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METHODS

One-on-One ‘Intensive’ Instruction: Faculty and Students Partnering for Success in First-Year Writing

ADRIENNE REDDING, JEANNE LAHAIE, AND JONATHAN BUSH

. . . composition faculty are especially well positioned to participate in conversations about retention. The unique context of the writing classroom as an interface between students’ past and future educational experiences, as an introduction to the discourse practices of higher education, and as one of the only universal requirements at most institutions makes it a prime site for retention efforts (p. 669).

- Peegen Reichert Powell, 2009

Colleges and universities across the United States are all working to increase student success. Many of these - first year experience programs, social and emotional support programs, counseling, cohorts, and others have only limited connections to what goes on in the classroom. We appreciate these initiatives and their goals, but we also see significant shortcomings in any program that disconnects student success from academic coursework. We hold that first-year writing programs have an important opportunity to fill this need and hold the potential position to become a powerful force for retention and support for struggling students. In particular, we believe in the role of building partnerships that create connections while providing needed academic support.

Students leave higher education for multiple reasons. As Tinto (1993) notes, all students new to a university setting go through uncomfortable or even traumatic processes. Even for the most prepared students, there are opportunities for error, unease, and elements of poor academic performance. While early academic preparation and background are still the most powerful indicators of student success (Hiss and Franks, 2014), there are many more factors that affect first year student success. One of the most powerful non-academic factors that influences success and retention is the student’s ability to develop a sense of belonging at the institution (Hoffman

et al, 2002). The literature, and our own experience, suggests that the key to retaining students is developing personal relationships with faculty or staff members and through those connections, developing a sense of belonging. O’Keeffe argues, for example, that [t]he relationship between a student and a key figure [...] within the university can ensure that the student does not exit their course prior to completion” (p. 608). This fact seems obvious, but in many cases, students struggle to establish relationships with faculty members, particularly students who are at-risk and do not automatically relate to their instructors. Further, he writes “that for the more reticent students within the student body, developing a personal relationship with the tertiary institution may be more difficult than for non-reticent students,” and he further notes, “these challenges also exist for international students and students from ethnic backgrounds, who may be less confident approaching faculty members for support” (p. 609). The students O’Keeffe describes as being less able to develop relationships with faculty on their own are the same at-risk students our program most often serves. Powell (2013) sees first year writing as a potential resource for retention efforts, focused on academic success,

What first year writing faculty do as a matter of course — teach smaller classes, conduct personal conferences, assign papers that call for personal writing — is a tremendous resource, deliberately or not, for retention efforts and their institutions (p. 43).

Like Powell, we see first year writing as being inherently optimal for building connections and assisting students: an ideal place to establish connections, which provides a powerful opportunity to position the course to assist with success and retention. First year writing is not only universally experienced by students, it is also a venue for personal interaction and partnerships with students in ways that most other entry-level courses are not.

In this article, we describe a program that leverages the practices common to first year writing instructors — the things we do “as a matter of course” and our inherent positionality as partners and mentors — and positions them as part of a partnership that expands and extends the natural connections that occur in the first year writing classroom. Specifically, we help students succeed in our first-year writing course who have, by the official definitions of the course and the individual instructor syllabus, already failed. Select students are given a second chance at mid-semester, and work individually with an experienced instructor to successfully complete the course. What we do goes beyond remediation of the content and skills of the course: we also work to establish partnerships with students that help them build connections to instructors, other students, the institution, and their place in higher education. This program is challenging, labor intensive, and sometimes perceived to be expensive. However, we have also seen it produce significant increases in student success and retention, benefiting students, many of whom have problems that go far beyond academic competencies and helping them adjust to university life and succeed in our courses and others.

While our initial impulse in developing the program was simply to help students pass their writing classes, we find ourselves positioned as part of a larger movement. We see that the work we have done, while still in progress, has implications for other first year writing programs and that connections can be made between composition courses, student success programs, and academic support. Our program, rather than growing out of a strategic initiative with a set of specific objectives and procedures and a university structure, evolved quickly, and as an ad-hoc response to a specific set of conditions in need of immediate intervention. As a result, we found ourselves creating, implementing, and revising our practices, typically on a semester-by-semester basis. Surprisingly, we came pretty close to hitting the mark fairly quickly, particularly in how to approach students, meet their needs, and develop individualized curriculum for each. We also learned valuable lessons in administration of the program, introducing ways to leverage relationships and maximize opportunities for students to succeed in academic space where they had previously failed.

Our Students: Focusing on the Individual

There is no easy archetype to describe all the students we serve, particularly considering the national trends towards

wider college access. Our students are often those traditionally outside of the traditional university demographic, lacking that academic preparation and those characteristics often expected of university students. They are those who regularly miss class, the plagiarists who patch-write or outright copy their papers, the disengaged young men with ball caps pulled low over their foreheads, the scared students who nod convincingly when the instructor asks “does everyone understand?” Our students also include those with mental illnesses and other cognitive and social difficulties — obsessive compulsive disorder, Asperger’s Syndrome, anxiety, and more. As a group, they are often those on their way out of academia — a quick one or two semester stop before returning home. They are also people with great potential, often first-generation college attendees whose families don’t understand what they’re facing. They often have outside responsibilities, stressors, and difficulties beyond the classroom, come from minority communities or have English language learning issues. They are successes just for getting this far. And, yes, they are also the diffident, middle-class students who don’t know why they are here and/or haven’t yet figured out why or if they want to succeed. What they have in common is some trait, or combination of traits, that has caused them to fail the first-year writing course, as well as the potential to overcome their challenges and achieve a passing grade. Together, they are in need of an environment that helps them succeed and a connection with the institution they haven’t yet experienced.

Our story, then, begins with some of the students we have served recently. Jeanne describes one such student: Joey.

“Joey:” A Hardworking but Under-prepared Student Athlete

Joey joined the program early in the semester because he ran into trouble with his traditional first year writing course right away. This giant young man walked into my office with a big smile and an excellent attitude. What he lacked were the writing skills to allow him to be successful. Joey struggled with the usual—focus, organization, and developing his ideas; however, his biggest problem was comprehension. Often I would explain some aspect of the assignment to him, and he would smile and nod as if he knew exactly what I meant. I got very adept at reading him, and I learned to pause and ask, “Do you understand?” At first he would nod his head, but when I pressed, “do you really?” he would often admit that he didn’t.

Throughout the remainder of the semester, Joey and I worked on a research project about concussions. This topic was one he was very interested in because he had suffered a

concussion in high school, and was at risk for others. As we moved through the steps of the research process, he became more confident in his ability to make a complex argument. His enthusiasm for the project caused him to work patiently through revision and editing, and although the paper he produced was far from perfect, it represented significant growth. Through our partnership, and the relationship we developed, we effectively remediated some of the gaps in his educational experience.

I chose the story of Joey for a couple of reasons. First of all, he comes from large, poor school district where 85% of students are eligible for free or reduced hot lunch. Many students transfer to other schools, and those who remain graduate at lower rates than the state average. As a result, these students are underprepared and must often catch up to their peers once they come to college. For those who are academically gifted and who have outside support from parents, getting a good education is possible, but for students like Joey—ones who need a little more time and attention to be successful—a floundering school district is extraordinarily problematic.

How, then, did Joey make it to the university? Sports. Joey is an outstanding football player, and, in fact, he was recruited by a much larger, nationally ranked, Division I school. Unfortunately, his standardized test scores eliminated this opportunity. Joey is so good that he is likely to be recruited by a professional team if he can stay in school long enough. College, from his perspective, is focused primarily on football, but being academically successful is Joey's best chance at becoming professionally successful at his chosen profession.

There is more at stake here than this one instance. We have had a number of athletes in our program, many of them are more academically capable than Joey, but they share a couple of problems. The first is that the demands of playing college sports make studying difficult. For example, I have another college football player this semester, and when I tried to set up an appointment for his library work I learned that on Fridays the team has an early breakfast to go over information, followed by a two-hour practice, a shower, and an hour of class. Essentially the whole day is consumed by football, and this is the off-season. During the fall, players often practice twice a day and miss class to travel to away games; they are physically and mentally exhausted.

The other issue these students face is bias—both active and unconscious—on the part of their instructors. Last semester my best student in the program was a starting freshman athlete who worked hard on and off the field. While I

cannot prove that his inability to be successful in his regular composition classroom was related to instructor bias, there seems to be no other explanation for his failure.

More and more often students who come underprepared and students who have other significant demands on their time are becoming the norm rather than the exception. The freshman who comes to school without baggage, without having to juggle more than one job, without illness or family issues or financial problems is becoming quite rare, and our response to students with problems needs to be compassionate and effective. Adrienne describes another student: Dee

"Dee": Lacking Confidence and a Productive Writing Process

I actually met Dee the semester before she became my student in our program. Our university offers a non-credit basic writing course that students must take as a prerequisite to the mainstream freshman writing class if they are accepted with test scores below a certain level. Dee was in this course and her teacher observed that in class Dee seemed unable to produce any work at all. On her own, outside of class, Dee's work regularly failed to meet the assignment requirements in even the most basic ways. If the teacher sat with her, however, talking her through the reading of the assignment sheet and act of writing, Dee could produce assignments that satisfied the requirements. Dee's teacher came to me and to my colleague to ask about ways to address these unique learning needs. The decision was made that this instructor would pass Dee conditionally, providing that she enroll in my section of freshman writing the following semester and have the opportunity to participate in our program if she needed additional support.

At first, as a student in my regular section of freshman writing, Dee continued to struggle. During one of our early free-write sessions, with a prompt that asked students to put ideas on paper about ways their identities had been shaped by an experience in school, after an in-class discussion where we all shared some of these examples, and reassurance that free-writes were not about grammar, spelling, organization, or any other kind of "correctness" worry, Dee sat frozen for the full five minutes. Pencil still; not one word making it to the page. She came to my office hours to discuss the topic. She talked easily about experiences she'd had. She sat with me and wrote them down. After watching this occur a couple of times, I offered Dee the opportunity to become part of the program.

As we met week after week, together we developed a writing process that allowed Dee to demonstrate her creativity, her critical thinking skills, and her writing competency. We would first talk through the assignment sheet provided

for whatever writing project she was working on (we often processed assignments she had in classes other than first-year writing in addition to the work she did for me). She would read each section out loud and then put its instructions into her own words. I would either confirm that she had understood correctly, or clarify any point I thought she had misinterpreted. She would begin to write in a spiral notebook with a pencil, after first speaking out loud what she planned to record on the paper. My role consisted mainly of reassuring her that what she was about to write worked. She would speak and write, speak and write, until a section was completed. We would then consider the section as a whole, moving on to the next section when she felt satisfied. I allowed her to produce authentic first drafts, not stepping in to alter her train of thought or micro-edit grammar or spelling issues. With this complete, I would have her word-process this draft and we would then, in the next meeting, look at where it might require revision, and then where it required editing. She struggled with a few minor grammar issues, many of which she could spot herself when required to read her writing slowly out loud.

Dee's intelligence became clear as she found it possible through this process to release words onto the page. Her ideas were insightful, her sense of humor frequently found an outlet, and her organizational abilities manifested themselves as the work poured out of her. Over the months she became able to do some of the earlier writing moves on her own, allowing us to spend more time discussing and brainstorming. Overall, though, she proved herself a proficient critical thinker, a capable writer, and a competent learner. I'm convinced that without access to this program, Dee would never have passed a first-year writing course. She wouldn't have failed because of a lack of writing proficiency; she would have failed because her writing process looked different than everyone else's. She required an alternate writing environment. Jonathan describes the situation of a third student: Jocquain.

"Jocquain": Cultural Conflict and Apathy

Jocquain came to our attention early in the development of program. He was referred to our first year writing director by his instructor. The instructor was displeased with his work and his behavior in class – considering him rude and disrespectful. The instructor claimed that he had plagiarized on a previous paper and wanted to rescind the previous grade given and bar him from attending the course for the rest of the semester. He was told that no matter what he did from this point on, he did not have any chance of passing the course. He is slightly older than the ordinary first year

student at our institution – 22 or 23. He also often speaks and writes in an urban dialect. He didn't get along with his classmates and often did not participate in peer review or other class activities, sitting quietly and refusing to interact with others. He described the assignments as 'uninteresting' and admitted that he had trouble motivating himself to do the work. Although he did turn in many assignments and projects, he felt that it was unengaging and that the other students and his instructor did not understand his background, interests, or cultural perspectives.

In his perception, his instructor's responses to his work and her statement that he could not pass the course also implied that he did not belong at the university. In working with him, however, I found a student who recognized his own mistakes, understood his own culpability in the situation, but also expressed a desire to succeed, along with the academic aptitude to pass the class. I also learned that failing the first-year writing course would invalidate his financial aid and force him to leave the university. Jocquain's failure was due to his own demeanor and the cultural and personality issues that occurred between him and the instructor, both of whom expressed dislike of each other.

In his new partnership with me, away from the negative interactions he had in the classroom, he successfully completed his papers, including a research project, a reflective piece, and a multi-genre personal narrative, and passed the course and remained in the university, continuing his progress towards a degree.

These students have all participated in various iterations of our program, some early in our development. Others have seen a more polished version in more recent semesters. Below we describe the mechanics of the program and how it integrates into the institution and the first year writing program, including what we do and how we do it. We are still learning lessons as we go, but this is the version that we are currently using and having significant success with.

Building Partnerships: Administration and Organization

At our onset, we asked ourselves several questions regarding the best way to develop this program. For example: How would we remediate an entire semester in only a few weeks? How would we communicate with the current first year writing instructors to offer help with these 'problem' students and get to get referrals? What administrative, pedagogical, and curricular processes would we need to put into place to achieve this result? And how would we reach the students

who do have the grit to embrace an opportunity given to them. In addition, how would we prevent the program from becoming an easy way to fulfill the first year writing requirements? The result has been the program we currently refer to as the "First Year Writing Intensive."

The facilitation of our program incorporates a several-step process which has evolved through practice and trial and error. What follows represents what we have currently found to be best practice, but we seek continually to improve these steps along which students progress from their place of difficulty in their classroom to a place of opportunity in our program.

The first step involves reaching out to a semester's current first year writing teachers in order to familiarize them with the Intensive program and explain how it might be beneficial to students in their classes that are facing challenges. We ask that they survey their class(es) and reply to our email with the names and student ID numbers of students who, just prior to midterm grade assessment, seem unlikely to pass the class(es) for whatever reason (absences, failure to submit assignments, assignments that do not meet required standards, etc.). We request that all instructors reply to our email, either with the names of students who fit the criteria, or to say that they have no students to recommend. Students just prior to midterm grade assessment still have time to demonstrate and/or acquire the proficiencies required to pass first year writing.

At this point, we (originally one or both faculty instructors, and now our graduate student worker) contact those referred students via email, alerting them to their instructors' assessment that they are unlikely to pass their writing class, briefly explaining the Intensive program and attaching an application form. We inform each student that if accepted, they will be partnered with a faculty instructor for one-on-one mentorship in developing/demonstrating the necessary first year writing proficiencies. We provide them with a link to the program application and a dedicated email address where the applications can be sent, as well as the location of the English Department office where they can, if they choose, drop off a hard copy of their application. Once we receive applications, those students are contacted via email to schedule a short interview that will confirm their enrollment. Students and instructors sign a 'contract' that explains and defines expectations.

Students accepted in the program set up a regular, weekly, hour-long meeting time with their faculty instructor. They are required, in addition to the one-on-one meeting time, to attend a group work time, usually held at the university

library on Friday mornings from 10 a.m. – Noon. Accepted students receive the Intensive binder which contains all of the materials they will need to organize their time, remember their meetings, understand their assignments, and hold the work they produce. These materials include specifically: a calendar for the months during which the student is enrolled in the Intensive, a contact page with the phone numbers and email addresses of the program's faculty, a blank schedule of assignments and due dates to be agreed upon by the student and faculty member, as well as an assignment explanation sheet and pocket folder for each writing assignment.

Students participating in the program complete four writing projects which allow them either to develop or demonstrate first year writing proficiencies. They begin by composing a research proposal in which they lay out the plan for a proposed research project. They then produce an annotated bibliography that presents and discusses the contribution of at least six sources to their proposed research question. Thirdly, they must produce the research paper itself, based upon the approved research proposal and the completed annotated bibliography. Finally, each student writes a reflective writing of at least 500 words, allowing them to analyze purposefully both the content provided and the practices modeled in the program. Upon completion and faculty approval of all of the above components, the student earns a "C" for first year writing. If the student demonstrated extraordinary proficiency in producing the required materials, the instructor may consider awarding a higher grade. In general, this ability to earn a grade higher than the contracted "C" is not shared with the student beforehand, as it often leads to unrealistic student expectations. If the student receives a higher than expected score, they are pleasantly surprised. If they know they might receive a score higher than a "C" and they successfully complete and are awarded that "C," there is the chance they will be disappointed.

Conclusions and Implications: Partnerships and Possibilities

Our program has experienced success beyond our expectations; in our first year, we worked with 30 students, 24 of whom passed. This past academic year, we served 50 students. Of these, 47 passed the course and 32 returned to our university for the current academic year. Students who failed the first year writing course had a retention rate of just under 33%. Our retention rate was 64%. This isn't quite equal to our institution's freshman retention rate overall (78% for all

first year students; 75% for those who enroll in first year writing), but it represents a vast improvement over the retention rate of students with recognized risk factors and low first semester grades. We recognize that, in the overall picture of our institution, these numbers are fairly small. Our initial data collection shows that our program increased our university's enrollment by 19 students this academic year, consisting of a 0.7% rise in overall 1st/2nd year retention. From our perspective, though, they represent a powerful demographic. All these students would have been at risk of failing out of the institution, or, at minimum, would have been behind their peer group in their progress towards graduation. Our program took these students, all deemed ready for failure in first year writing, and gave them the opportunity to succeed. At the same time, they built a relationship with the instructor who partnered with them and helped them develop a connection with their studies and the institution.

Our program is often positioned as being part of a retention movement, but we consider it to be focused even more on student success, and our obligation to meet students where they are and provide alternative opportunities and models to facilitate that success. As we hope we have shown here, our program does not give students an easy pathway. Nor does it provide a shortcut to achieving credit. But it does provide a potential means to achieve success where none was visible before. And, the increasing number of socially and academically underprepared students coming to our college made this program necessary, and while its implementation requires significant commitment from the administration and the faculty members who run it, the resulting student successes make it a model for the many other schools struggling with similar issues.

Ideally, those with institutionally decision-making power would recognize the money spent to hire qualified instructors as an investment in student retention and success. From a strictly financial perspective, each student retained contributes to the financial well-being of the college, and the value of a student-centered reputation is incalculable. At the same time we recognize that the program isn't cheap. Optimally, it takes at least two full-time faculty members who can spend a significant amount of time working specifically on the initiative. This is both because the strengths of instructors may complement each other (in our case, one has a linguistic background, another has worked extensively with basic writers), and that working together allows the sharing of ideas, commiseration over the students who have problems that cannot be solved, and, of course, an increased number of students that can realistically be worked with. Due to budget

constraints, one of us will be leaving next year. As a way to bridge the gap that will be left, we have begun to consider alternative ways of assisting students, primarily by including having other interested faculty take on smaller numbers of students to mentor. In fact, several of them have already reached out to investigate how they can participate in this inspiring work. We are excited to partner with more dedicated faculty, but we also worry whether the voluntary increase in workload is sustainable.

We built this program because we saw a gap that allowed students with potential to not achieve success when success was possible, and we wrote this article because we knew that there were others teaching first year writing to underprepared and unsuccessful students who wanted to find ways to help them succeed without compromising the quality of their courses. We know that a commitment to student success is built into the ethos and history of composition studies and we wanted to share our ideas with others who share the same commitment we do. We realize that there may be other models that might be more efficient than ours; however, we strongly believe that one-on-one faculty/student interaction provides a powerful means of engaging these students. Many students are struggling to find a place in higher education, and if we are going to accept them, we need to find ways to facilitate their success. Our experience, and much of the retention literature, leads us to believe that developing partnerships with struggling students, especially in the context of first year writing coursework where so much personal interaction naturally takes place, is key to student and institutional success. For most colleges and universities, the expectation that students will arrive traditionally prepared is no longer a reality, and there are only few effective ways to address the situation. We can continue to value numbers over success and accept students even while understanding that many of them will leave, in debt and discouraged, after the first year. We can raise admissions standards and reduce the size of our institutions in order to maintain outdated ideas about what colleges do and who they serve.

Or we can radically rethink the way we serve students, implementing programs like ours in a sincere attempt to provide greater access to education and success. In writing and sharing our story and experiences, and talking about the joys and challenges of working with these students, we hope that others read about our model, consider it for their own contexts, take elements and ideas from it and work to build partnerships and coalitions with students to help them overcome obstacles and achieve academic success where only failure loomed.

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