

Chapter XV

Assessing the Effectiveness of a Basic Writing Course

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes an outcomes assessment study completed in a basic composition course at a small urban open admissions community college. The course was a pilot course designed in response to marginally remedial performance on a standardized writing instrument and solidly exempted performance on the standardized reading instrument. This chapter takes its readers from process to product, exploring both the collaboration between administration and faculty as well as the steps involved in assessing student learning. Specifically discussed is how data was used to guide decision making about curricular change on our campus. At different moments, this assessment study highlights a success story, red flags areas of weakness and suggests future courses of action and research.

INTRODUCTION

In 2003, the U.S. Department of Education reported that over 40% of first-year students at public two-year colleges place into remedial courses. At Hostos Community College/CUNY, that percentage is even higher because it draws

its student body from one of the poorest Congressional districts in the nation and serves students who have historically had limited access to higher education. Data collected by the Office of Institutional Research indicates that about 90% of its student body requires remediation in one of the following areas: writing, reading, math. To meet

this remediation crisis, Hostos has offered courses in remedial writing, reading, and math since its founding 40 years ago. Particularly since 1999, when CUNY mandated an institution-wide policy that charged its two-year campuses with the task of offering remedial coursework for underprepared students, Hostos has offered even more sections and a variety of organized interventions to supplement them.¹

While the expansion of remedial courses can be looked at negatively, to indicate how many students are educationally underprepared for college-level work, these same courses can also be seen positively, as a heroic effort by community colleges to rise to the challenge of making the educational system finally work for this population. However, developing courses is not in itself a sufficient response to the problem. Consider the following example from Act III of Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part I*.

Glendower: I can call spirits from the vasty deep.

*Hotspur: Why, so can I, or so can any man;
But will they come when you do call for them?
(p. 1222)*

As the lines makes clear, Hotspur deflates Glendower's boast that he can conjure spirits by remarking that anyone can conjure spirits. The real sign of success, Hotspur argues, is in the effectiveness of the conjuring—whether or not the spirits come when they are called. By the same token, until and unless the effectiveness of the courses has been determined through assessment, their worth, like Glendower's ability to call spirits, is debatable.

BACKGROUND

In response to Glendower's boast, Hotspur asked him, "But will they [the spirits] come when you

do call for them?" To assess the effectiveness of a remedial course, it is also necessary to ask questions, the two most important being the following.

1. Do remedial courses give students the academic skills necessary to perform satisfactorily in college-level courses?
2. Do students who take remedial courses persist?

The authors of this article, one the Coordinator of Outcomes Assessment (COA) and the other a professor of English (PE), recognized that answering these questions would be very helpful to the institution but also very difficult. Researchers who have studied these questions have come up with varying findings. On the one hand, there are researchers like White (1994) and Levin and Calcagno (2008), who have pointed out that design flaws so compromise the evaluations of many Basic Writing programs that their outcomes data are unreliable. Then there are the somewhat more positive studies by Hodges (1998), Southard and Clay (2004), Bailey and Alfonso (2005) and Bettinger and Long (2005). These researchers have suggested that Basic Writing courses are helpful, if not the proverbial magic bullet. For example, looking at data collected at a Georgia technical institute, Hodges found that between 60 and 70% of students completed the developmental course(s), but that of this number, fewer than half took the next English course. In other words, while students' academic performance improved, this performance was not translating into long-term progress toward graduation. Similar mixed results were reported by Southard and Clay (2004) and Bailey and Alfonso (2005). Southard and Clay found that at a community college in northwest Florida, students who passed a developmental English course typically saw "their grade drop. . . at least a letter below the grade they received" (p. 5) in the next English course they took. Here,

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