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THE “HARD EVIDENCE”: DOCUMENTING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A BASIC WRITING PROGRAM

ABSTRACT: This manuscript demonstrates and presents the program evaluation of one basic writing program. Based on a two-year study that targets 685 basic writing students, we hypothesize that these students achieve similar or higher retention rates than those of regularly-admitted students. The authors, who studied four variables which are nominally rated – retention rate, current classification, grade point average, and writing course sequence completed – discuss how each contributes to the successful retention rate of these basic writing students.

“I want to see hard evidence that BW courses shelter more than they shunt.”
— Ira Shor (96)

“If only things were not the way they were, then they would be different.”
— Richard E. Miller (7)

In the Spring 1998 issue of *JBW*, Harvey S. Wiener asserts that basic writing instructors have neglected an important factor — researching program data — as they react to bureaucratic measures to reduce and cut basic writing programs. In a discussion identifying how we have failed, at least in part, to deter such drastic measures which have led to abolishing basic writing programs throughout the country, he says, “The point here is the lack of research: it is a complaint I have made many times before, urging mainly to the indifferent the need to document the effectiveness of what we do. Instincts, sixth sense, and anecdotal reports: these never serve the policy makers and money holders who want only evidence” (Wiener 100). As basic writing instructors and program directors who count themselves among the decidedly *not* indifferent, we began an on-going study of our basic writing

In response to questions about the efficacy of the basic writing program at their university, Tracey Baker, Director of the UAB Writing Center, and Peggy Jolly, Director of Freshman English and Developmental Studies, conducted a retention study focusing on 685 basic writing students. Baker's and Jolly's work has appeared in various academic publications.

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program in 1997, involving 685 students.

Our interest in studying basic writing students grew out of our work with at-risk students enrolled in our freshman writing program. As Writing Center Director and Director of Developmental English, we find ourselves situated in the center of the on-going debate at our university concerning the questions of retention, especially among basic writing students. The work we do and the students with whom we work lead us to agree with Bruce Horner:

The success of Basic Writing in legitimizing the institutional place of basic writing courses and students cannot be separated from the ways in which it works within the framework of public discourse on higher education and Open Admissions, particularly its silence about the concrete material, political, institutional, social historic realities confronting basic writing teachers, students, and courses. (200)

Because of the work we do, both programmatically and with individual students, we have relied, primarily, on the scholarship of others in the field of basic writing to help determine our goals for our courses and for our students. But we also rely on our own research, experience, and even our intuition as instructors – Wiener’s “instincts, sixth sense, and anecdotal reports” (100) – for this information helps us understand our students, their strengths and weaknesses, even as we also study the “hard facts.” One without the other tends to distort the picture – at least within individual institutions.

Impetus for our study was spurred by a university-wide initiative to accomplish two goals: to assess retention rates for the student body in general, and to assess the value of individual programs (such as basic writing) in order to determine whether to retain or abolish them. One concern expressed by the administration was the *purpose* of an urban research university offering developmental programs, such as those offered by both the Math and English Departments. Within this larger concern were posited a number of subordinate questions: does the university have an obligation to admit marginally-prepared students into its program; if the university chooses to admit such students, does the university have a further obligation to offer remedial work to help prepare those students for future academic success; is the prospect of admitting and providing instruction for those students fiscally feasible, given the diminishing revenues available to the university; and finally, what is the efficacy of the existing developmental programs? A committee was formed to answer these questions – appointed by the Provost, chaired by a member of his office, and rounded out by us and the Chair of our department.

Background information about our university and the basic writ-

ing course will help situate our study. Our school is an inner-city, open admissions campus. The average age of undergraduates is 26, and most are first-generation college students who come from low-income environments. Over 80% of our student population commutes to campus, juggling work, school, and family responsibilities, and they encompass most of the qualities for at-risk students cited by Otherine J. Neisler in "Access and Retention Strategies in Higher Education: An Overview":

financial need and lack of financial aid; lack of academic success; personal, emotional, and family problems; feelings of isolation; adjustment problems; lack of commitment; inadequate potential for success; inadequate high school preparation; inadequate language skills; definition and attitudes about success; responsibility for learning/motivation; maturity; lack of student services, counseling, tutoring, etc. (6)

The university attempts to cater to this commuting population, almost by design, in that we offer semester credit for classes held during 10-week quarters, schedule classes from six in the morning to ten at night, seven days a week, and offer two 4-week mini-terms each year. In addition, our university belongs to a local consortium designed to help students move seamlessly among our schools and to help faculty and administrators understand the programs available at each school. The consortium consists of city and county, public and private 2-year and 4-year universities, and it includes the public school system, as well. Within the English Department, we offer our placement exams on computer so that students may take them when convenient, given the time constraints of classes, work, and family. We have both a Writing Center and a Reading Center which offer free tutorial help to any student in the university by appointment and through drop-in hours. The faculty concern for the writing program is so encompassing that all full-time, regular faculty teach at least one freshman writing course each year. Our students are historically under-prepared to take on post-secondary education, particularly the population with whom we are most familiar, the students enrolled in developmental courses.

The Developmental Program offers two courses, College Reading and Fundamentals of Writing, each a three-credit hour course which offers institutional credit. While the course credit is not transferrable to other universities, it does count toward full-time status at the university, an important consideration for students on financial aid, historically the largest percentage of students enrolled in such courses. Within the curriculum itself, basic writing students complete referential writing assignments, beginning with sentence and paragraph structure and moving to essays. Each writing assignment is designed

to go through a multiple drafting process, during which instructors both read the drafts and confer with students so that they are clear about how to make each draft more effective with respect to audience, purpose, content, and context. The students are retained or passed into freshman composition based on a portfolio they assemble which represents their most effective work from the quarter. When these students move on to the first half of the freshman composition sequence, they write essays, learning to incorporate outside sources into their thinking and their writing. The second half of the sequence introduces them to the rhetoric of argument, and the final courses in the English program sequence, the sophomore surveys in literature, focus students on writing literary criticism. Throughout these courses, the assignments and drafts become increasingly complex, as does the textual material covered. A major element of the entire sequence, no matter the course, is to help students learn the process of writing and, most importantly, the process of revision. The grade basic writing students receive for the course is non-punitive; although the customary range of grades applies, the grade is not computed into the students' grade point averages. While basic writing is open to any student who wants to review writing basics before attempting freshman composition, it is required for students who score below a pre-determined minimum score on the university's entrance exams.

The Developmental Programs have been in place for a decade. During that time, the students' progress has been periodically tracked and their performance has been found to be competitive in upper-level English courses with that of initially better-prepared students who were not required to take basic writing. But retention rates have never been analyzed until now, and thus no data existed to support our "sixth sense" that basic writing students achieve similar or higher retention rates than the university's published third-year and fourth-year retention rates of 54% and 34%, respectively, for the general enrollment (Minter Associates). Back to Wiener's challenge: "But only individual colleges and departments through focused investigation can determine successful instructional paradigms—and these institutions have not attempted the studies or, if they exist, broadcast them" (102). The following represents our broadcast.

We chose to prepare a summative evaluation of a select number of students by subjecting them to a qualitative descriptive study. The sample is inclusive, rather than exclusive; it includes all students enrolled in basic writing sections offered during the fall terms of 1993 and 1994. We chose those two terms for three reasons. First, students enrolled in fall are more likely to be taking the course for the first time rather than repeating it. Second, many more sections of basic writing are offered during the fall term than during subsequent terms, making the observations more reliable. Third, we wanted to track the students'

progress over a three- and four-year period (to 1997). In the fall of 1993, 342 students enrolled in basic writing courses; in the fall of 1994, 343 students enrolled, for a total of 685 students. Our findings are given under the following headings: variables, data collection, retention rate, current classification, grade point average, writing course sequence completed, and conclusion. Under each heading we describe how we did this research which, in turn, explains how we made our argument to university administration. We offer this study as one model for demonstrating the effectiveness of a writing program.

Variables

Because we believed that retention rates could best be found by looking at several related factors, we identified four variables to analyze for each of the two groups over four and three academic years, respectively: (1) retention rate, (2) current classification, (3) grade point average, and (4) writing course sequence completed. Since the variables are nominal (GPA recorded as A, B, C, D, F), data consists of frequencies of occurrence in each category. While we did not really know what to expect — especially of the inter-relationships among these variables — we felt that we could arrive at a clearer picture of retention than that presented by the administration. This instinct proved to be right.

Data Collection

Our greatest challenge in the study proved to be gathering data because they had to be collected individually, student-by-student, taking many weeks to complete. As the weeks passed, we developed a pattern of ranking the variables, based on the chronology of the students' progress through the entire sequence of English courses. We reviewed university records including course grade sheets, students' transcripts, and the Student Academic Records System which provides access to historical and personal data. We initially charted data by course, but as we accumulated more data, we transferred them to a more refined chart indicating identifiable patterns within the variables, patterns which led us to some surprisingly gratifying results.

Retention Rate

The retention variable was the most important construct to the study since we were told that most students who left UAB did so after their freshman year and that the attrition rate for this time span was, the administration believed, approximately 50% for conditionally admitted students contrasted with 37% of regularly admitted students. To support their claim, the administration supplied a copy of the university's latest retention study of the general enrollment, a 1996

survey analyzing cohorts from 1990, comparing UAB's first and fourth year retention rates with those of schools comprising the "Urban 13," urban universities with demographics similar to those at UAB: Georgia State, Indiana University-Purdue, University at Indianapolis, University of New Orleans, University of Illinois-Chicago, University of Missouri-Kansas City, University of Akron, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Wayne State, University of Louisville, University of Central Florida, University of Missouri-St. Louis, and University of Houston (Minter Associates, 1996). Retention rates for the two reflected categories of UAB students, "Full Time Freshmen" and "Part Time Freshmen," as reported in Section 4.2 of "Retention, Graduation Rates Special Study" (Minter Associates), appear in Table 1.

Table 1-A: Overall Retention Rates for General Enrollment

	Full Time Freshmen	Part Time Freshmen	Average
1st year retention	73%	53%	63%
2nd year retention	61%	43%	52%
3rd year retention	54%	40%	47%
4th year retention	34%	12%	23%

(Minter Associates, 1996)

Table 1-B: Retention Rates for Sample Population

1st year retention	69%
2nd year retention	60%
3rd year retention	58%
4th year retention	50%

Our study reflects retention rates for the entire population of 685 basic writing students, not distinguishing between full and part time sub-groups as the Minter study recorded for the general enrollment. These figures held our first important discovery. Our basic writers had first year retention rates of 475 (69%)—6% higher than regularly admitted students not required to take basic writing courses—second year retention rates of 411 (60%), and third year retention rates of 395 (58%). In addition, 343 (50%) students were retained or had graduated by the fourth year, as compared to 23% of the total UAB general population as reported by Minter (1996). The 17% difference in these two retention rates confirmed what we could only hope for—that basic writing students fared better than those in the general population. It is safe to say that these findings were even stronger than we had expected.

A second hypothesis the administration forwarded was that the

largest number of students who leave the University do so within one year after their initial enrollment (Minter Associates, 1996). Our own instincts and anecdotal evidence from our own basic writing classes led us to believe this assumption, but we wanted to confirm it. Thus, we noted the time at which students in the remaining 50% of the sample population failed to enroll for further classes. Excluding 48 students in non-matriculating status [Transient: 3; Special: 33; Temporary: 11; Non-degree Seeking: 1], Table 2 indicates at what point in their studies the students in the sample population left the university.

Table 2: Attrition Rate for Sample Population

N = 294

	Number	Percent
1st year	210	71%
2nd year	64	22%
3rd year	16	5%
4th year	4	1%

Of the original 685 students in the sample population, 18 earned degrees and 325 were still registered at UAB four years after initial enrollment. In this case, then, our instincts proved to be accurate, for most students who leave the university do so within one year after initial enrollment. A curious corollary we found is that students – all students, not just basic writers – who survive this critical first year are in as much or more danger of leaving the university the second year; thus, the second year retention issue becomes equally crucial.

When we compared the fourth year retention rates between the students in the sample population and UAB’s general enrollment during the same period, we were especially pleased to discover the percentage of retention for each group. The fourth year retention rates for the 685 students in the sample population and the 2,978 students in the general enrollment are reflected in Table 3.

Table 3: Fourth-Year Retention Rate

Sample Population	50%
UAB Full-time	34%
UAB Part-time	12%
UAB Overall	23%

Once again, our results proved to greatly exceed our expectations: sixteen (16) percentage points higher for full time students and thirty-eight (38) percentage points higher for the part time students.

Taken together, this comprised a full twenty-seven (27) percentage points higher than the average for all students in the UAB study. Therefore, although the conditionally admitted students are initially at greater risk of withdrawing from the university than students not required to take basic writing courses, those who remain past the one-year period are more than twice as likely as other students to be retained. In fact, the study indicates that, for the students in the sample, second- rather than first-year retention is the crucial factor in determining whether or not students will complete their studies through a fourth year. This finding did not surprise us, given the increased complexity of work required from our own second-year students, a level we expect is required from these students by their professors across the curriculum. From conversations with other faculty, we understand that students under prepared in English are under prepared in other disciplines, as well. Students who remain in the university two years after initial enrollment risk only a 6% chance of non-completion; those who complete the third year fail to return at a rate of 1%.

Current Classification

We were also interested in discovering how much progress these basic writing students had made toward graduation by noting current classification the fourth year after its 1993 or 1994 enrollment in the Developmental Writing Program. Of the 325 students still registered with the University, the majority had attained only sophomore or junior standing rather than the optimal junior and senior levels. A breakdown of specific current classification is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Current Classification of Sample Population
N = 325

Current Classification	Number of Students
Freshman	38 (12%)
Sophomore	123 (38%)
Junior	114 (35%)
Senior	30 (9%)
Other*	20 (6%)

*Transient: 1; Special: 10; Temporary: 6; Doctoral Candidates (ESL): 2; Master's Level (ESL): 1

Current classification four years after enrollment revealed that seventy-three (73%) percent of the students retained past the first year had achieved only sophomore or junior status. Ideally, the students

should have been ranked as either juniors or seniors. Although members of the sample population are approximately one year behind their expected ranking, eighty-eight (88%) percent of the 343 retained students have remained enrolled more than one year, thus surviving the crucial first- and second-year attrition threats.

Grade Point Average

We were curious to discover what impact, if any, grade point average had on these students' retention rates. In February 1997, we recorded cumulative grade point averages of all 685 students in the sample population, noting the differences between those who left and the retained sub-groups throughout their registration. Since UAB uses a 4.0 grading standard [4.0 = A], we grouped the students' averages to reflect the university's general grade point average ranges:

(1) = 0-1.00; (2) = 1.01-2.00; (3) = 2.01-3.00; (4) = 3.01-4.00.

While we guessed that the grade point averages of retained students at UAB would be substantially higher than those who had left, Table 5, which also indicates the grade point average at which the greatest number of students in each classification was either retained or lost, proved us wrong—surprisingly so.

Table 5: Most-Frequent Grade Point Averages of Sample Population

Current Classification	Grade Point Average	Retained	Lost
Freshman	(1.01-2.00)	55%	43%
Sophomore	(2.01-3.00)	63%	50%
Junior	(2.01-3.00)	79%	56%
Senior	(2.01-3.00)	63%	75%
Graduate	(2.01-3.00)	72%	—

While the percentages varied from 12-23 percentage points between the retained and lost students, the grade point averages of the two groups remained similar. We were quite surprised to note that, apparently, grade point average is not a variable which predicts whether students will continue university studies. Once again, the transient nature of the student population seems to override many factors, including this one which would seem to influence retention rates. In the future, we plan to compare these results both with those from a larger sample of basic writing students as well as within the larger context of the general enrollment.

Writing Course Sequence Completed

Another important consideration, we believed, was the number of times students attempted each course in the required English core. This includes a six or nine credit-hour writing sequence, depending on admission test scores: EH 099 (Developmental Writing), EH 101 (Exposition), and EH 102 (Argument) as well as a three or six credit-hour sophomore literature sequence which consists of one or two classes at the 200 level, depending on the student's major course of study. We also noted both persistence throughout the entire sequence and the point of attrition for students who withdrew from the program. We hypothesized that the longer a student is retained in the sequence, the more likely he or she is to complete each course as well as the entire core. Results of this study are presented in Table 6.

The figures in Table 6 indicate that of the initial 685 students in the study, 511 enrolled in EH 101; 410 in EH 102; and 276 in EH 200-level courses. Thus, 40% of the sample population fulfilled the entire required sequence; 32% remained registered throughout the study, while 8% were lost. At the conclusion of the study, 79% of the entire population had completed EH 101, 55% had completed EH 102, and 38% had completed sophomore literature.

In addition to observing the number of times these basic writers attempted each course, we also noted how many had completed each course in the sequence. We hypothesized that as students progressed through the sequence, their completion rates would remain stable. These figures are presented in Table 7.

These figures are crucial since they reflect that the number of basic writing students who completed courses in the English sequence remains within a six-percentage range from 89-95%. Specifically, of the 685 students who enrolled in EH 099 (Developmental Writing), 611 (89%) completed the course; of the 511 students who enrolled in EH 101, 477 (93%) completed the course; of the 410 students who enrolled in EH 102, 376 (92%) completed the course; and of the 276 students who enrolled in EH 200, 262 (95%) completed the course(s). While these figures disregard the number of times students took each course before completing it and sharply contrast with the percentage of the sample population who completed the sequence (90% completed EH 099; 70% completed EH 101; 55% completed EH 102; 38% completed EH 200), it nevertheless does strongly demonstrate a consistent and stable completion rate throughout the courses in the sequence. But these figures still had little to do with retention rates. At-risk commuter students hampered by financial concerns, employment conflicts, and family matters tend to drop out, stop out, or at least to need more time to graduate than we might expect. Part of our future work will be to look at the general enrollment to determine whether this is true for all UAB

students. This study does, however, support the conclusion that conditionally admitted students' retention is enhanced by enrollment in a basic writing course and demonstrates the efficacy of our Developmental Writing Program. This finding alone supports the need for offering developmental course work as part of the university curriculum. In this study, developmental writing courses appear to enhance the retention of these students, shutting the revolving-door that many universities have become for at-risk students.

Table 6: Persistence Rate of Course Enrollment

Course	Times Attempted	Retained Percentage	Lost Percentage
<u>EH 099</u>			
N = 685			
	1	277 40%	278 41%
	2	60 8%	55 8%
	3	5 <1%	9 1%
	5	1 <1%	0 0%
TOTAL		343	342
<u>EH 101</u>			
N = 511			
	1	268 52%	176 34%
	2	42 8%	16 3%
	3	4 <1%	4 <1%
	5	1 <1%	0 0%
TOTAL		315	196
<u>EH 102</u>			
N = 410			
	1	255 62%	101 25%
	2	32 7%	16 4%
	3	4 <1%	0 0%
	4	0 <1%	2 <1%
TOTAL		291	119
<u>EH 200-Level</u>			
N = 276			
	1	203 74%	51 18%
	3	16 7%	4 1%
	5	1 <1%	0 0%
	8	1 0%	0 0%
TOTAL		221	55

Table 7: Completion Rate of Course Sequence

N = 685

Course	Enrolled		Completed	
EH 099	685	100%	611	89%
EH 101	511	70%	477	93%
EH 102	410	55%	376	92%
EH 200	276	38%	262	95%

Conclusion

Did we save the basic writing program with our results? For the moment, yes. Beyond the university administration lies a conservative state legislature who traditionally underfunds higher education. In fact, a bill sits in the legislature this moment which, if approved, will take all developmental courses out of the state's 4-year institutions, placing them exclusively in 2-year junior and community colleges. Our arguments to the contrary, politics may be the decisive factor. However, we are clear-sighted enough to know that, if the bill is passed, we will still be faced with under-prepared writers who will be unable to take basic writing but who, we know, will need developmental work nonetheless. Perhaps, then, it will all become a matter of semantics and clever course numbering. What will this next generation of basic writing students be called and what sort of course can be devised to give them the help they will inevitably need? A competition between the discourses of bureaucrats and intellectuals, as Richard Miller points out, is patently futile. Basic writing instructors trying to hold onto their programs, he would argue, operate from bureaucratic notions, albeit not generally using financial decisions as decisive factors. While discussing the fact that teachers complain that the world of the academy is increasingly being treated as a business — though the academy has always and will always be a business — Miller says:

Consequently, those who have been willing or have been compelled to do the work of setting admissions standards, designing curricula, establishing appropriate modes of assessment, and generating adequate grievance procedures — those people, in other words, who have had to choose between one set of bureaucratic practices and another — have been left to labor in a kind of critical darkness. (203)

Miller suggests that "the best strategy available to anyone seeking to enter or remain in the profession may well involve fabricating for oneself and for the academic community at large some inhabitable version of the intellectual-bureaucrat" (216). As writing program directors strive to do just that, to figure out how to work within the system while, at the same time, to labor for improving (or in the case of basic writing instructors to labor for retaining existing) learning conditions for students, we must also do something equally vital. We must research and record data to support our claims.

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