Linked Course: Library Instruction Q110/First Year Writing W131
Vision 20/20 Grant Proposal

Team Members:

Director: Nicole Mason, Associate Faculty; Composition (nrkoroch@umail.iu.edu)
Co-Director: Julie Elliott, Associate Librarian (jmfelli@iusb.edu)
Rachel Cheeseman, Staff; ACE Writers’ Room Tutor (recheese@umail.iu.edu)

Abstract:

The objective of this project is to create a successful linked course, with an embedded tutor, between W131 and Q110 in the First Year Experience program. These two courses teach fundamental skills to incoming freshman; all students must be proficient in communication, writing, and research if they are to thrive in academia. A strong link will not only provide students with additional instruction and support in writing and research methods, but it will also help overall student success and retention in multiple ways: This link will better acclimate students to the rigors of college by supplying them with the tools they will need in school and in the workforce, and to look deeper into the various culturally relevant issues explored in W131. This link will provide benefits to hundreds of incoming students who will enter their college career prepared to succeed.

Proposal Narrative:

As these two courses are undeniably related, the integration and linking of the curriculum of W131 with Q110 will improve students’ success rates and retention in both courses and provide them with a holistic and productive initiation into the world of academic discourse, research, and writing.

There is considerable research to support our aims: Margaret Artman, et al (2010) note that teaching writing and information literacy together enhances the way students understand information literacy, helping them to “recognize the complexity, the difficulty, and the centrality of information literacy within contemporary writing environments” and that linking the two “may prove essential to counteracting the skills mindset, in that research requires responsible, inquiry-driven consideration of ‘meaningful’ uses of information” note” (97). Additionally, according to Paula S. McMillen and Eric Hill (2004), composition courses that have a shared model and curriculum with the university’s library instructional system enjoy greater success with student engagement and retention. Not only will this link between the two courses help students to directly experience how much their development as writers and thinkers depends upon their technological savvy and research practices, but it will also benefit IUSB itself as it promotes the objectives of the First Year Experience program.
Goals:

According to data provided by the Office of Institutional Research, between the Fall Semesters of 2011 and 2015, 1098 (19.5%) in-coming freshman failed W131. Students fail this course for various reasons: outside stressors, inability to master the skills, time management issues, etc. This linked course will afford us the ability of double-duty, so to speak, as two instructors (who will be in close contact with one another) and one peer tutor will be able to monitor and assess individual student’s academic progress. As students will have the benefit of extra instruction and tutoring, their mastering of these integral skills will lead to success, not frustration, and the transition from high school student to college academic will be more painless.

There have been numerous studies that suggest that students who succeed in their freshmen courses have a better chance of succeeding throughout their college career. In Vincent Tinto’s Completing College: Rethinking Institutional Action (2012), he argues that “academic support should be aligned to key first-year courses” such as composition and math courses, “which are considered foundational to different programs of study” (122). Through linking Q110 to W131, we will be providing that crucial support. By giving that extra leg-up to just two or three students per class, we estimate that our project will allow at least 10% more students to pass W131 (not to mention, Q110), and will retain hundreds of students, overall.

Goal Assessment:

To assess how well we were able to meet our goals, will we look at how many students passed our sections of Q110 and W131 as compared to other sections that are enrolled in Fall 2017, as well as how it compares to previous years. We will also look at how well students perform using a strict rubric and looking at final grades and general performance on assignments. Finally, we will track student success over their entire career, as well, to see how individual GPA and retention was affected.

Further, if we are able to secure funding for multiple years, we would be able to ask participating students to fill out anonymous surveys each year that would evaluate how they are using what they learned in this linked pilot over and how it has impacted them during their entire college career.

Project Activities:

The main objective is to create a seamless learning community that utilizes the expertise of Julie Elliott and Nicole Mason in their respective fields, as well as that of an experienced tutor embedded in one or both classrooms. According to Rapchak and Cipri (2015) learning communities, “encourage interdisciplinary learning and [...] engage and retain students. Students who enroll in learning communities have higher fall-to-spring semester retention, higher GPAs, and lower attrition rates in individual courses” (662). As Q110 and W131 re-evaluate course objectives and goals, using the learning
community model will provide a good framework for reassessment.

- The linking process will allow for the integration of the curriculum of Q110 and that of W131 to retain the goals and standards respective to each course, while the re-thinking and renovation of this link will further improve on the learning community model and student engagement, curricular goals and expectations, and faculty communication where previous Q110/W131 links fell short.

- While Q110/W131 links have been attempted in the past, this particular link has a better chance of success for two reasons: First is that our student body has shifted from predominately non-traditional, to 70% traditional. Traditional students typically work less and have fewer outside responsibilities that affect time management issues. Secondly, Banded Tuition encourages students to take 15 credit hours or more. These changes will make it easier for students to schedule the linked courses and make it more financially viable, overall.

- Tinto (2012) believes that learning communities are most successful when they “require a central theme or problem that links the courses in which the students co-register” so that they might “connect what they are learning in one course to what they are learning in another” (71). Our project will enforce the ideas and skills learned in W131 through further implementation in Q110, thereby making each course more relevant to the students.

- The two coordinators will link the timing and presentation of materials through parallel syllabi for both courses and decide on the primary objectives at which one course could augment or enhance the aims of the other course. Tinto (2012) asserts that alignment of faculty and staff is crucial to student success and adds that it is most important in “basic-skills learning communities” where “collaboration among faculty is essential to the building of a coherent learning environment that aligns the content and activities of the courses that constitute the learning community” (112). To that end, and as the coordinators firmly believe that a commitment to communication and shared expectations are the key to this link’s success, they will work closely with each other during the planning period and throughout the semester to make sure the timing of assignments, lectures, and course activities overlap in useful ways, rather than inefficiently duplicating material or moving in opposing directions.

- The planning stage of this project, made possible by this grant, will allow for at least one linked course to be offered Fall 2017 with an embedded tutor once a week in either the Q110 section or the Lab portion of W131. The Q110 section will be scheduled directly after the second W131 class each week, and students will have to enroll in both in order to participate. Coordinators will frequently attend one another’s classes, as well as maintain close communication throughout the semester to ensure student progress.
Student Impact:

One thing that the English Department has learned through the process of re-thinking how W131 should be taught is that the most accurate predictor for success in our writing program is high school GPA. Almost all of the students who fail W131, had below a 3.0. What this indicates is that what our placement exam measures—the ability to write—is not what enables success. Students with a lower GPA typically have poor study, planning, and time-management skills and less confidence in their skills as a student. As we all know, this effects the resilience factor. This project will provide the extra support that these students need through reinforcement and the embedded tutor.

Each year, approximately 800 students enroll in W131. If fully implemented, almost 100 students, who previously would have had to repeat W131, would now have the opportunity to improve their time-to-degree and save some money—two elements which Tinto (2012) argues are tied to overall student retention (97). Not only would this benefit at-risk students, but it would also enhance every student’s learning experience, providing them with the necessary skills to make the most of their time in college.

Budget:

This project will not require any outside resources or items other than summer salary and a Fall and Spring Stipend for project leader, Nicole Mason, as well as a $500 stipend for Rachel Cheeseman.

For Year One:

$3000 Summer Salary for Nicole Mason ($2806 + $194 fringes)  
$1000 Fall and Spring stipend for Nicol Mason (($500 per semester)  
$500 Stipend for Rachel Cheeseman  
$4500 total budget for Year One

For Year Two:

$3000 Summer Salary for Nicole Mason ($2806 + $194 fringes)  
$1000 Fall and Spring stipend for Nicol Mason (($500 per semester)  
$500 Stipend for Rachel Cheeseman  
$4500 total budget for Year Two

List of any current and future funding sources:

This project has requested funds from Jake Mattox, English Department Chair; and Elizabeth Dunn, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Dean. While all requests were met with great support, the funding is simply not available for such an undertaking.
Timeline:

Year One:
- May 15-June 30, 2017:
  Julie Elliott, Nicole Mason, and Rachel Cheeseman meet to work on syllabi and course activities for their Q110 & W131 courses. Meetings will focus on objectives for the courses, linking of assignments so that they complement one another.

- Fall Semester 2017:
  Linked courses taught.
  Include 5 meetings between Mason, Elliott, and Cheeseman to discuss students’ progress in the courses and discuss revisions as needed.

- End of Fall Semester 2017:
  During winter break, Mason, Elliott, and Cheeseman will review success of project and collaborate on revisions based on fall 2017 feedback and determine initial findings.

Year Two:
- Summer 2018:
  Based on Fall 2017 data, Mason, Elliott, and Cheeseman make revisions to linked courses.

- Fall 2018:
  Linked courses taught.
  Five meetings between Mason, Elliott, and Cheeseman to discuss students’ progress in the courses and discuss revisions as needed.

References:


February 28, 2017

Erika Zynda
Contracts & Grants Coordinator
IU South Bend

Dear Erika:

I write as Chair of the English Department in strong support of Nicole Mason and Julie Elliott’s application for a Vision 2020 grant. The goal of the project is to develop a meaningful, lasting, and replicable link between ENG-W 131 and COAS-Q 110, two courses central to the experience of first-year students, and thereby assist with the university’s effort to increase retention and success rates.

Grant funding would support Nicole’s team leadership and collaboration with Julie in developing and establishing a model that faculty can draw upon and that lays a common groundwork for easy articulation between the two courses. Such work requires extensive time commitments from both co-leaders, and it is not possible without the support that Nicole needs to be able to work with Julie Elliott in the crucial planning stages over the summer. This kind of work is well beyond what is normally expected of associate faculty seeking to alter a course or pursue a new idea. With support, they will be able to do extensive planning during Summer 2017 to prepare for Fall 2017 implementation.

Nicole teaches a variety of courses for the English Department and is an ideal candidate for leading this endeavor, as she has deep familiarity with the entire First-Year Writing program. She teaches in the composition program, serves on the committee that rates the English writing placement exams, tutors at the Writers’ Room, and went through the writing program herself as an undergraduate several years ago. She is an excellent department community member who goes well beyond the expectations we have for associate faculty by consistently seeking out new ways to improve the experiences of our students and the success of our program. I have little doubt that she will work well with Julie, herself an experienced teacher of Q 110 and a librarian committed to enhancing the student experience. Because this is a faculty-inspired initiative, their strong personal relationship and history together also give them a better basis for communication and collaboration.

The link itself should prove invaluable to the English Department and the campus as a whole as we continue to address the challenge of retention and student success, especially for first-year students. ENG-W 131 is quite often very challenging for students, and their outcomes in this course often is a predictor for their retention and later success. We have been taking a hard look at ways to help students succeed in it—including trying our new “pilot” sections of W131
“Enhanced,” a 4-credit version of the course that attempts to help students meet the writing requirement in one semester instead of two. We have also revised our placement exam format. Beyond these two examples, though, we are excited to seek new opportunities and try new ideas that will strengthen the writing program--and this grant would allow Nicole and Julie to take the time to think through, strategically, the components of both ENG-W 131 and COAS-Q 110 in order to then revise and align them. The potential for productive cooperation and synergy is exciting, since both courses have students develop research questions and use technology in their pursuit, learn how to properly use and cite sources, see how their classroom studies are relevant to their personal and career goals, and practice key critical thinking skills. Making these two courses work together could provide a blueprint for multiple links in future semesters, where faculty will have model syllabi to follow, and in that way the project has the potential to reach a significant number of students, especially those in their early (and most vulnerable) years of university studies.

Thank you very much for your consideration of this application; the linkage proposed would be an excellent addition to the IU South Bend curriculum. Please contact me directly if I can be of assistance during your review.

Sincerely,

Jake Mattox
Associate Professor and Chair
Department of English
Indiana University, South Bend
jdmattox@iusb.edu
February 27, 2017

Vision 2020 Committee
IU South Bend

Dear members of the Vision 2020 grant selection Committee,

I am pleased to write this letter of support for Julie Elliott and Nicole Mason and their project to link sections of Q110 and W131 for the fall semester of 2017. I am writing in my role as course coordinator for Q110. This project would ideally make both courses more meaningful for the students enrolled in them and could serve as a model for future collaborations. As noted in the supporting research evidence in the application, efforts to link writing and information literacy has been shown to improve student learning, student engagement and retention.

In 2005 and 2006, W131 and Q110 experimented with linking the two classes. There were successful links and some that were unsuccessful. The successful course links were those that involved good communication between the two faculty members; effective integration of course syllabi, and a high degree of flexibility in terms of who teaches what. Since it has been ten years since the last experiment, much has changed in what is covered by each of the courses. It would be advantageous to have these two individuals actively consider what works for students and what does not and try to make the courses fit together in a seamless fashion. Both Julie and Nicole have considerable experience teaching in their respective areas and have the enthusiasm and communication skills needed to make this project successful.

In my experience, linking a course requires a significant amount of time in order to be successful. Multiple conversations, sharing of draft syllabi, discussion of teaching and learning and visits to one another’s classes are all part of the process. While neither course is technically new, the merging of the two courses to make them larger than the sum of their parts is, and will require effective collaboration. Working ahead – over the summer – will be best in order to have adequate time to adjust syllabi and assignments. While Julie Elliott’s portion of the work will be considered to be part of her normal 12-month appointment duties, Nicole, as an associate faculty member, requires compensation for her participation in the planning during this time. In addition, the addition of a tutor will greatly enhance the project.

I strongly support this project and believe that summer salary compensation for Nicole is a reasonable request as is compensation for the tutor. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Nancy W. Colborn

Nancy Wootton Colborn
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