

The Basic Writing Course at Eastern Illinois University: An Evaluation of Its Effectiveness

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When we undertook to evaluate Eastern Illinois University's basic writing course English 1000 two years ago, we did so with some trepidation. What we hoped our evaluation would reveal was that the course had succeeded in its purpose of giving underprepared writers (defined by the English department for placement purposes as students having ACT English scores of 12 or lower) an opportunity to bring their skills to a level sufficient to allow them to exit from the course on a first or second try, and then go on to pass the two regular writing courses required of all our freshmen, and eventually earn a college degree.² That was our hope. What we feared was one of two considerably less felicitous outcomes. We feared, on the one hand, that we would find English 1000's exit requirements to have been insufficiently rigorous to prepare our basic writers for the demands of the two all-university freshman writing courses which awaited them, with the result that English 1000 alumni routinely failed their subsequent freshman writing courses and in the process, as Geoffrey Wagner and other opponents of developmental courses had cautioned, lowered the level at which instruction could proceed in the required freshman writing courses designed for our better prepared writers.

Or had our exit criteria for English 1000, and our failure rate of 40%, been too rigorous? In our alternative nightmare we imagined ourselves discovering that instead of offering underprepared writers an opportunity eventually to succeed in our college-level freshman writing courses, English 1000 effectually barred enrollees from entering our all-university freshman writing courses at all, and thus denied students who had had the misfortune of earning ACT English scores of 12 or lower a reasonable opportunity of earning a college degree.

Happily, the evaluation revealed our worst-case scenario to have been excessively gloomy. Indeed our findings are consistent with those of Ferrin, Pedrini, Brown and Ervin, and Presley in suggesting that in this specific instance a developmental course has been moderately successful in achieving its aim of giving underprepared students a fighting chance of succeeding in freshman English and beyond. As for

the question of "lowering," we suspect the situation at our institution is not much different from that at most other institutions in which composition courses are taught by regular, full-time, autonomous staff members, including the chairman and full professors. The presence of underprepared writers in college composition courses necessarily lowers the level at which instruction can proceed in classes taught by instructors who are responsive to the needs of their underprepared writers. In classes taught by instructors who are indifferent to the needs of such writers their presence has no lowering effect at all. We offer a sampling of our findings in the pages that follow.

First a description of our research design. We compared the academic performance of a group of 196 students having ACT English scores of 11 and 12 (scores which obliged the students to enroll in our basic writing course English 1000) to a group of 239 similarly prepared students having ACT scores of 13 and 14 (scores sufficiently high to exempt them from English 1000). Our sample of 435 students comprised all of Eastern Illinois University's freshmen reporting ACT English scores of 11 through 14 during the semesters of Spring '77 through Fall '78. For each of them we collected and used SPSS (*Statistical Package for the Social Sciences*) programs to analyze information which included the following: composite ACT score, grades in English 1001 and 1002, cumulative GPA, total number of credit hours accumulated, probation/dismissal record and graduation or non-graduation.³

We begin with the less encouraging news. We found no significant difference in either the average total credit hours earned by the two groups or in the groups' graduation rates (42.2% for the 11s and 12s vs. 46.8% for the 13s and 14s). Indeed for our 11s and 12s (i.e., those who had been required to take English 1000) were significantly more likely to be placed on academic probation and eventually dismissed from the university for low scholarship than were the 13s and 14s (22% vs. 14%). We also found that the 11s and 12s in our sample had significantly lower GPAs than did the 13s and 14s (\bar{x} = 2.18 vs. 2.40 on a 4-point scale). That is to say, we found, not very surprisingly, that students with lower ACT English scores did not do so well in college as did those with higher ACT English scores.

Nor were we particularly surprised to discover that for the 11-14s in our sample higher ACT Composite scores were significantly and positively correlated with higher grades in English 1001 and 1002, higher GPAs, and higher average total credit hours. (Here and elsewhere in this report, when we use the term "significantly" we mean statistically significant at the .05 level.) What did rather surprise us was our discovery that ACT Composite scores were better predictors of performance in our all-university freshman composition courses than were ACT

English scores (though ACT English scores did prove to be effective predictors of performance in the all-university Speech 1310 course). In short, we found that the higher the ACT scores the better the student's chances of succeeding at Eastern Illinois University.

But if English 1000 offered no simple and cheap remedy for all of the ills associated with low ACT scores, we did find evidence to suggest that the experience of taking the basic writing course proved beneficial to our students when they later took their all-university freshman composition courses English 1001 and 1002. To be sure, the English 1000 alumni (the 11s and 12s) did *not* earn significantly higher grades in English 1001 and 1002 than did the students in our sample (the 13s and 14s) who had not taken the basic writing course. But the grades of the two groups were very similar. The 13s and 14s earned slightly higher grades in 1001 than did the 11s and 12s (\bar{x} = 1.92 for the 13s and 14s vs. 1.88 for the 11s and 12s). On the other hand, our 11s and 12s earned slightly higher grades in 1002 (\bar{x} = 2.20) than did the 13s and 14s (\bar{x} = 2.10).

But the similarities in average 1001 and 1002 grades for the two groups do not adequately testify to the benefits which the English 1000 experienced offered its alumni. What we found most encouraging was the discovery that *the students in our sample who had taken English 1000 were significantly more likely to pass English 1001 on the first try than were those who had not taken English 1000. What is more, the 12s who remained in English 1000 for the entirety of the semester were significantly more likely to pass English 1001 on the first try than the 12s who were excused from taking English 1000 after passing an essay-writing proficiency examination in the first week of the semester.* We can now answer in the affirmative the most basic of the questions we posed for ourselves: our evidence strongly suggests that the taking of our basic writing course does indeed improve an underprepared writer's chances of surviving Eastern Illinois University's regular freshman composition courses.

Who passes and who fails the basic writing course? Eighty percent of the 11s and 12s in our sample passed English 1000 on the first try. Those who did so had significantly higher ACT Composite scores than did those who failed on the first try. Moreover, those who passed on the first try were significantly more likely to graduate than were those who failed in the first attempt (47% vs. 16%). The prognosis for those who fail the course is not good. Only 33% of those who failed the course once passed it on a second try. *None* of the seven students who failed English 1000 twice ever passed the course.

Our evidence suggests that class attendance is related to success or failure in English 1000. In an investigation of attendance patterns conducted two years ago, our graduate assistant Jennifer Donnelly discovered that persons who attended their English 1000 class regularly

were more likely to pass the course than were persons who did not attend regularly—this despite the fact that attendance was not considered in determining the final grade for the course. Donnelly noted, for instance, that *all* of the thirteen students who had perfect attendance in Fall '82 passed the course. Conversely, and again with very few exceptions, she discovered that students who did *not* attend regularly failed the course.

In speaking of class attendance we speak of one aspect of student behavior which common sense tells us is pertinent to academic performance, and in some way indicative of the degree of our students' motivation to learn. All of us who have taught or supervised a basic writing course know that some basic writers are more highly motivated, and consequently more likely to be successful than others. But can such students be identified beforehand? The response of the students in our sample to item #20 of the "Special Educational Needs" section of the ACT Assessment was enlightening. Item #20 reads as follows: "I need help in expressing my ideas in writing." Students who answered "yes" to the item earned significantly higher GPAs and average total credit hours than did persons who left the answer blank.

Some Conclusions

On the basis of our investigation we would hazard the following generalizations about the academic performance of basic writers in our own program:

1. The single most clearly discernible difference between the *behavior* of students who pass and that of students who do not pass the basic writing course is that the former attend class regularly whereas the latter do not.
2. Basic writers with higher ACT Composite scores have a better chance of succeeding in freshman English and beyond than do basic writers with lower ACT Composite scores.
3. Students who fail the basic writing course twice are not at all likely to pass the course in additional attempts. Certainly none of the students in our sample succeeded in doing so.
4. If the prognosis for those who fail the basic writing course is poor, the benefits for those who do pass—60% of all our enrollees, and 87% of the 11s and 12s in our study—are real and measurable. The English 1000 alumni in our sample (the 11s and 12s) required significantly fewer tries to pass English 1001 than did the students who did not take English 1000 (the 13s and 14s).

5. Finally, basic writers who answer "yes" to the statement, "I need help in expressing my ideas in writing" are more likely to succeed in college than are basic writers who answer "no" or who leave the answer blank (item #20) in the "Special Educational Needs" section of the ACT Assessment). We suggest this finding is potentially useful to admissions officers and writing program administrators seeking to identify underprepared students who are likely to prove good academic risks.

Notes

¹We are indebted to Jim Quivey for encouraging us in this investigation and for suggesting that we examine the performance of students having ACT English scores of 11 through 14. To Bill McGown we are grateful for performing much of the statistical analysis on which our report is based. Thanks also to Tony Schaeffer, Shirley Karraker, Jerry McAnulty, and Jennifer Donnelly.

²English 1000, which is taught by English department graduate assistants working under the close supervision of the Director of Composition, is a non-credit course in basic writing which students with ACT English scores of 12 and below must pass before enrolling in the first of the university's two required composition courses, English 1001. To pass the course students must write two final essays which are judged acceptable by the Composition Committee (full-time faculty who regularly teach English 1001). Students who write acceptable essays in the first week of the semester are placed immediately in sections of 1001.

³Our data were analyzed using the following statistical tests: (1) a *t-test*—to compare for significant differences the means of two groups; (2) the *Pearson product-amount correlation*—to indicate the degree of relationship between two sets of paired numbers; and a (3) *chi-square test*—to indicate the degree of relationship between two frequency data variables.

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