

The “Stretch Program”: Arizona State University’s New Model of University-level Basic Writing Instruction

Gregory R. Glau

Like many other institutions, before Arizona State University (ASU) allowed its “basic writers” into its standard ENG 101-ENG 102 composition sequence, the university insisted they first take ENG 071, a “remedial” class offered by a local community college.¹ (For the reasons ASU brought its BW students back into university classrooms, see Schwalm). However, it soon became obvious to the Department of English faculty that the “remedial” grammar-focused class (ENG 071) was not giving this group of students the help and background and writing experiences they needed to produce rhetorically effective college-level compositions.² What P. G. Perrin wrote more than a half-century ago still was true with ENG 071: the drill-and-fill grammar exercises of “remedial” classes “violate the lone principle that present teachers of composition have salvaged from the 2,500 years of the discipline of rhetoric, that one learns to speak and write by speaking and writing” (384; see also Bartholomae “Teaching”; Lunsford “Politics,” 249; Scott). ASU’s faculty recognized that students were being charged university-level course fees for a non-university class they did not receive credit for . . . while the community college controlled both the curriculum and the level of instruction.

As a result of what amounted to spending more and receiving less, in the fall of 1992 ASU’s Department of English piloted what it called the “Stretch Program”: a two-semester sequence that “stretches” ENG 101 over two semesters. Graduates of the Stretch Program then take ENG 101, as do all ASU students. This “stretched” version of ENG 101 was designed to give beginning writers more time to move into the university community.³ This new program was ASU’s attempt to do what David Bartholomae suggests, that in order to change the curriculum, we first must “change the way the profession talked about the students who didn’t fit” (“Tidy House” 21; see also Gunner). ASU’s faculty was saying that the students accepted into the university but *placed* into a basic writing class did *not* give “evidence of arrested cognitive development, arrested language development, or unruly or unpredictable language use” (Bartholomae, “Error” 254). Rather, ASU’s move away from ENG 071 was a move to include basic writers in its curriculum, a change from seeing and talking of these students as defective to one that, as Mina Shaughnessy taught us, understands that “students write the way they do, not because they are slow or non-verbal, indifferent to or incapable of academic excellence, but because they

are beginners and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes" (*Errors* 5; see also Hartwell; Horning).

At the same time, ASU's shift called for basic writing students to view themselves differently: as *writers*, doing the same assignments all the other first-year composition students were doing, rather than as someone who feels "that if only they could learn to write 'grammatically,' their problems would be solved" (Bizzell 294). The Stretch Program was designed to replace remedial word- and phrase-level instruction with the practice of multiple discourse strategies, for as Andrea Lunsford argues, "basic writers must continually be engaged in writing in a full rhetorical context, solving problems and practicing conceptual skills in a carefully sequenced set of assignments" ("Content" 288; see also Sternglass 259). Put another way, our program *sees* our beginning writers as just as capable as their ENG 101 counterparts; we just give them an extra semester to work on their writing.

What the Stretch Program Is

Four concepts, originally developed by former Directors of Composition John Ramage and David Schwalm, underlie the Stretch Program:

- a view of basic writing students as capable and intelligent but lacking experience in the kinds of writing expected at the university level (see Rose, "Narrowing" and "Remedial"; Hull and Rose);
- a belief that in order to learn to write, any writer must *write*, receive feedback on that writing, and then revise her work, over and over (see Lunsford "Content");
- a belief that students should receive course credit for their college work; and
- the notion that beginning writers, since they lack experience in writing, need more *time* to learn to work with and to develop appropriate writing strategies.

In essence, the Stretch Program "stretches" the standard ENG 101 course over two semesters. Figure 1 compares ASU's old model to the current one.⁴ The first class in the Stretch sequence carries the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum label WAC 101. The "WAC" designation connected the class to a new ASU department that focuses solely on undergraduate education and which reports directly to the Provost. Therefore, even if the course is seen as "remedial," as so many basic writing programs are, this connection to the Writing Across the Curriculum program provides some political protection. Since WAC 101 feeds directly into specially-designated sections of ENG 101, the Stretch sequence is *part* of ENG 101, rather than something "outside" and thus vulnerable to political attack. Also, the higher-than-100 course description identifies the class as *non-remedial*, and also means the Department of English did not have to come up with a course designation that preceded ENG 101.

Our whole idea is to give these beginning writers more time to work on and revise and think about their writing, so instead of doing all the ENG 101 assignments in one semester, they do three papers each semester, each with multiple drafts, along with a portfolio analysis of their writing as a final examination.⁵ Stretch students use the same textbook that regular ENG 101 classes work with (currently *St. Martin's Guide to Writing*). Our direct and constant connection between ENG 101 and Stretch Program classes cannot be overstated, for it immediately distances the first class in the sequence, WAC 101, from the traditional and prevalent "fill in the blanks" workbook approach to the teaching of writing. As Mike Rose puts it, such a pedagogy "remains with us" in many basic writing classes, always "focusing on isolated bits of discourse," a pedagogy that is "error centered, and linguistically reductive" ("Exclusion" 343). What writing that does take place in these classrooms often has nothing to do with what is happening in class (see Rose, *Lives* 205-07). By using the same process-oriented text in our Stretch classes as "regular" ENG 101 students use, we ensure that our students do the same kinds of reading and writing assignments.

Figure 1

A Comparison of Basic Writing Instruction Models at ASU

Old Model:

- curriculum, pedagogy, and instructors not controlled by ASU

ENG 071 -----> ENG 101 -----> ENG 102
 no credit* 3 hours credit 3 hours credit

* Students took nine hours of composition, but received six hours of credit.

New Model:

- ENG 101 "stretched" over two semesters
- same teacher both semesters
- same group of students both semesters
- curriculum, pedagogy, and instructors controlled by ASU

WAC 101 ----- ENG 101 -----> ENG 102
 3 hours elective credit* 3 hours credit 3 hours credit

* Students placed into the Stretch Program take nine hours of composition and receive nine hours of credit.

Our Stretch Program students earn three hours of elective credit for the first part of the Stretch course sequence, credit that counts toward graduation at ASU, and three hours of ENG 101 credit for their second semester's work. We believe that *any* college work done at ASU ought to be for credit, in contrast to both current and early versions of ENG 100X or ENG A, courses which students were required to take but for which they received no credit. For a recent example of composition classes that so-called "deficient" writers are required to take, are charged university fees, are taught by community college instructors rather than university faculty, but receive no credit, see Schriener and Willen (231).

Students currently place into Stretch or into ENG 101 based on their ACT or SAT scores. Each semester, we also offer several sections of Stretch Program classes for international students, for these students especially benefit from more time to work on their writing.⁶

The first class in the Stretch sequence, WAC 101, is a pass/fail course. But while students do not receive a formal grade for their WAC 101 class, the grades they earn in the class (for their papers and other work) accumulate and count as 50 percent of their ENG 101 grade. Since teachers stay with the same group of students for *both* their WAC 101 and their ENG 101 semesters, each semester's work "counts" as one-half of each student's final ENG 101 grade. That "combined" grade is awarded at the end of the ENG 101 semester.

When they pass WAC 101, students get a ticket to ENG 101 and their WAC 101 class has no impact on their GPA. But if they fail, they receive an "E" (failing; other colleges may call this an "F" grade), which lowers their GPA. In other words, students are playing with real money on the downside, and need to be closely monitored and advised to withdraw from the class if they are in danger of failing.

Following their WAC 101 semester, students who pass go into a Stretch Program version of ENG 101, with the same instructor, group of students, and even the same classroom. As Mary Sheridan-Rabideau and Gordon Brossell argue, keeping students together helps build a sense of trust and works toward a real community, and "with the added comfort of a community of writers who share similar writing experiences, basic writers are more likely than other at-risk students . . . to write drafts that help them understand their writing and develop personal writing strategies" (24). A further goal of our course is to build a sense of such a writing community, since students remain together for an entire year.

We were initially concerned that many students would be unable for some reason (they got a job, perhaps) to take the "linked" section of ENG 101 and would have to be moved to another class. This concern turned out to be false, however, as so far less than one percent of our students have had scheduling difficulties from one semester to the next.

One problem we did not anticipate concerned instructor continuity when a part-time adjunct who taught two WAC 101 classes decided to not return the following semester. Consequently, those two groups of students lost the sense of continuity and community that comes from keeping the same instructor with the

same group of students over two semesters. Eleven percent of Stretch Program students report that being with the same instructor over two semesters is the “best thing” about the program, so we are working harder to try to keep instructors and students together over both semesters.

Initial Results

Following piloted sections of the WAC 101—ENG 101 sequence of classes that started in 1992, we put the Stretch Program into full operation in the fall of 1994, with 512 students enrolled in WAC 101. This amounts to roughly 18 percent of all those students taking their first composition class at ASU. In addition, we planned five WAC 101 classes for the spring of 1995 (with corresponding ENG 101 classes in the fall of 1995). We also decided to offer the sequence during the summer, with WAC 101 in the first five-week summer session, followed by ENG 101 during the second summer session.

As I will outline below, we were quite pleased with the fall—spring sequence of classes, somewhat less pleased with the spring—fall sequence, and disappointed with the summer classes.

WAC 101 in the fall, ENG 101 in the spring

We started the fall 1994 semester with 512 students in WAC 101; in the fall of 1995, we registered 709 students into WAC 101. Naturally, a percentage of the students who started in the program did not subsequently register for ENG 101 in the spring; they failed or withdrew or passed, but did not return for ENG 101. Our fall/spring attrition rate for the first two years of operation are shown in Table 1.

This means our WAC 101 to ENG 101 “retention” rate was 81.8 percent, for students enrolled in academic year 1994-95; it was 82.5 percent for the 1995-96 academic year. For both academic years, then, we managed to retain four out of every five students who started the Stretch Program. As a comparison, only two-thirds (the actual average for the last three academic years is 66.2 percent) of those ASU students who take ENG 101 in the fall also take ENG 102 the following spring. Our class-to-class “retention rate,” for whatever reason, is about 15 percent higher in Stretch.

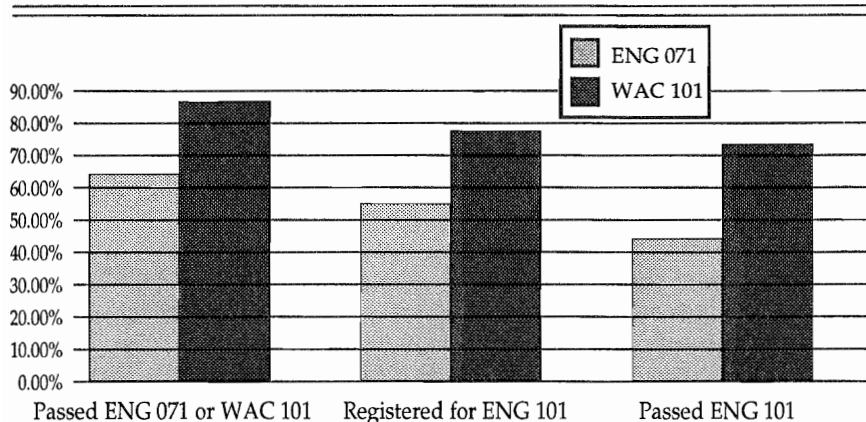
Since many other colleges and universities have a “take this remedial class *before* you can take ENG 101” model, as we did with ENG 071, perhaps the following comparative data will be useful. When we compare the students who registered in the Stretch Program sequence of WAC 101-ENG 101 over the last two academic years (1994-95 and 1995-96) to those who took our old ENG 071-ENG 101 sequence over the last five years it was offered, we find that about 23 percent more students pass WAC 101 than passed ENG 071; about 20 percent more WAC 101 students go on to take ENG 101 here, and nearly 30 percent more WAC 101 students pass ENG 101. This information is shown in Figure 2.

While that data examines the numbers as a percentage of those who registered for either ENG 071 or WAC 101, a more useful view might be to consider those who continue on as a percentage of those who moved to the next step. That is, we would compare those students who moved into the next class not as a percentage of those who'd originally started the sequence, but as a percentage of those who continued. Here, as noted above, we can say that of the

Table 1
Fall/spring attrition rate for 1994-1996

	WAC 101 in: ENG 101 in:	fall 1994 to spring 1995	fall 1995 to spring 1996	
beginning number of students		512	709	
failed WAC 101		44 8.6 %	38 5.4 %	
withdrew passing		24 4.7 %	27 3.8 %	
received an Incomplete		0	3 4 %	
passed but did not return or enrolled in other classes		25 4.9 %	56 7.9 %	
total "lost students"		93 18.2 %	124 17.5 %	

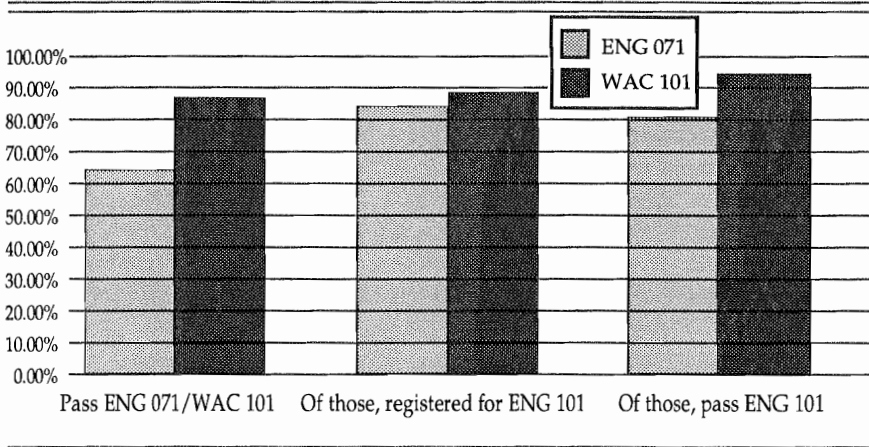
Figure 2
Percentages of those who originally registered in ENG 071 or WAC 101



students who originally registered for ENG 071 or WAC 101, about 23 percent more pass WAC 101. We also can say that of those who continue on to register for ENG 101, about four percent more WAC 101 students go on to take ENG 101 here, and of those who continue on to register for ENG 101, almost 13 percent

Figure 3

Percentages of those who continue on from ENG 071 or WAC 101



more WAC 101 students pass ENG 101. This information is shown in Figure 3. By either measure, then, more students pass WAC 101 than passed our former ENG 071 requirement; we register more WAC 101 students into ENG 101, and more WAC 101 students pass ENG 101 than did ENG 071 students.

Spring and Summer School Blues

While we expected our attrition rate to be higher when we started the Stretch Program sequence of classes for the spring 1995 semester, we were disappointed at the number of students who did not return to take ENG 101 in the fall, 1995 semester.

In the spring of 1995, we offered five sections of WAC 101, with the intention of offering corresponding sections of ENG 101 in the fall. However, whereas over 80 percent of students who took WAC 101 in the fall semesters went on to enroll in ENG 101 the following semester, only 50.9 percent of those who took WAC 101 in the spring did so. We can perhaps attribute the differences between the percentages of students who failed or withdrew to the relatively small number of students in the spring-fall sequence. Such a small group of students may produce "blips" like these in the data. However, we went from a

fall-spring "retention rate" of about 82 percent to a spring-fall "retention rate" of 51 percent.

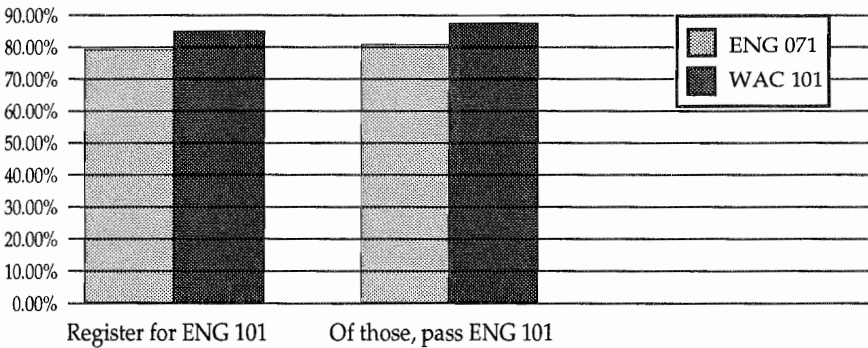
I am revising this essay before our fall 1996 registration is complete, but early indications are that we will have about the same "retention rate"—only about 50 percent of spring 1996 WAC 101 students are returning to take ENG 101 in the fall of 1996.

As a way of comparison, for the past three academic years, only about one-third of the students who took ENG 101 in the spring also took ENG 102 the following fall, so perhaps our 50 percent "retention rate" is not too low, after all. And it is also important to note that if we combine these results, we've had 1,361 students start WAC 101; of those, 1,058 took or are currently enrolled in ENG 101, for an overall "retention rate" of 77.7 percent.

Although we have had too few summer school students in the Stretch Program to draw any conclusions, they fared about the same as those who started the WAC 101-ENG 101 sequence in the spring. As noted above, while we lost only one out of five students between WAC 101 and ENG 101 during the regular academic year, we lost nearly half during the spring-fall sequence, and our summer results were similar—only about half return to take ENG 101.

Figure 4

Underrepresented groups continuing into/passing ENG 101



Who are Stretch Students and What Do They Say about the Program?

Perhaps the best way to draw an informal picture of the students in the Stretch Program is to briefly compare them to their ENG 101 counterparts. For the four semesters for which we have complete data (academic years 1994-95 and 1995-96), Arizona residents made up a slightly higher percentage of Stretch students than did out-of-state students: 57 percent of Stretch Program students were from Arizona, while 53 percent of ENG 101 students were state residents. Since ASU's admission requirements are lower for Arizona residents than they are for out-of-state students, we would expect to find more Arizona students in the Stretch Program.

I also think that perhaps both educational background and a testing bias shows up in the number of underrepresented groups we serve, as the Stretch Program also had higher percentages of Asian, African American, Hispanic, and Native American students than did ENG 101. Overall, these students make up about 21 percent of all ENG 101 students, while they comprise about 39 percent of Stretch Program students.

In comparison to our old model, we now have a higher percentage of all groups of students who go on to and pass ENG 101, and this is especially true for underrepresented groups. While about the same percentages of these students (Asian, African American, Hispanic, and Native American students) register into WAC 101 as used to take ENG 071, about five percent more go on to register for ENG 101, and of those, about seven percent more pass ENG 101. As illustrated by Figure 4, about 80 percent of these underrepresented groups who took ENG 071 continued on to ENG 101; of those, about 80 percent passed ENG 101. With the Stretch model, about 85 percent of WAC 101 students go on to take ENG 101, and of those, about 87 percent pass ENG 101—better by either measure than what we used to do.

Near the end of the spring semester 1995 and again in 1996, we asked students in the Stretch Program to complete an anonymous evaluation of the program. Here, I will concentrate only on three questions:

1. Has the Stretch Program improved your writing? If it has, *in what way(s)*? If it has not, *why not*, do you suppose?
2. The *best* thing about the WAC 101-ENG 101 sequence is. . . .
3. The *worst* thing about the WAC 101-ENG 101 sequence is. . . .

We received 729 completed surveys (and of course, not everyone answered all questions), which represents about 65 percent of Stretch Program students. This group expressed overwhelming satisfaction with the WAC 101—ENG 101 sequence of classes: 87 percent indicated that their writing had improved over the course of the program. Most of these (43 percent) felt their writing had gotten better because they had more time to spend on their papers. Other reasons mentioned including having the same teacher (11 percent of respondents), one-on-one help and small classes (six percent; our Stretch

Program classes are capped at 22 students), and working with the same students for peer review (seven percent).

Eight percent of those students who responded indicated that they felt their writing had not improved. The main reason for their expressed dissatisfaction was that they felt they'd been misplaced and "would have done fine in regular ENG 101." Because of these comments, we now distribute a one-page outline that explains the Stretch Program in detail to every WAC 101 student. We also ask each instructor to give several in-class briefings to explain the program and to let students know that if they feel they are misplaced, they should speak to me about their placement.

Other parts of the program also caused students to complain.

About 16 percent of the students who completed our survey were unhappy with the slow pace of the class and that it took an entire year to complete. Another six percent felt that they "lagged behind their peers," because they had to take three semesters of composition rather than the more standard two semesters. These comments caused us to make sure we let students know that they do receive credit that counts toward graduation for their WAC 101 class, and therefore they have one less elective class to take along their academic road.

About seven percent complained that they did not receive a grade for their WAC 101 class, and therefore their "Grade Point Average was hurt." In fact, students are graded for their work, but these grades do not show up as grades until their second semester. Other institutions, if they follow our model, may want both classes in the sequence to be graded. Since WAC 101 is a pass/fail class, a "pass" does not enter into a student's GPA calculations (although, as noted above, a failure does affect a student's GPA). We now are doing a more effective job of explaining these situations, and we're explaining them several times early in the semester, to make sure our students understand.⁷

Where We Plan to Go from Here

Our experience with this particular model of basic writing instruction, at least so far, indicates that the approach makes good pedagogical sense for the majority of students who place into the Stretch Program. Students and instructors alike express a high rate of satisfaction, primarily because of the extra writing time our model provides. More students not only pass the first class in the Stretch sequence, WAC 101, than passed ENG 071, but more Stretch students go on to register for and to pass ENG 101. And while we only have one year's worth of data so far for those students who have had the chance to go on and take ENG 102, preliminary information indicates that more Stretch students sign up for ENG 102, and more of them pass ENG 102 than did those who started in ENG 071.

At the same time, we recognize that our attempt to "do it all" during the summer was a mistake and needs to be reconfigured. We also want to keep a

close watch on our spring-fall sessions, as early indications show that we will lose (perhaps too) many students. We also want to ensure that students know who to talk with if they feel misplaced or have other problems or concerns. It is apparent that the majority of student complaints came from those students who did not really understand the program.

One key element of our approach is that the first part of the sequence, WAC 101, is more closely tied to our composition curriculum than standard “remedial” courses and is therefore better insulated from political attack. At the same time, I as director and our basic writing students enjoy the complete support of the department—which is not the case in every college or university. The faculty now provides me two-class reassigned time to give me the time necessary to supervise Stretch—including selecting instructors, checking syllabi, observing each teacher every semester, dealing with student/instructor problems and concerns, and so on. Any institution with such a model must provide the administrative support required.

As noted, we are working to develop a more accurate placement mechanism, and, with Director of Composition Duane Roen, we are developing ways to move students, after school has started, between “regular” ENG 101 and Stretch classes to aid in more accurate placement. At the same time, the ESL component is growing and is aggravated by the often very late registration of international students, whose situation was especially complicated in 1996 by the shutdowns of the federal government.

And, of course, we are working on ways to assess our performance; while we know we are doing a better job of retaining students for their composition classes, it will be several years before we see if the Stretch Program is having a long-term effect on graduation rates.

Notes

1. I would like to particularly thank the following for their useful comments and good advice on this essay: Janet Bacon, Leanna Hall, Cynthia “C.J.” Jeney, Keith Miller, John Ramage, Duane Roen, David Schwalm, and Viktorija Todorovksa. I also would like to thank the two anonymous WPA reviewers, who made useful suggestions on an earlier version of this manuscript.
2. For a discussion on the problematic terms “basic writer” and “basic writing,” see Adams; Bartholomae, “Writing”; Greenberg; Shaughnessy, *Errors* 40; Troyka. For an ongoing discussion of curricular matters, see Harris, Lattin, Lu, Odell, “Symposium.”
3. ASU originally tried two versions of the Stretch Program: a “jumbo” five-hour course over the fall 1992 semester, along with the two-semester WAC 101-ENG 101 sequence that ran from fall 1992 through spring 1993. When the two-class sequence appeared to be the more successful approach, we piloted two full classes over the 1993-94 academic year.
4. In doing research for this article, I tried to find other, similar programs that “stretched” one of their composition classes to allow students more time, but could not find any. Several institutions are in the process, though, of planning similar “stretch” models, while others are working on variations—for example, see Grego and Thompson on their “Writing Studio” approach.
5. When this program started, ENG 101 was doing six papers, so our 3/3 break

was easy to decide on. Now ENG 101 is four papers plus a portfolio, so we are now not only "stretched" but also somewhat expanded ENG 101.

6. Students with an SAT verbal score of 460 or lower, or an ACT Enhanced English score of 18 or lower are placed into the Stretch Program. Students who score between 470-540 (SAT) or 19-20 (ACT) are advised to take the WAC 101—ENG 101 sequence, but are not required to. Students with a TOEFL score of 540 or less are placed in the ESL version of the Stretch Program. Students with TOEFL scores in the 540-560 "range" are advised to take the WAC 107—ENG 107 sequence for foreign students, but are not required to.

7. There has been some discussion about changing the WAC 101 class to a graded class, but when we asked students taking the course, they overwhelmingly wanted it to remain as a pass/fail class. Our department agrees. Students indicated the pass/fail approach put less pressure on them to do well during their first semester at the university.

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