

Chapter 26

A Study of the Relationship between Freshman Composition and Student Performance in Intensive Writing Courses

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to ascertain the relationship between students' performance in Composition/Rhetoric I (ENGL1301) and their performance in intensive writing courses for the purpose of determining whether or not ENGL1301 should be required as a prerequisite to all courses that involve intensive writing. Data related to course-taking patterns and performance in ENGL1301 and six intensive writing courses were extracted from Suburban Community College student information system for students who enrolled in the intensive writing courses during fall and spring semesters 2007-2008. The data were analyzed using multinomial logistic regression.

The study produced three primary findings. (1) Better performance in ENGL1301 decreased the odds that students would experience negative outcomes (withdrawal and grades of D or F) in intensive writing courses. (2) In most instances, students who were not college ready were more likely than other students to experience negative outcomes in intensive writing courses. (3) Taking ENGL1301 before, after, or concurrently with the intensive writing courses had little relationship with student performance in intensive writing courses.

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The latter finding, while complicating the interpretation of the analysis, contributed most significantly to answering the question of whether or not ENGL1301 should be required as a prerequisite to other intensive writing courses. If ENGL1301 were germane to performance in intensive writing courses, then taking ENGL1301 before taking the intensive writing courses should consistently reduce the odds of negative outcomes in the subsequent courses. Since the sequencing of ENGL1301 did not predict the likelihood of adverse outcomes in intensive writing courses, and since college readiness and having effective writing skills were both predictors of the likelihood of adverse outcomes in intensive writing courses, the evidence suggests that ENGL1301 should not be required as a prerequisite to intensive writing courses. The data do underscore the importance of ensuring that students are college-ready and have some degree of writing proficiency, whether or not that proficiency comes from ENGL1301, before attempting intensive writing courses.

BACKGROUND

The purpose of this study was to assess the relationship between student performance in Composition/Rhetoric I (ENGL1301) and student performance in intensive writing courses to determine whether or not there was sufficient justification for requiring ENGL1301 (freshman composition) as a prerequisite to all courses that include intensive writing experiences as part of the Suburban Community College (Suburban) curriculum. Academic administrators identified six courses that comprised the operational definition of intensive writing courses for purposes of this study: GOVT2301 (American Government I), GOVT2302 (American Government II), HIST1301 (U.S. History I), HIST1302 (U.S. History II), HUMA1301 (Introduction to the Humanities), and PHIL1301 (Introduction to Philosophy).

In designing the study of the relationship between ENGL1301 and the intensive writing courses, two sets of variables were controlled: 1) students' college readiness upon first entering Suburban (based on initial performance on the Texas Success Initiative [TSI] test) and 2) how ENGL1301 was sequenced relative to the intensive writing courses. In addition, two of the courses (GOVT2302 and HIST1302) are the second in each of two course sequences following GOVT2301

and HIST1301 respectively. Consequently, it was decided that the study should also control for students' performance in the initial course in each sequence since it is reasonable to assume that performance in the first course would have an impact on performance in the second.

Other variables that were initially considered as having potential impact on student performance in intensive writing courses were ethnicity, gender, and age. A preliminary analysis found that these variables had little relationship with performance in intensive writing courses once TSI readiness was taken into account, so, to keep the models as simple as possible, these variables were excluded from the primary analysis that is the subject of this report.

Data for this study were extracted from Suburban's student information system (SIS-Plus®, at the time) using a series of Hyperion Explorer (Brio) queries. The data were then analyzed using multinomial logistic regression in SPSS®. The decision to use multinomial logistic regression was made because the dependent variable (performance in intensive writing courses) was an ordinal variable that had been re-coded as a nominal level variable, and the independent variables were either dichotomous or scaled variables.

Data were extracted from SIS-Plus for all students who completed any of the intensive writing courses during fall semester 2007 or spring semes-

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