peer mentoring into an upper-level class in writing pedagogy. Our goal, then, is for W131 Enhanced students to advance more quickly in their degrees while mentors have the valuable learning experience of translating theory into practice.

Goals
Our primary goal is to increase the retention rate and decrease the time-to-degree for IU South Bend students by enabling them to complete their writing requirement more quickly. We also hope that the peer-mentoring program will improve retention and persistence among upper-classmen by making them feel part of a tight-knit community and by giving them the chance to experience the real-world applicability of what they learn in the classroom. Finally, if it is successful, W131 Enhanced will lead to a dramatic decrease in ENG-W130 sections, which will financially benefit the university.

1. Increasing Retention and Time-to-Degree for First-Year Writing Students
Recent research suggests that completing basic skills courses is one of the strongest predictors of student success. A study by Ogden, Thompson, Russell and Simons cited by Vincent Tinto in Completing College: Rethinking Institutional Action (2012) concludes that "unless students are successful in those courses, they are unlikely to be successful in the courses that follow." For under-prepared students, this is especially true of classes that emphasize reading skills: according to Tinto, "students whose reading skills require remediation are less likely to graduate from college than are students with other 'remedial' needs," including math. Consequently, writing programs have sought ways to intensify the reading and writing instruction that students receive without requiring additional classes, which can prolong their time to degree and decrease persistence. Many have turned to co-requisite models that require students to attend additional workshop sessions with a supplemental instructor or peer mentor. For example, at Richard J. Daley College, students in freshman writing meet eight additional times with a "tutor-facilitator," who oversees reading and writing exercises and leads discussions of the course texts. After the system was instituted, the completion rate for basic writing dramatically increased. While Richard J. Daley employs staff to serve as facilitators, other programs, like the one at Montgomery College in Maryland, use peer mentors, perhaps because recent research on the first-year seminar shows that "student retention
increases” when undergraduates perform such roles. This is because peer mentors not only provide valuable supplemental instruction, they also serve as role models and mentors, who can help students navigate university life. According to Tinto, this kind of mentoring is “especially important for low-income, first-generation college students as well as academically underprepared entrants”—i.e., the kind of students we serve at IUSB (Tinto 2012).

2. Providing a “Deep” Learning Experience for Peer Mentors

By incorporating peer mentoring into a class, we hope to make this experience as profitable for the mentor as for the mentee. According to Tinto, “the more students are academically and socially engaged with other people on campus, especially with faculty and student peers, the more likely … they will stay and graduate from college.” Peer mentoring provides this additional contact, as peer mentors have to meet frequently with the course instructors and also frequently consult one another to share experiences and solve problems. Chair of Psychology Dennis Rodriguez informed me that the peer mentors that his department employs in their labs have formed a tight-knit community based on their shared experiences. Such communities are a chief reason students stay in college. Moreover, tying peer mentoring to a class will enable students to see how the concepts that they learn “work” in real-life situations. In High Impact Educational Practices (1998), George Kuh found that such experience is “essential to deep, meaningful learning experiences.” Finally, such experiences can help students discover a career path, as well as develop confidence in their skills, both of which are essential to success after college.

Assessment

One of the goals of this pilot is to try out three popular models for co-requisite instruction and compare them with both a control group and with one another. The control group will be comprised of 120 students who completed ENG-W130 prior to W131. Each year, the pilot team will compare the completion rates of W131 Enhanced and the control group, based on the number of students who withdrew or received below a C (the minimum passing grade for W131). As the pilot develops, we will likewise compare the rates for students who had supplemental instructors and those who had peer mentors. In order to make improvements in the pilot from year to year, we will also design a student survey that helps us gauge how well these different forms of instruction are meeting students’ needs. Finally, we will use class observations and a peer mentor survey to assess the effectiveness of the orientation so that we can better prepare students for the experience.

Timeline


I. Design the course. This includes choosing a textbook, writing the syllabus and assignment sequence, and coming up with productive activities for the supplemental instruction sessions.

II. Assist Advisors. Because students will self-place into W131 Enhanced, Julie Wells will help the team design a questionnaire that can help advisors determine if this is an appropriate course for their advisees. Julie will explain the new course at a PAC meeting and teach the advisors how to use the questionnaire to help students decide if the course is right for them.

III. Recruit and train supplemental instructors. Joshua Giorgio-Rubin, Director of the Writer’s Room, will enlist 3 experienced tutors from the Writer’s Room, which will pay them at their standard hourly rate. These tutors may be first-year writing instructors who also work in the WR. The three W131 Enhanced instructors will design a one-week intensive orientation for SIs that introduces them to the activities that they will lead in
their sessions and gives them some pedagogical tools for successfully conducting these exercises. Joshua will lead the orientation.

IV. Assess the orientation's effectiveness. Joshua will observe the SI sessions several times during the first year, and the pilot team will administer a survey to identify problems that SIs experienced. Together, these measures should enable the team to gauge how well the orientation prepared them for the experience and to revise it accordingly.

V. Assess W131 Enhanced by (1) comparing the success rate of its students with a control group of 120 ENG-W131 students who previously took ENG-W130 and (2) administering a survey of students about how well supplemental instructors are meeting their needs.

VI. Prepare for the transition to peer mentors in Year 2. This includes defining the criteria for selecting peer mentors; drafting a contract, based on pilot team’s research on best practices for using peer mentors and on the contracts in other departments; advertising the positions; and determining the most suitable applicants.

Year 2 (2016-17): Transition from supplemental instructors to peer mentors, employing teams of two mentors per section. The goal is to offer PMs internship credit for their work; however, if we cannot recruit students this way, we will pay them for their work, with support from CLAS. Prepare to offer a regular course for peer mentors in fall 2016.

I. The pilot team will revise the orientation, based on the SI survey and to meet the needs of a new audience that may not have experience as tutors. Joshua will lead the orientation.

II. The pilot team will design an assignment sequence for the internship, and each member will supervise two interns each semester.

III. Joshua will continue to evaluate peer mentor performance and assess the effectiveness of the orientation as described in 1.IV above.

IV. The pilot team will continue assessment as described in 1.V above. They will also compare success rates for students in ENG-W131 Enhanced 2016-17 and ENG-W131 Enhanced 2015-16 to determine the relative effectiveness of peer mentors and supplemental instructors.

V. Rebecca Brittenham will produce the materials necessary for the department to put “ENG-W400 Issues in Teaching Writing” through remonstrance, with an eye to running this course in fall 2017 if peer mentoring proves successful.

Year 3 (2017-18): Incorporate peer mentoring into ENG-W400 if W131 Enhanced proved successful.

I. The department will double the number of sections that it offers to 6, all still taught by the course design team.

II. The department will offer ENG-W400 both semesters, capping the course at 12 to enable 2 peer mentors per section.

III. The pilot team will revise the orientation, which Joshua will give at the beginning of both semesters for students enrolled in W400.

IV. Joshua will continue to assess peer mentor performance through classroom visits and the survey. Additionally, students will complete a reflective writing assignment in W400 in which they discuss their experience.

V. To prepare for increasing the number of sections in fall 2017, the pilot team will design and implement a workshop series for other composition faculty to train them to teach the course and work effectively with peer mentors.
**Budget**

**Year 1:**
- Supplement pay for each member of the course design team: $1500 x 3 = $4500
- Supplemental pay for SIs to attend orientation and meet occasionally with instructors: 15hrs x $10 per hour x 3 SIs = $450
  
  **Total:** $4950

**Year 2:**
- Supplemental pay for peer mentors to attend pre-semester orientation: 6hrs x $10 per hr x 12 PMs = $720
- Supplemental pay for course design team to supervise interns, conduct assessment and make adjustments to the program: $1200 x 3 = $3600

  **Total:** $4320

**Year 3:**
- 1-semester course release for Professor Brittenham to supervise peer mentors as part of ENG-W400: $2500
- Stipend for course design team to train additional faculty to teach the course in fall 2018: $500 x 3 = $1500
- Stipend for faculty to attend workshop series on teaching W131 Enhanced and working with peer mentors: $100 x 10 = $1000

  **Total:** $5000

**Other Sources of Funding**
The pilot team will seek a Curriculum Grant in spring 2015 to pay its members and the associate faculty helping the team a small stipend for designing the course and educating advisors. In Year 1, the Writer's Room will pay supplemental instructors for their classroom hours at the normal hourly rate. Joshua will continue to provide the peer mentor orientation each year in lieu of a summer course that he is required to teach.

**The Future of W131 Enhanced**
After Year 3, if student success in ENG-W131 Enhanced is equal or superior to the success of students who take the current ENG-W130/W131 sequence, the department will increase the cap of ENG-W400 to 20. This will enable us to offer 10 sections of W131 Enhanced each semester, which means that approximately 400 students per year will have the opportunity to complete their writing requirement in one semester rather than two. This can both improve their time-to-degree and save them money, both of which are linked to student persistence (Tinto 2012). In the future, the department will look for ways to further increase these positive outcomes by adding more sections of W131 Enhanced, either by offering an additional section of W400 if there is sufficient interest from students or by collaborating with the Writer's Room to use peer mentors in some sections and supplemental instructors in others. Our goal is to give as many students this opportunity as possible and to reserve W130 for the most at-risk students. Since this would reduce the composition sequence from two courses to a single course for most students, our proposal will also eventually generate substantial cost savings for CLAS: 10 sections of W131E reduces the annual instructional budget by $25K, calculated at the current associate faculty rate. It will also free up English faculty to serve students in other growth areas of the curriculum.