

# From Falling Through the Cracks to Pulling Through: Moving from a Traditional Remediation Model Toward a Multi-Layered Support Model for Basic Writing

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*ABSTRACT: This article examines two course redesigns undertaken to improve student support, learning, and retention in the basic writing program at Oakland University, a doctoral research university in southeast Michigan, where support for developmental writers has fluctuated dramatically between nurture and neglect over the past fifty years. However, current conditions—including the creation of a new department of writing and rhetoric and a university-wide commitment to student support and retention—have set the stage for dramatic revisions to the way our basic writing and supervised study courses are administered. Over the last five years, the writing and rhetoric department at Oakland has revised both of these courses to better align them with our first-year writing program’s focus on rhetoric, research, revision, and reflection. These changes have formed the groundwork for a new curricular model that we believe will provide multiple layers of faculty and peer support for our most vulnerable students.*

*KEYWORDS: curriculum reform; writing instruction; basic writing; retention*

In 2013, Michigan adopted a new transfer agreement that effectively eliminated the requirement for a research-focused composition course by allowing students to fulfill their writing requirements through a combination of *any* composition course and a communication course. This agreement was designed by a committee of university registrars, community

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college administrators, and directors of marketing who were appointed by the state legislature, and it was done without the input of writing program administrators (WPAs) or composition specialists. Paralleling Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson's 1996 account of how the expertise of composition faculty was ignored when for-credit basic writing classes were eliminated in South Carolina ("Repositioning" 63), compositionists and WPAs in Michigan have found ourselves confronted with just how "invisible" our discipline is to educational bureaucrats. As we wondered what this agreement would mean for our transfer students' college readiness, we also contemplated why no one on the committee had deemed a single composition professor or WPA to be a legitimate stakeholder in their deliberations. This decision led the writing and rhetoric faculty at our university to reevaluate how our program was perceived by the state legislature, to consider what they imagined our work to be, and to contend with how those perceptions might shape future legislative actions. We worried, not without cause, about the future of basic writing on our campus.

Our worries are doubtlessly shared by many readers of this journal and with university and community college faculty around the country. Indeed, in 2015, the Two-Year College English Association published a "White Paper on Developmental Education Reforms," which outlined their concerns over movements "from Florida to Washington, from Connecticut to Colorado" intent on legislating the administration of developmental college courses ("TYCA" 227). Almost invariably, such legislative mandates have been pursued without the advice or consent of two-year college faculty (227). With legislation poised to move developmental courses such as basic writing out of four-year institutions and into community colleges, the TYCA white paper acknowledges that two-year college faculty may be caught flat-footed, finding that they need make dramatic programmatic changes "on short notice and with few or no additional resources" (235). Other factors, such as dwindling enrollments, low retention and completion rates, and high DFWI rates in gateway and required courses also contribute to a troubling environment for all institutions and impact the support we can provide to our at-risk students.

As disciplinary experts, we might wish to pretend that political and bureaucratic concerns should have no bearing on our pedagogical decisions. But in this contentious regulatory context, we would do well to consider Sugie Goen-Salter's warning that—while considerations of "curriculum, pedagogy, and basic writing theory are left out of administrative policy discussions about remediation"—writing faculty may also be guilty of "ignoring basic writing's complex history and the ways it interacts with vested

institutional, economic, and political interests” (83). Throughout Oakland’s history, writing instruction has “shifted among curricular and institutional locations that were at first invisible, then remedial, and then independent” (Chong and Nugent 176). The university’s earliest records show an institution at first in denial about the need for writing instruction, then one swept by urgent calls for writing support and, eventually, an institution in possession of a substantial developmental writing curriculum. The Basic Writing (WRT 102) and Supervised Study (WRT 104) courses that we discuss in this article were revised in response to two pressures: the threat of additional curricular mandates enacted by the Michigan state legislature and, more generally, “the increasing influence of neoliberal impulses” driving university administrators to eliminate curricular and extra-curricular support for at-risk students (Lamos, “Minority-Serving” 5). Our revisions were inspired by departmental concerns about the future of basic writing support on our own campus, grounded in current best practices in the field, and informed by an understanding of the troubling history of developmental education and first-year writing instruction at Oakland University.

## **THE HISTORY OF WRITING INSTRUCTION AT OAKLAND UNIVERSITY**

Oakland University (OU) was endowed in 1957 as a liberal arts college, drawing faculty from Ivy League universities in the northeast who began their work here with unrealistic expectations and “relentlessly rigorous” academic standards for their first few classes of students (Riesman, Gusfield, and Gamson 33). As noted in OU’s first course catalogs, the university was committed to offering no “courses of a sub-collegiate character” (*Michigan State University-Oakland*, 1959), defined as any courses in reading, math at a level below calculus, or composition. In their history of the university, David Riesman, Joseph Gusfield, and Zelda Gamson note that the university’s “original plan to have no ‘remedial’ or ‘bonehead’ English composition in the freshman year but to begin with the study of literature was in keeping with the post-Sputnik insistence that the colleges force better preparation upon the high schools” (31). Thus, while Mike Rose notes a tendency for institutions to treat basic writing “in isolation from the core mission” of the university and to place the course in a kind of “institutional quarantine” (“The Positive” 4), at Oakland such courses were initially prohibited because they were viewed as both unnecessary and antithetical to the mission and higher ideals of the institution. Instead of traditional composition classes,

the university claimed that faculty in every department were expected to “place a strong emphasis on writing in all courses” (*Michigan State University-Oakland*, 1959).

All composition courses were considered “sub-collegiate” during the university’s early years, but a number of other academic initiatives attempted to make up for the lack of direct writing instruction and support during this time. The first of these initiatives was a literature course that emphasized writing about literature, “Composition and Analysis of English Prose.” However, a number of other approaches to improving student writing were proposed between 1963 and 1972. In 1963, for example, university faculty and administrators serving on the University Senate questioned the assumption that students were learning “writing in all courses,” and charged the Academic Affairs Committee to investigate “the University wide problem of literacy” (*Minutes*, April 8, 1963). Within two years, the University Senate approved the committee’s proposal that all first-year students be required to complete “two semesters of UC 01 Freshman Explorations” (*Minutes*, April 14, 1965). The proposal made exceptions for transfer students who had “successfully completed a full transferable year of English Writing work elsewhere” (*Minutes*, April 14, 1965). These new courses were called Freshman Explorations, or Exploratories for short, and were first offered in Fall 1966. They emphasized writing within specific subject areas, including western civilization, non-western civilization, literature, fine arts, “Man and Contemporary Society,” and science (“UC Courses” 1).

There may have been some limited success to this approach; however, incremental changes to the wording of this requirement suggest that faculty continued to be dissatisfied with student writing. In 1968, for example, the University Senate approved language indicating that “any student who has not satisfactorily completed two Exploratories in his first three semesters may be declared ineligible to continue as an enrolled student” (*Minutes*, March 26, 1968). In 1970, the Academic Policy Committee proposed using reading and writing exams to place students into one of three new levels of Exploratories. Those three levels will likely look familiar to readers of this journal: UC 01, a 4-credit course capped at 18 students that involved “frequent short writing assignments” and that could be waived if the student earned an excellent score on the placement exams; UC 02, a 4-credit course, which was capped at 25 and engaged students in “longer, less frequent assignments”; and an 8-credit course, UC 03 for students who had earned a score below satisfactory on their placement exams (*Minutes*, April 2, 1970). This course, offered an “intensive concentration in writing,” was capped at 20 students, and was

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staffed by an instructor and a student assistant (*Minutes*, April 2, 1970). Instructors and assistants teaching UC 03 were charged with forming “a group to exchange information about problems and specific teaching techniques” (*Minutes*, April 20, 1970). As further evidence of the university’s struggles to address developmental writing students, only one year later, the University Senate approved a motion to abolish UC 03, the course designed specifically to address the needs of those students.

In 1971, the Academic Policy Committee proposed yet another measure to improve student writing by eliminating the remaining Exploratories and creating a free-standing Department of Composition charged with teaching reading and writing courses, developing placement exams, and collaborating with the new Department of Speech Communication (*Minutes*, March 28, 1972). The proposal to abolish the Exploratories was approved without discussion, but the proposal for a Department of Composition was amended to rename it the Department of Learning Skills Development (*Minutes*, April 5, 1972). A discussion over the name of the department and its institutional home continued over several meetings before the member advocating “Department of Composition” agreed to withdraw that name if the member advocating “Department of Learning Skills Development” agreed to withdraw the word “development” (*Minutes*, April 26, 1972). A compromise having been reached, the Learning Skills Department was approved on April 26, 1972 and began offering its first developmental writing courses that fall. Unlike other academic departments, this department was entirely under the auspices of the Provost’s Office.

The institutional history of writing instruction that we recount above demonstrates the extremes to which the pedagogical pendulum has swung at Oakland—oscillating between the institution’s inattention to direct writing instruction and the needs of at-risk students in the 1950s and early 1960s, to uncertainty over how best to address student literacy in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and finally, as we discuss below, to hyper-attention for these students and the creation of an extensive developmental reading and writing curriculum in the 1970s and 1980s. Like other universities around the country, writing instruction at Oakland has also moved away from the current-traditional instruction of the university’s early decades to the more contemporary curriculum rooted in rhetoric and process.

## **Developmental Instruction and an Emerging Discipline**

By conceding in 1972 that developmental writing courses were at least a pedagogical necessity—if not entirely consistent with what many faculty believed to be the highest ideals of their institution—Oakland joined countless other institutions around the country who were newly committed to attending to their at-risk student population by providing supplemental instruction, peer tutoring, and basic writing classes. Indeed, only three years after Oakland offered its first developmental writing classes in 1972, Mina Shaughnessy invited readers of this journal’s inaugural issue “to take a closer look at the job of teaching writing” (“Introduction” 3). While Shaughnessy’s work emerged from the challenges facing universities around the country as a result of new open admissions policies, Felicia Chong and Jim Nugent suggest that Oakland faculty were always deeply troubled by the academic preparation of their students. They note that, beginning with its first class of students, “a conflicting dynamic surfaced almost immediately between the aspirations of OU’s esteemed faculty and the academic abilities of its students,” suggesting that “the early history of the institution is defined by a gradual reconciliation among the expectations of faculty, the abilities of students, and the imperatives of institutional administration” (173).

In the early 1970s, faculty at Oakland worked first to develop and then to expand a collection of skills-based, developmental reading and writing courses. The new department began to address the needs of more advanced students by offering a Basic Writing III course that emphasized “the development of extended rhetorical structures” and that focused on organization, logic, coherence, and unity alongside an introduction “to techniques of persuasive argument and to fundamental methods of research and annotation” (*OU Undergraduate Catalog, 1972–1973, 366*). The department also offered students up to 8 credits of a 200-level “Writing in Special Fields” course (*OU Undergraduate Catalog, 1972–1973, 366*). These course offerings suggest that learning skills faculty recognized the importance of rhetoric and research practices in preparing students for work at all levels in the university. Unfortunately, this interest in advanced writing classes was short-lived. In 1974, LS 200-210, Writing in Special Fields, was removed from the catalog; LS 101, Basic Writing III, was removed in 1978; and by 1979, the department of learning skills comprised a dozen writing, reading, and study skills classes, seven of which were below the 100-level.

As Oakland embraced developmental education in the 1970s, contributors to this journal were laying the foundation for research and best

practices in the field. Some of the most innovative and powerful voices published works on grammar instruction (D’Eloia; Halsted; Kunz), vocabulary (Eisenberg; Gallagher), and rhetoric (Lunsford; Taylor). During its first six years, *JBW* authors proposed pedagogies for ESL students (Bruder and Furey; Davidson) and writing across the curriculum programs (Maimon; Reiff); presented research on revision (Harris; Sommers) and evaluation (White; Williams); and turned their attention to how graduate programs might best prepare teachers of basic writing (Gebhardt). Unfortunately, as this intellectual tradition in basic writing developed on the national level, the curriculum at Oakland and at universities around the country continued to exhibit a remedial approach consistent with what William B. Lalicker terms the “prerequisite model” and what Shawna Shapiro identifies as a “traditional remedial model” (42).

### **Basic Writing’s New Status at the University**

While a skills-based curriculum for reading and writing persisted at OU throughout the 1980s and 1990s, changes to the departmental home for these courses made possible some eventual adjustments to how writing was taught and perceived at the university. In 1982, a dozen learning skills courses were transferred to a new Department of Rhetoric, Communication, and Journalism (RCJ), marking the first time composition was housed in a non-administrative, fully academic department. At the same time, courses in the advanced learning skills curriculum, which introduced students to both process and rhetoric, were renamed from Basic Writing Skills I and Basic Writing Skills II to Composition I and Composition II. With this change, OU came to recognize composition as a necessary course for all students and not just developmental students. Subtle changes were also made to the course descriptions, demonstrating a clear shift in approach for these two classes. For example, in 1980, LS 101 Basic Writing Skills I was described as “a course emphasizing the formal and functional elements in expository writing. Students are introduced to syntactic and rhetorical patterns of the English sentence and related patterns of paragraph development” (*OU Undergraduate Catalog*, 1979-1980, 128). In 1982, this course was renamed RHT 100 Composition I and described as a course that “explores the formal and functional elements of expository prose, with emphasis on the process of writing. Students investigate effective syntactic and rhetorical patterns, incorporating these patterns into the composition of several short essays” (*OU Undergraduate Catalog*, 1982-1983, 126). In its original form, LS 101

focused on sentence-level and paragraph-level considerations. With this new iteration of the course, Composition I came to emphasize the writing process and the development of short essays.

In place of these basic writing skills classes, two “developmental” classes—RHT 075 Developmental Writing I and RHT 080 Developmental Writing II—were created. Both were described as small group classes in “basic composition skills” (*OU Undergraduate Catalog*, 1982–1983, 126). Gradually, the number of skills-based courses offered in RCJ decreased, and an advanced writing curriculum, one that incorporated the rhetorical and process-based pedagogies of Composition I and Composition II, emerged. In 1999–2000, half of the rhetoric courses offered by RCJ (7 of 14) were identified as reading, writing, and study skills courses, although only one of those courses, a 6-credit Communication Skills class, was listed as below the 100-level.<sup>1</sup> While most of these skills-based courses were offered only rarely after the turn of the century, six remained on the books until Fall 2010, two years after the new department and new writing and rhetoric major were formed. That year, writing and rhetoric faculty voted to reduce the number of developmental courses to three: WRT 102: Basic Writing (required for any student earning a 15 or below on the ACT), an elective 1-credit WRT 104: Supervised Study course, and an elective WRT 140: College Reading class.

The number of developmental offerings in our department has remained unchanged since 2010; however, the attention that we pay to the curriculum, staffing, and assessment of these courses has improved greatly in recent years. This renewed attention was made possible, in part, as a result of financial support from both our senior associate provost, who chairs our university’s retention and completion committees, and from the College of Arts and Sciences. With both financial resources and the efforts of new faculty, our department has significantly revised both the basic writing and supervised study curriculum. The basic writing course was redesigned to focus on instruction in rhetoric, research, revision, and reflection and is intended to support students’ development of the habits of mind of effective college writers outlined in the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* and to encourage help-seeking behaviors among at-risk students. These changes to basic writing have been strengthened by an improved referral process and new course objectives for supervised study.



## **A TROUBLED HISTORY OF WRITING SUPPORT AT OAKLAND UNIVERSITY**

### **Writing Centers as the “New Frontier”**

Like developmental courses, writing centers have a checkered history at Oakland. Our first writing center was established in 1965 by English department faculty. Students were referred to the center by their instructors or advisors, although some students chose to enroll in the writing center’s course of study of their own accord. In its first semester, Oakland’s writing center served seventy students (out of some 1,800 undergraduates), offering each student three mandatory one-on-one conferences and two optional open lectures every week (“Student Help” 1). Faculty and student tutors in the writing center focused their efforts on helping students “learn to limit a subject adequately, organize it methodically, and develop it thoroughly” (1). According to the center’s founders Joan Rosen and Rosale Murphy, tutorials and lectures emphasized “clearly constructed sentences and paragraphs with specific attention to unity, coherence, emphasis, and variety,” along with attention to the use of standardized English so that students might gain the confidence that “their ideas will be understood and respected” (1).

While this first center may fall short by a number of contemporary measures, faculty and students who staffed it aimed to instruct students in higher-order concerns like organization and development alongside lower-order concerns like grammar and mechanics. By the 1980s, however, the English department’s writing center was moved into a unit known as the Academic Skills Center, a transition that shifted the center’s focus more exclusively to lower-order concerns and compelled faculty in Oakland’s rhetoric program to develop their own writing center that, according to one of our senior colleagues, was funded by “passing the hat” at department meetings. Known as the Writing and Reading Center, the department’s center was staffed by three advanced writing students and provided at least some measure of support for first-year writing students in researching and writing.

So while tutorials offered in the department’s Writing and Reading Center provided assistance with research and writing, the university’s Academic Development Center largely conformed to the “fix-it-shop” model that Lil Brannon and Stephen North identified in the first issue of *The Writing Center Journal* in which writing centers are held to be “correction places, fix-it shops for the chronic who/whom confusers” (1). For more than two decades, this fix-it shop doctrine informed the kind of writing support that

the majority of Oakland students received in the Academic Development Center and, later, the Academic Skills Center. In fact, one rhetoric professor described that support as clinical: “Even before we became much more rhetoric[ally] and theoretically grounded [in the rhetoric program], we had issues with how the Academic Skills Center was [tutoring writing. . .] It was a little bit like, ‘Here’s your paper [hospital] gown’. . . Like there had to be something pretty wrong with you.”

In 1984, OU’s Commission on University Excellence authored a report suggesting that institutional support systems for developmental students such as the Academic Development Center lacked both “sufficient resources...[and] widespread support to achieve their limited goals” (“Preliminary Report” 72). The report not only suggested that the university might consider relying on community colleges to support students with “minimal skills levels,” but it also reflected our faculty’s commitment to underprepared students by noting that, “for political and social justice reasons, the University may wish to retain and significantly improve and strengthen its academic support program” (73). Despite the recommendations for increased student support for writing, there appears to have been limited support and vision for a fully funded university writing center during this time. Thus, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the rhetoric program’s basic writing and supervised study courses were often the only institutionally sponsored writing support for our underprepared students.

It took years of discussion, several proposals, and financial support from two generous donors, but in 2006, the university finally established a writing center as a permanent administrative unit. Where the Academic Skills Center operated on the model of “remediation labs, schoolhouse grammar clinics, [and] drill centers” (Brannon and North 1), Oakland’s new writing center remains informed by current theories, research, and best practices in the field. The new center is also staffed by undergraduate and graduate student consultants who are required to complete our department’s peer tutoring course (WRT 320 Writing Center Studies and Peer Tutoring Practice), and the work of tutors drawn from writing and rhetoric is overseen by a writing instructor whose academic background and research are in the field of composition-rhetoric.

### **The Writing Tutorial Course**

OU’s history is marked by a number of literacy crises, the earliest of which was described in school newspaper accounts of the first writing cen-

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ter in 1964. The creation of the university’s first writing tutorial course that same year suggests that Oakland faculty felt more could be done to improve student writing. The non-credit-bearing tutorial course that emerged from this perceived crisis in student writing, ENG 009: Aids in Expository Writing, was a precursor to our department’s supervised study course. ENG 009 provided students with access to a faculty tutor and offered struggling students much-needed support beyond what the university’s first writing center could provide. This tutorial course persisted for more than a decade at Oakland, disappearing from the English Department’s curriculum in 1972 when the university’s new Learning Skills Department began offering their own series of for-credit writing tutorials. When the new RCJ inherited the learning skills curriculum in 1982, rhetoric faculty reduced the number of tutorial courses from five to two, offering both a 1-credit tutorial for ESL students and the 1-credit supervised study course that promised to aid students in “any variety of subjects including mathematics, the sciences, the social sciences, theatre, art history, and composition” (*OU Undergraduate Catalog*, 1982–1983, 126). By 1988, supervised study was described as providing students with “tutorial instruction focusing on academic skills” (*OU Undergraduate Catalog*, 1988–1989, 165), and in 1993 the tutorial sessions were redesigned to focus more specifically on composition practices and were described as “tutorial instruction in areas mutually agreed upon by student and instructor such as independent or academic writing projects” (*OU Undergraduate Catalog*, 1993–1994, 170).

With the creation of a new writing center in 2006, both the center’s free peer tutoring and the department’s for-credit supervised study course co-existed without any formal delineation of their respective roles in supporting student writing. In practice, however, referrals to supervised study by first-year writing instructors, academic advisors, administrators, and writing center staff tacitly implied that a student had “more severe” problems with standardized edited English than peer tutors could cope with or classroom instructors had time to address. While tutors in the new writing center employed current best practices in the field, by 2008 our supervised study course again began to resemble Brannon and North’s “fix-it shop” (1): instructors addressed grammar and mechanics with their tutees, while largely ignoring the kinds of process and rhetorical instruction that informed our other first-year and advanced writing courses.

## **HOW SUPPORT FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS FELL THROUGH THE CRACKS**

During OU's first five decades, writing instruction and support shifted and expanded as writing courses were first offered by the English department in the 1960s (ENG 009: Aids to Expository Writing; ENG 101: Composition and Analysis of English Prose; and ENG 210: Fundamentals of Exposition); then through a separate department of learning skills in the 1970s; then by a rhetoric program housed in an academic department of rhetoric, communication, and journalism in the 1980s; and finally by an independent academic department of writing and rhetoric in 2008. As tempting as it would be to make this history into a teleological narrative of developmental writing's arrival at its ideal institutional home, we admit that even within our department, basic writing has at times fallen through the cracks as our faculty's energy was consumed by the urgent and unceasing tasks involved with the establishment of a new department and major. Curriculum design for the new undergraduate writing major and baseline assessment of the required general education/first-year writing course depleted our resources as a department in the first few years, especially in terms of faculty time. Out of necessity, issues with the basic writing and supervised study courses were put on the back burner, even as we recognized serious pedagogical issues with the current-traditional content and teacher-centered approaches of both courses. When the university's Retention Committee began exploring ways to support at-risk students and improve first-to-second semester and first-to-second year retention, though, we knew a kairotic moment was at hand for us to dramatically revise these classes.

In the sections that follow, we briefly discuss how we revised the basic writing and supervised study courses to better prepare our students for the rhetoric- and process-based curriculum of our other first-year classes. The revision of each course began with an assessment of its "ground game" pedagogy that revealed the extent to which they had come to diverge from the research, theories, and best practices embodied in the rest of our curriculum. For example, while other first-year writing courses at OU adhered to best practices in the field, such as those outlined in the *WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition*, Lori's research suggested that our sole basic writing course was built around retrograde assumptions about students' struggles with writing and overwhelmingly informed by skills-based, current-traditional instructional practices. This course has since been revised to

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focus on the “four Rs” of our first-year writing curriculum: rhetoric, research, revision, and reflection.

As with the basic writing course redesign, the revision of our supervised study course began with an assessment that demonstrated that some of our first-year instructors referred students to the supervised study course because of grammatical errors, proofreading problems, or perceived ESL issues. The course also lacked consistent pedagogical practices or learning objectives, leaving the decision of how best to use the weekly half-hour tutorial meetings to the student. Our revised supervised study course now emphasizes guided practice in interpreting writing assignment directions and instructor feedback, developing strategies for invention and revision, and reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of work-in-progress (Appendix A). Ultimately, we believe these course revisions may serve as a catalyst for more substantial curricular changes to take place at OU in the next few years.

### **THE BASIC WRITING REDESIGN**

Basic writing students at Oakland fit the pattern that Mark McBeth identified at John Jay College: students are frequently “enrolled in their freshman composition courses still underprepared to complete the types of college-level critical thinking and writing expected” in the Composition I and Composition II courses (82). With its skills-based, current-traditional approach, our original basic writing course did little to prepare students for this type of critical work. This course also provided basic writing students with little or no rhetorical instruction, and it did not introduce students to primary or secondary research practices.

### **Reforming a Skills-Based, Current-Traditional Curriculum**

While the other first-year writing courses at Oakland embrace rhetoric, research, revision, and reflection, prior to our redesign, the department’s only basic writing course was informed by more current-traditional assumptions about student writers and about the types of support our at-risk student population required. We bragged on our new department home page that our first-year writing program helped our students “develop the rhetorical skills, processes, and information literacies necessary for writing and composing in the 21st century,” and we also touted the program’s “focus on community and civic engagement, new media composition, collaborative writing, and revision” (“First-Year Writing and Rhetoric”). However, with its emphasis on grammar, punctuation, and sentence and paragraph construction, our

basic writing course was not “theoretically or epistemologically compatible with outcomes being assessed” (Lalicker), valued, and boasted about in the other courses in our first-year program. Looking back now, we realize that we may have assumed that the theories and best practices that shaped our innovative Composition I and Composition II courses would naturally and inevitably trickle down into the basic writing curriculum.

As we undertook our course revision, first-year attrition rates and course-specific data provided by our Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA) indicated that our basic writing course was, indeed, failing to provide our students with the academic preparation they needed to succeed at the university. In the past, only 30–40% of Oakland’s basic writing students returned for their sophomore year, compared with 70–80% of students who initially enroll in Composition I. First-year student attrition rates are a university-wide concern, and national research studies suggest that “most of the gap in graduation rates has little to do with taking remedial classes in college” (Attewell and Lavin qtd. in Otte and Mlynarczyk 184). However, our university’s data suggested that the basic writing course might have contributed to retention problems at Oakland. In their 2010 assessment of our first-year writing program, OU’s OIRA suggested that even “after accounting for differences in academic preparedness, results suggest that there is some aspect of Basic Writing that reduced six-year graduation rates for Basic Writing students” (*Student Performance* 13). Despite this observation, OIRA’s published report did not support mainstreaming this population of students; instead, it proposed there was only “weak support for the argument that [our basic writing] students would have had higher six-year graduation rates if they had instead been enrolled in [composition I]” (19). We took OIRA’s mixed review of the data to suggest that low graduation rates among basic writing students were not the result of our students being assigned to the developmental class; rather, these rates may have been, in part, the result of that course’s failure to prepare these students for more advanced work at the university.

### **Assessing the Curriculum**

Administrative oversight of basic writing at Oakland has generally been minimal, and as a result, instruction in the course was informed primarily by individual instructor preferences and lore rather than by disciplinary research and best practices. In addition, no assessment of Oakland’s basic writing course had ever been undertaken prior to the 2012 revision of the

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course. Before we could revise our approach to the course, then, we needed to get a clearer understanding of how writing was actually being taught in the class.

In 2011, Lori was appointed to serve as the department’s director of first-year writing, and her first undertaking in that role was to conduct an informal assessment of our basic writing course by surveying course syllabi. Faculty teaching these classes had received scant oversight of their teaching, and course syllabi were poised to provide insights into the objectives these instructors had identified for their courses and the assignments they designed to meet those objectives. In the process of this research, Lori was pleased to discover two recent developments, initiatives spearheaded by our writing center director who regularly taught basic writing and first-year writing in the department. These included an embedded writing specialist program that put writing center tutors into every basic writing class and an *ad hoc* committee charged by the department chair, Marshall Kitchens, with developing a common syllabus to bring consistency to course instruction in the dozen or more basic writing classes we offer every year.

While the embedded writing specialist program was a step in the right direction, providing our students with additional in-class writing support, the common syllabus displayed many of the characteristics of a “traditional remediation model” (Shapiro 42), suggesting that the committee’s efforts had only re-entrenched and institutionalized an approach that privileged instruction in grammar, punctuation, and sentence and paragraph development. The eleven distinct course goals that shaped this revised curriculum revealed that the process of developing a common syllabus may not have been an easy one. In fact, these eleven goals reflected the compromises that had to be reached to address the “paradigm clashes [and] significant differences in belief” about basic writing students’ abilities (Del Principe 65) that were embraced by our diversely trained faculty on the committee.

The course objectives revealed the compromises the committee had forged to construct a common curriculum, although theirs was a curriculum marked by contradictory pedagogical and theoretical approaches. For example, the new course goals ranged from “feel-good” learning outcomes such as “develop confidence in ability to accomplish a writing task” to more current-traditional concerns such as “write complete sentences in the four basic patterns (simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex).” These goals reflected the full range of our instructors’ familiarity with movements in the field, from new—“add visual literacy to your definition

of composition”—to not so new—learn to “appreciate the complex and personal effort involved in the craft (art and science) of writing.”

Because a course syllabus may not accurately reflect what happens from one day to the next or during an entire semester, Lori supplemented her syllabus review with classroom observations and a review of Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs). Both revealed that, despite the eclectic assortment of course goals outlined on the common syllabus, our basic writing faculty focused almost exclusively on sentence construction, editing, and appreciation of good writing (i.e., reading published writers) in their courses. Indeed, instruction in these areas frequently overlapped, with grammar being taught in the context of what students were reading (including “at least one book”). During a classroom observation in 2011, for example, one senior faculty member observed a basic writing instructor lead her class in a lengthy discussion of the previous night’s reading of Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*. This was followed by a grammar lecture and fill-in-the-blanks activity examining comma usage in paragraphs taken from *Walden*. Students in these classes completed “scaffolding assignments” that included some writing in response to issues and readings, but the majority of the scaffolding assignments focused on online workbook lessons in “punctuation, usage, and syntax work”; vocabulary exercises; and quizzes to test “readings, vocabulary, punctuation, grammar, and usage.”

To Lori’s eyes, primary course assignments reflected the instructors’ insecurities about assigning more complex writing tasks and their belief in what Annie Del Principe describes as “the linear narrative” (65), which presumes that “a particular sequence of genres or rhetorical modes represents an ascending sequence of complexity and skill” (66). Thus, major projects did not challenge students to compose in unfamiliar genres but merely required that they practice genres with which they already had some familiarity: our basic writing students were assigned a reading summary, a reading synthesis, two personal narratives, and two letters. In both its faculty-centered focus on analyzing (or appreciating) literary non-fiction and its emphasis on vocabulary building and on grammar and punctuation drill and testing, our basic writing course shared little resemblance with the rest of our program’s courses, student-centered practices, or learning outcomes. Lori determined that the course’s emphasis on grammar needed to be replaced with an emphasis on rhetoric, providing basic writing students with the same kind of introduction to rhetorical appeals and audience awareness that students in our Composition I course receive. Rather than requiring that students read one or more books chosen by the course instructor, Lori believed our basic



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writing students needed an introduction to secondary and primary research methods, to information literacy practices such as source evaluation, and to incorporating and synthesizing source information into their own texts. And rather than requiring grammar and vocabulary drills and quizzes, Lori wished for our basic writing instructors to make more time for peer review, conferencing, revision, and reflective practices.

### **A Redesign that Emphasizes Rhetoric, Research, Revision, and Reflection**

In 2012, Lori and Kitchens wrote a proposal for a \$10,000 “High-Impact Practices” grant offered by the university’s Office of Undergraduate Education (see Kitchens and Ostergaard). This grant paid for stipends for members of a small committee of full- and part-time faculty to research basic writing curricula during the summer of 2012, pilot a new curriculum in the fall of 2012, and assess and adjust that curriculum in Winter 2013. Together, this committee developed new outcomes and assignments for the class that brought basic writing in line with the outcomes valued in our Composition I and Composition II courses.

The redesign of the basic writing course that Lori’s new committee facilitated incorporates a number of programmatic and pedagogical features that are accepted as best practices in both writing studies and basic writing:

- a Basic Writing Committee that is responsible for maintaining, assessing, and, as necessary, updating the new curriculum;
- an embedded writing specialist program that appoints a writing center tutor to work with each section of basic writing;
- assignments that develop students’ help-seeking behaviors by asking them to conduct primary research into student support services on campus; and
- reflective writing assignments that encourage the transfer of learning from basic writing to other classes.

The 2012 redesign project refocused the course goals and aligned them more with our first-year writing program’s learning outcomes and with the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* by emphasizing rhetoric, research, revision, and reflection.<sup>2</sup> Changes to the course goals include subtle changes in wording that emphasize practice over comprehension and appreciation, such as revising an original course goal asserting that students would “understand writing as a process (not a product)” to a goal that asks

students to “approach writing as a multi-step, recursive process that requires feedback” (Appendix B). The new goals also demonstrate significant changes in emphasis within the course: the original goals asserted the importance of students making “a connection between reading and writing,” but the new goals prioritize “synthesiz[ing] information/ideas in and between various texts—written, spoken, and visual.” Where the original goals emphasized sentence structures and copyediting, the new goals privilege reflection to improve learning transfer and to help students develop the habits of mind of successful college writers.

The four major projects in the class challenge students to

- analyze their own learning strategies (Project 1: Learning Narrative)
- conduct primary research and analyze data—observations, interviews, and surveys—about support services on campus (Project 2: Guide to Student Support Services)
- employ and synthesize secondary research to develop an argument (Project 3: Critical Response to Selected Readings), and
- compile and reflect on their revised work in the class (Project 4: Final Portfolio)

An unexpected benefit of this standardized curriculum is that our basic writing instructors have developed an online resource where they share assignment descriptions, classroom activities, model student papers, and resources. When an instructor is assigned to teach the basic writing course for the first time, they have both a wealth of resources and a cohesive group of other instructors to provide support.

### **Assessing the New Curriculum**

Data from OU’s OIRA suggest our revised curriculum, which has been in place for four years, may better prepare our basic writing students for the Composition I course than in years past. In the three years prior to our redesign, of the basic writing students who went on to pass Composition I, about 70% earned final grades of 3.0 or above (on a 4-point grading scale). After the new curriculum was implemented and assessed, however, this portion went up to 90% (*Enrollment*).

We also developed a means for basic writing students to bypass the Composition I course and enroll directly into Composition II. As students work on Project 3: Critical Response to Selected Readings, basic writing

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faculty encourage their students to compose a second, optional critical response paper using a selection of readings and a prompt designed by the Basic Writing Committee. Members of our Basic Writing Committee (who are required to also teach Composition I and Composition II), receive small stipends to evaluate these papers every semester to determine which students may enroll directly into the Composition II course the following semester. During our pilot of this program, thirteen out of 120 students (11%) opted to complete a placement essay, and eleven of those students were placed directly into Composition II the following semester. Of those eleven, one student left the university, one earned a 2.0 in Composition II (sufficient to meet the prerequisite for upper-level, writing-intensive courses), and the remaining nine earned grades of 3.0 or above. An additional program-wide benefit we've experienced since instituting the optional placement essays is that this new placement process provides our basic writing faculty with an opportunity to read and evaluate essays written by their colleagues' students. Thus, these evaluations serve a norming function for the course: at the end of every summer, fall, and winter semester, our basic writing faculty assess and discuss the work that students complete in their classes.

The gains we've witnessed in student performance following their enrollment in our basic writing class may be attributed to the new curriculum, especially to its focus on rhetoric, revision, research, and reflection. Following our redesign of the course, the new Basic Writing Committee spent a day assessing a random sampling of three of the assignments students completed in every section of basic writing: portfolio reflections, first-week essays, and critical response papers. We began the assessment process by norming a set of high, medium, and low essays using the department's Composition II rubric. During the assessment, each paper received two ratings to ensure consistency among raters. If the raters were off by more than one point on our five-point rubric, the papers were discussed until consensus was reached or a third reader was consulted. Otherwise, the two scores were averaged. Our assessment of our basic writing students' portfolio reflections revealed that these students critically analyzed the choices they made as writers, scoring a 3 (on a 5-point scale<sup>3</sup>) for their “critical analysis of writing process choices (‘what I did’)” and 3.36 for their “critical analysis of success of writing process (‘did this work?’).” Our analysis of students' Critical Response to Selected Readings papers compared students' first-week essays with their work at the end of the semester. In this assessment, students demonstrated improvements in their organizational strategies when writing to an academic audience, from an average of 2.32 to 3.23 on a 5-point scale; in their adoption

of an appropriate ethos (tone and register), from an average of 3.25 to 3.57; and in their ability to write to topics that were appropriate for college-level inquiry, from an average of 3.14 to 3.47.

### **THE SUPERVISED STUDY REDESIGN**

At the time that Elizabeth took on the project of redesigning supervised study, many of our instructors assumed this 1-credit tutorial course was a kind of makeshift developmental writing course: a tutorial designed to aid students who had qualified for Composition I or Composition II “on paper,” but whose struggles in these courses suggested they would have been better off in basic writing. Additionally, there was widespread confusion about whether our basic writing students should ever be advised to enroll in supervised study, since it was assumed that they were already receiving grammar instruction in their basic writing classes. And many of our students were, quite understandably, resistant to paying for an additional elective credit.

### **Responding to a Crisis: An Athlete Falls Through the Cracks**

As is often the case, the redesign of supervised study began as a response to a “crisis” that attracted the attention of a college administrator: an athlete had been (mistakenly) told that supervised study was mandatory, and the additional tuition charge had affected the athlete’s financial aid status. As department chair, Kitchens was called to a meeting with the associate dean to explain the situation. Kitchens asked Elizabeth, who was then in her second year as an assistant professor in the department, to accompany him to the meeting. Once the associate dean understood both the potential for a credit-bearing professional tutorial course to support student writing and the problems we faced regulating the *ad hoc* and unruly system for referring students for supervised study, we were able to secure the resources needed to evaluate whether the course was (or could be) effective in meeting the needs of our underprepared students.

In 2011, the Dean’s Office provided a course release and a departmental summer research grant for Elizabeth to conduct a research-based assessment of existing practices and to develop and pilot a redesigned version of the course. She and her student research assistant Jason Carabelli designed an IRB-approved, qualitative study to document the history of the supervised study course and to solicit feedback about its perceived strengths and weaknesses. An online survey was distributed to all fifty-five full- and part-time writing and rhetoric faculty, twenty-eight of whom responded (51% response

rate). The survey consisted of fourteen questions, covering how faculty administered and evaluated the first week essay assignment and what factors influenced their decisions about referring students to the supervised study course. Faculty were also asked for suggestions to improve the referral process and the tutorial course. In addition to these surveys, eight faculty who had taught the course or who had administered the writing program were invited to participate in in-depth interviews. Seven of these faculty members were interviewed about their experiences teaching or overseeing the course, the history of the course and its relationship to writing centers at OU, writing placement and referral procedures, and the characteristics of students who typically took the course. Based on this research, Elizabeth revised the first-week essay assignment used to identify FYW students who need additional support, developed clear criteria for supervised study referrals, and created a common syllabus required for use in every section of the class.

### **Results of the Supervised Study Research Project**

Writing and rhetoric department faculty and administrators who participated in Elizabeth’s study described the supervised study course using the theoretical framework of Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations*. As they found, students’ patterns of error could be explored more effectively through sustained individualized instruction. Participants compared the supervised study course to the “Oxford model” of tutorial instruction, also called supervisories in the British educational system, which “allows the tutor to adapt the [instructional] process to the student’s learning needs and to give students immediate feedback on their performance” (Ashwin 633). Interview participants emphasized that, as experienced writing teachers, supervised study instructors had both the expertise and the opportunity to “unpack” students’ difficulties with writing. At its best, supervised study had been a catalyst for changing many students’ attitudes about writing and college. Left to its own devices, however, there were indications that our supervised study course had not lived up to its potential. Many participants expressed deep concern that supervised study should not be, as one faculty member feared, a “dumping ground” and that referrals should not be based on individual instructors’ “pet peeves.”

Unfortunately, Elizabeth’s research findings suggested that some of our first-year instructors were “hyper-focused on grammar and development” and “looked for markers of otherness” when referring students to the supervised study course. Of the twenty instructors whose survey responses

described the writing issues that typically influenced their referral decisions, eighteen included surface-level errors or linguistic patterns. For example, those survey responses documented the following reasons for referrals:

- “poor grammar and syntax”
- “sentence issues (fragments, comma splices), Ebonics and ESL issues”
- “serious grammar problems, i.e. fragments, run-ons and comma splices, verb tense switches, agreement problems”

Rarely were these issues clearly defined in terms of specific patterns of error. Nor did they appear to be so egregious as to render the student’s ideas unintelligible. Many of our colleagues’ survey responses mirrored those of the basic writing instructors who Del Principe suggests do not work from a model of current research and best practices, but who, instead, base “their decisions on their sense of what basic writers need” (77), believing that students’ struggles with grammar indicate that they are not prepared for “a more complex level of writing” (69). For example, while half of the instructors considered content to some extent, using vague terms to describe students’ lack of “focus” or “development,” only one instructor cited “failure to provide examples and evidence to support ideas” as a reason for referral.

Although they believed they could recognize red-flag issues with students’ writing, the instructors were not always able to articulate or agree on what those issues actually were. One faculty member asserted that Composition I or II students who were referred to supervised study just needed “some particular kind of help” with writing, whereas our basic writing students “did not have enough writing experience—*period*” and “really need a *course*. . . on *just* the basics.” Another faculty member stated that a student’s “inability to generate any specific ideas” during a 45-minute, timed diagnostic essay was sufficient grounds for a referral. This instructor’s comment points to another problem with our referral system prior to the redesign: the first-week essay assignment was a decontextualized, in-class, timed, handwritten essay and was not aligned with our writing program’s emphasis on a rhetorical, process-centered writing pedagogy.

### **Changes to the Supervised Study Referral Procedures**

In light of these findings, Elizabeth approached the supervised study redesign with the belief that a faculty-led tutorial course should provide a different kind of learning experience for students than either traditional

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classroom instruction or peer tutoring. The first phase of the redesign effort clarified how and why a student should be referred to supervised study. To counter our instructors’ tendency to privilege “accuracy over fluency, and decontextualized ‘skills’ over discipline specific conventions” (Shapiro 27), Elizabeth developed a referral rubric that focused instructors’ attention on higher order concerns, such as a student’s ability to identify and respond appropriately to the rhetorical situation of the assignment (Appendix C). The redesigned supervised study referral system is one way that our program has been able to reinforce our pedagogical principles. Instructors were also strongly encouraged to treat the first-week essay as they would any other writing assignment—allowing students time to draft and revise outside of class and to use word processing tools.

### **Changes to Supervised Study Pedagogy**

The second phase of the supervised study redesign involved establishing consistent pedagogical practices for sustained, individualized writing instruction that set the course apart from writing center peer consultations. For example, the new common syllabus includes course goals and specific learning objectives for supervised study that emphasize interpreting and responding to the rhetorical situation (Appendix A).

In addition to framing these instructional goals, Elizabeth established regular checkpoints where the supervised study instructor and the referring writing class instructor could share information about a student’s progress. Because our writing center’s consultations are confidential, both peer tutors and classroom instructors rely on the student’s understanding of what was said in class or during a peer tutoring session, and students sometimes report feeling confused by what they perceive as contradictory instruction. By opening a channel of communication between the supervised study instructor and the referring writing instructor, both were better able to understand the student’s struggles with writing.

### **Pulling Through: Initial Assessment Results for the Redesigned Supervised Study Course**

Elizabeth’s research prior to the supervised study course redesign included an online survey distributed to the sixteen students who had enrolled in supervised study the previous semester; however, only one student responded. Consequently, her study was extended to include an analysis of the anonymous end-of-semester course and instructor evaluations for

the first two semesters after the curriculum redesign. A total of thirty-four students were enrolled in supervised study during the 2011–2012 academic year, and twenty-three of them completed the evaluations. Analysis of these course evaluations for the revised supervised study course suggests that the redesign has been successful.<sup>4</sup> Students’ comments emphasized how helpful it was to have an instructor who took the time to “guide [them] through” the writing process, “talking through” and “work[ing] through every detail.” Supervised study instructors were characterized as teachers who “didn’t give up” and were “ready to help me get through this.” In many ways, the redesigned supervised study course resembles Rose’s model of intensive, individualized intervention, as described in *Lives on the Boundary*. Supervised study provides professional tutoring and mentoring support for students who have fallen through the cracks of our educational system, but it does so within the context of a credit-bearing course rather than out of the kindness of an individual teacher’s heart or as an optional service provided by a tutoring center. Changes to the placement, instruction, and assessment of this 1-credit course are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Supervised Study

	<b>Original Model</b>	<b>Current Model</b>
<b>Referral Procedure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unregulated and poorly defined</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Systematic referral across FYW using a common rubric</li> </ul>
<b>Curriculum</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instructor creates learning activities based on the student’s agenda</li> <li>• No syllabus</li> <li>• No common assignments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instructor consults with the referring instructor</li> <li>• Common syllabus</li> <li>• Emphasis on rhetoric, research, revision, and reflection</li> </ul>



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	<b>Original Model</b>	<b>Current Model</b>
<b>Assessment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Baseline assessment in first year</li> <li>• Course evaluations collected every semester</li> <li>• OIRA assessment currently in progress to compare writing course grades, GPAs, and retention/completion rates of supervised study students to students who were referred but did not enroll</li> </ul>

**A CULTURE FOCUSED ON STUDENT SUCCESS**

As the sections above demonstrate, there have been a number of positive changes to both courses as a result of our redesign efforts, but the most significant changes can be seen in the culture of the first-year program and in its valuing of underprepared student writers. Some of those changes are detailed below.

Table 2: Changes to Department Culture

<b>Before the Course Redesigns</b>	<b>After the Course Redesigns</b>
No one oversaw the administration, curriculum development, and assessment in the course.	A Basic Writing Committee comprising full-time and part-time faculty is directly responsible for overseeing the administration, curriculum development, and assessment for the course. Part-time faculty who serve on this committee receive stipends to compensate them for their time and efforts.
Tenured and tenure-track faculty did not teach basic writing or supervised study.	Full-time faculty are encouraged to teach these classes (although, to date, only Lori and Elizabeth have done so).

<b>Before the Course Redesigns</b>	<b>After the Course Redesigns</b>
All basic writing students were required to take basic writing and Composition I before enrolling in Composition II.	An optional placement essay provides basic writing students with an opportunity to enroll directly into Composition II.
There was little to no collaboration between basic writing faculty and the writing center.	The embedded writing specialist program, currently directed by Elizabeth, and required writing center visits for basic writing students allows for greater collaboration with the writing center.
Basic writing students were only rarely recommended to enroll in the supervised study course as the basic writing class was viewed to be the only necessary intervention for students at this level.	Basic writing students are regularly encouraged to enroll in this course.
No referral rubric for supervised study.	A referral rubric guides the recommendations that faculty make and shapes our conversations about the kinds of issues developmental or struggling writers may experience.
No syllabus, course goals, or specific learning objectives for supervised study.	A common syllabus provides theoretical consistency and pedagogical structure, while preserving flexibility to address individual student needs.

Prior to the redesigns of these courses, our underprepared writers were not recognized as a department or program priority, and as a result, both of these courses fell through the cracks.

### **Toward a New Integration of Support for Basic Writers**

As our history of these courses illustrates, writing instruction at Oakland University was both treated with suspicion by early faculty across campus and embraced by our own colleagues in rhetoric. Our senior colleagues in the Writing and Rhetoric Department cut their teeth in the Learning

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Skills Department, developed and taught a variety of reading and study skills courses, supported first-year students with a private writing center, and eventually helped to shift our program’s focus to upper-level writing and rhetoric courses and a new undergraduate degree program. In our revisions to basic writing and supervised study, we were conscious of the fact that we were both standing on the shoulders of giants and altering curricula over half a century in the making.

Our most recent efforts to support developmental students have focused primarily on curricular reforms to bring basic writing and supervised study in line with our department’s values and expectations for all writing instruction. These redesigns have led to some successes; for example, a sizable number of our basic writing students now complete an optional placement essay and advance on to Composition II. Because the focus and approach to our supervised study class has improved, we have also begun promoting the course as an option for advanced writing-intensive courses across campus, and we have more than tripled (from two to seven) the number of supervised study courses offered each year. We have also come a long way since Elizabeth and our department chair met with the associate dean to explain what supervised study was and why a student athlete had been referred to the course. Two years ago our athletic department required that new, at-risk, student athletes enroll in three of our courses during the second summer semester: Basic Writing (WRT 102), College Reading (WRT 140), and Supervised Study (WRT 104). Our Associate Athletic Director of Student Services described this sequencing of the classes as “incredible” for her new students, noting that the three classes combined had led to “the highest success rate . . . of our incoming freshmen” since she joined the university eight years ago.

We believe our curricular reforms have improved student retention and contributed to student success overall, and some early data confirms this. However, we are also considering a new model for administering basic writing, one that will transition our current prerequisite 4-credit basic writing course into a 5-credit Composition I course, placing our students into a first-year, credit-bearing course within their first semester (“TYCA” 235). This new course will provide our basic writing students with multiple layers of writing support from their own course instructor, a supervised study instructor, an embedded writing specialist, and required visits to the writing center. As we develop this new approach, we have considered several existing models for basic writing instruction; however, no existing model quite fits our institutional context. We believe our proposed model for providing stu-

dents with multiple layers of support synthesizes many of the best practices in basic writing pedagogy that were developed while our own basic writing curriculum was stuck in a current-traditional rut.

Grego and Thompson's innovative Writing Studio model of basic writing has inspired many other writing programs to develop institution-specific solutions to a seemingly universal problem ("The Writing Studio" 67). Their reinvention of basic writing instruction includes small-group workshops for mainstreamed basic writing students, led by peer tutors and writing specialists. In many studio-based models, the classroom teacher assumes the role of a tutor for an extra hour of small-group writing instruction (e.g. Rigolino and Freely; Rodby and Fox; Tassoni and Lewiecki-Wilson). Since our redesigned basic writing curriculum already features embedded peer tutors and small group workshops, our proposed multi-layered support (MLS) model integrates one of the features of the elective supervised study course that our students value most: one-on-one supplemental instruction with a writing faculty member who is not their classroom writing teacher.

Our assessment of the supervised study course and teacher evaluations also demonstrated that our students appreciate the extra time that they have to work on assignments for their basic writing courses with the help of their supervised study instructor. In this way, our model resembles Arizona State University's *Stretch Program*, which was designed to provide "more time to think, more time to write, more time to revise" (Glau 31). However, several features of the stretch model preclude it from being a viable option for our basic writing students. For example, the stretch model requires a two-semester, 6-credit course sequence—ideally taught by the same instructor (33). As a part of another retention initiative, we experimented with scheduling a cohort of students with the same first-year writing instructor for the entire academic year, a learning community option promoted by our first-year advising center. Unfortunately, we learned that logistical problems make such scheduling constraints untenable for many of our students. In addition, Oakland's emphasis on decreasing the time required to complete an undergraduate degree is at odds with the slower pace of the stretch model.

Similarly, De Paul University's School for New Learning developed their writing workshop model of basic instruction because the stretch model was impractical for their unique population of adult learners (Cleary 40). Based on a coaching model of instruction, a writing workshop serves "undergraduate and graduate students from across the university" (39), as well as basic writers, in a credit-bearing course with up to ten students per section (43). We have been successful in keeping our Composition I and Composition II

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courses capped at 22 students per section and lowering that number to 18 for basic writing and 20 for fully-online FYW courses, but De Paul’s ten-student workshop model is unfeasible in our current institutional context. Like a writing workshop, the supervised study component of our MLS model will support student writers at any level in writing or writing intensive courses—not just FYW students. But unlike the workshop model, each student in supervised study has an individual tutorial with a second instructor.

One of the key features of our proposed MLS model is that the combination of our existing separate courses, basic writing and supervised study, will not be optional for the student. The redesigned basic writing curriculum already integrates embedded writing specialists and writing center consultations. Unfortunately, the fourth component of the MLS model, the faculty-directed individual tutorial, is still an underutilized resource. Many basic writing support programs rely on self-selection, such as the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) developed at the Community College of Baltimore County. The ALP model combines voluntary heterogeneous grouping (regular Composition I sections that include 40% self-selected basic writing students) with a 3-hour, non-credit-bearing “companion course” taught by the same instructor (Adams, Gearhart, Miller, and Roberts 57). Our experience with the supervised study course suggests that self-selection into a separate, credit-bearing course for 30–60 minutes of individualized instruction—even with an instructor’s explicit referral—is not an efficient mechanism for supporting basic writers. Even after our course redesign, too many students referred for supervised study fall through the cracks because, at present, we do not require students to enroll in this course.

### **Implications for the Multi-Layered Support Model**

Like the community college students that Rebecca Cox interviewed for her book, *The College Fear Factor*, many of OU’s basic writing students “perceive every dimension of college and college coursework as overly confusing and too difficult” and have “avoided the forms of active engagement that would have improved their chances of succeeding” (40). Engagement with university support services is a necessary, but not sufficient, criterion for college success—for as many studies have demonstrated, students who could most benefit from support services are often unwilling or unable to seek them out (e.g., Addison and McGee; Cox; Drake; Tassoni and Lewiecki-Wilson).

In their 2010 survey based on the National Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE] and WPA “deep learning” practices, Joanne Addison and Sharon

James McGee found that although 89% of college teachers reported that they refer their students to institutional writing support services, only 25% of college students reported ever actually using them (159–60). This finding certainly holds true on our own campus. In the 2011 NSSE assessment, Oakland scored just slightly below average among Writing Consortium institutions for first-year students reporting that they had visited a writing center or tutoring center (*NSSE11*). In light of these findings, the multi-layered support model that we discuss in this section offers a more directive approach to meeting the needs of basic writers by providing those students with additional exposure to campus support services.

Our proposed MLS model course will deliver the intensive peer and instructor support that we believe our basic writing students need to pull through the difficult transition from high school to college. This model begins with an understanding that “the best programs work on multiple levels, integrate a number of interventions [and] emerge [not only] from an understanding of the multiple barriers faced by their participants, but also from an affirmation of the potential of those participants” (Rose, *Why School?* 143–44). Thus, we are moving toward combining our current prerequisite 4-credit basic writing course and optional 1-credit supervised study course into a single-semester, 5-credit course parallel to our existing Composition I course. Rather than automatic placement into a basic writing course, Oakland’s basic writing students will be required to sign up for a multi-layered support Composition I course that will provide four distinct layers of instruction and support:

- a course instructor administering the revised basic writing curriculum
- a second faculty member working as a supervised study instructor;
- an embedded writing specialist who provides in-class peer tutoring support, and
- two required visits to the writing center to meet with other undergraduate tutors

This multi-layered support design will require that basic writers enroll in one credit more of Composition I instruction than their peers, but it will eliminate the need for a traditional basic writing class, focusing both our faculty’s and our program’s efforts on providing underprepared writers with the resources they need to succeed in our first-year curriculum. Like the University of New Mexico’s Stretch/Studio Program, which was awarded the 2016

Council of Basic Writing Innovation Award, we believe our multi-layered support model “aligns with the national trend to reduce ‘remediation’ in higher education” and could result in significant gains in our students’ college readiness and success (Davila and Elder).

## **CONCLUSION**

Pressures to redesign the administration of our developmental classes arrive on two fronts, from legislative efforts to influence university curricula through new and increased accountability measures and from university administrations hoping to improve retention and completion rates in the face of shrinking enrollments and dwindling state budgets. Steve Lamos identifies these threats to “high-risk programs in four-year institutions, [including] pressures toward excellence, stratification, anti-affirmative action, and cost-cutting” (*Interests* 152). And in a 2012 article for this journal, Lamos suggests that “the logic driving BW elimination seems to be that institutions cannot compete for prestige if they support supposedly ‘illiterate’ students who do not belong within their walls in the first place” (“Minority-Serving” 5). These attitudes may be reflected in administrative and political ambivalence towards postsecondary developmental writing instruction, and even in our own departmental attitudes towards these courses.

Our course redesign demonstrates a significant transition in our administration of basic writing instruction at Oakland, helping us to reject an institutional perception of the basic writing course and its students as “separate from, and clearly not equal to, the academic mainstream” (Shapiro 27). This revision replaces our “prerequisite model” (Lalicker) with a multi-layered support model that challenges the history and “institutional culture” (Shapiro 26) of developmental instruction at our university, and it anticipates legislative mandates that might eliminate our department’s responsibility for the education and success of our basic writing students. Like our colleagues who assessed the effectiveness of OU’s academic support programs in 1984, we recognize the “political and social justice reasons. . . to retain and significantly improve and strengthen” our support for at-risk students (“Preliminary Report” 72). And like our colleagues in TYCA, we acknowledge the importance of developing curricula that attend to “local context,” provide “appropriate faculty training and input” (227), and take into account our institutional history, disciplinary knowledge, and pedagogical expertise.

## Notes

1. These developmental courses included RHT 045 Communication Skills, a 6-credit course “introducing new students to the basic language arts skills of reading, writing and speaking needed for success in the university;” RHT 102 Basic Writing (4 credits); RHT 104 Supervised Study (1-2 credits); RHT 111 Writing and Reading for Non-Native Speakers (4 credits); RHT 120 College Study Skills (4 credits); RHT 140 College Reading (4 credits); and RHT 142 Efficient Reading (2 or 4 credits) (*OU Undergraduate Catalog*, 1999-2000, 210).
2. For more information about how the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* informed the redesign of Oakland’s basic writing class, see Ostergaard, Driscoll, Rorai, and Laudig.
3. This scale was initially developed to assess the composition II course, with the expectation that it would also be used to assess student writing in upper-level courses in the major. Thus, we anticipated that composition II students would score in the 3–4 range, while a score of 5 would indicate an advanced level of writing.
4. When asked how the supervised study course could be improved in course evaluations, 54% of the students said they liked it the way it was, while 33% of the students wanted longer or more frequent tutorial meetings.

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## Appendix A

### WRT 104 Supervised Study Common Syllabus (Excerpt)

**WRT 104: Supervised Study (1 or 2 credits)** Tutorial instruction in areas mutually agreed upon by student and instructor such as independent or academic writing projects. May be taken concurrently with other writing and rhetoric courses (7 weeks or 14 weeks). May be repeated for up to 8 credits. Graded S/U.

**Course Goals:** Students in WRT 104 will develop effective strategies for a process-based approach to writing that will equip them to respond appropriately to a variety of writing assignments in their first-year writing or writing intensive courses.

**Specific Learning Objectives:** At the conclusion of this course, students will be able to

- interpret the rhetorical situation (audience, context, purpose) that a writing assignment asks students to address
- identify the requirements of a specific writing assignment
- use a variety of techniques to generate ideas and to draft, organize, revise, edit, and reflect on their writing
- recognize and correct patterns of error in standardized edited English that interfere with or distort meaning
- produce academic prose that demonstrates an understanding of college-level argumentation (or other course-specific writing tasks)

**Course Procedures:** WRT 104 instructors meet with each student individually for one half-hour per week (for one credit) at a regularly scheduled time mutually agreed upon between the student and the WRT 104 instructor. Students are required to bring course materials for their first-year writing or writing intensive course (see Required Text(s) and Supporting Course Material above), drafts in progress, graded papers, and other materials as directed. Individual class sessions will involve a one-on-one tutorial related to writing course material.

**Weekly Schedule and Topical Outline:** The WRT 104 instructor will contact each student to arrange a regular meeting time. The specific weekly activities will be determined by student and instructor.

Suggested weekly schedule:

- Weeks 1-2: Goal Setting
- Week 3: Interpreting Writing Assignment Instructions

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- Weeks 4-5: Review of Assignments (graded, in-progress, and forthcoming)
- Week 6: Mid-Semester Evaluation and Reflective Essay
- Weeks 7-11: Individualized Writing Workshops
- Weeks 12-13: Portfolio or Final Project Review
- Week 14: Exit Interview and Course Evaluation

## **Appendix B**

### **WRT 102, Basic Writing, Course Goals**

#### **Original Course Goals**

- Develop critical and analytical reading and listening skills
- Translate good thinking into the appropriate written form for a task and an audience
- Make a connection between reading and writing
- Communicate thoughts clearly and effectively in discussions and text, including asking questions at appropriate times
- Understand writing as a process (not a product)
- Approach each writing task with appropriate writing strategy and tools
- Develop confidence in their ability to accomplish a writing task
- Write complete sentences in the four basic patterns (simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex)
- Add visual literacy to their definition of composition
- Develop editing skills (specific punctuation and grammar strategies)
- Appreciate the complex and personal effort involved in the craft (art and science) of writing

#### **Revised Course Goals**

- Approach writing as a multi-step, recursive process that requires feedback
- Compose their texts to address the rhetorical situation
- Synthesize information/ideas in and between various texts—written, spoken, and visual
- Reflect on their own writing processes and evaluate their own learning

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- Adapt their prior knowledge and learning strategies to a variety of new writing and reading situations in college and beyond
- Develop the habits of mind of effective college writers and readers

### Appendix C

#### WRT 104 Referral Rubric

Students whose first week essays demonstrate weaknesses in at least two of the numbered rubric categories below should be referred to WRT 104. Please note that rubric category #4 applies only to WRT 160 Composition II students.

<b>First Week Essay Evaluation Criteria for WRT 104/ESL Referrals</b>		<b>Instructor's Comments:</b>
1.	Difficulty reading or interpreting the assignment instructions. This may include:	
	a. inappropriate response to the prompt (off-task or off-topic; does not answer the central question)	
	b. misinterprets the content of the quoted or summarized passages in the prompt	
	c. issues of comprehension that may be related to ESL or Generation 1.5 language fluency	
2.	Does not meet the basic requirements of the assignment. This may include:	
	a. under-developed response (fewer than 250 words, lists ideas)	
	b. inability to organize using essay conventions (lacks thesis or loses focus, lacks structure)	
3.	Difficulty with standard edited English, appropriate for academic discourse. This may include:	
	a. errors in sentence structure and syntax that substantially obscure or distort meaning	
	b. error patterns in grammar and conventional usage (not spelling, punctuation, or inconsistent proofreading)	

<b>FOR WRT 160 STUDENTS ONLY:</b>		
4. Difficulty constructing an evidence-based argument. This may include:		
	a. overly simplistic response (does not engage with complex issues)	
	b. biased response (relies entirely on personal opinion or belief)	