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The *Kairotic* Moment: Pragmatic Revision of Basic Writing Instruction at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne

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Abstract: This profile articulates the authors’ response to a statewide mandate to eliminate “remedial” writing instruction at four-year public universities, including their own. The profile describes the difficulties the authors faced in responding to this initiative, given the context of their regional comprehensive university and its specific challenges with retention and student success, and discusses their revision of the university’s writing program. The changes the authors made—eliminating a non-credit basic writing course and creating a credit-bearing basic writing course; instituting guided self-placement; and developing a flexible, WPA-outcomes based writing curriculum—have led to improved satisfaction, success, and retention rates among basic writers at their institution.

In the fall of 2008, a series of events emerged which created the conditions for a major overhaul of the writing program here at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW), a regional, comprehensive university with a population of over 14,000 students. [{1}](#) [\[#note1\]](#) We—the Director of Writing (Steve) and the basic writing course coordinator (Sara)—were faced with a state mandate that public, four-year institutions take immediate steps towards the elimination of so-called “remedial” (i.e., non-credit bearing) courses in the curriculum. The Indiana Commission on Higher Education (ICHE) recommended that such non-credit, developmental courses be eliminated from the curriculum by 2011; at that time such courses would only be offered through the state’s growing community college system (Indiana Commission on Higher Education, 2008). Basic writing courses have long been viewed—and dismissed—by some as a place of remediation (Bernstein; Bloom; Grego and Thompson; Hull et al.; Rose, “Language”; Soliday; Troyka). Because so much has already been written about these efforts to eliminate basic writing instruction from four-year universities (see among many others Goen-Salter, Smoke, Stevens, Stygall, and Wiener), we will simply note here that Indiana’s move towards removing basic writing courses from its four-year universities is in keeping with national trends of “outsourcing” basic writing to two-year colleges.

As we explain below, this mandate did not change the fact that our campus continues to serve many students who are less likely to be retained than their peers and who are underprepared by traditional standards to achieve our general education writing outcomes in a single, 15-week semester course. IPFW only requires one semester of composition for all students, and this semester of instruction is simply not enough for a significant portion of our first-year students, many of whom are inexperienced writers and some of whom are returning to school after many years in the workforce or at home. Furthermore, their lack of preparedness is not uniform enough that a single, 15-week course could address the needs of these students to gain familiarity with a variety of genres. We have found that too many of our students are inexperienced in making the transition from familiar to unfamiliar writing genres; any experience and familiarity they may have with writing does not transfer when they are asked to write outside of the genres they find most comfortable. While the issue of genre

knowledge and transfer is complex and the subject of much current debate in composition studies, we are persuaded by Amy Devitt's argument that "writers use the genres they know when faced with a genre they do not know. These genres are not in fact transferable [. . . but] they help writers move into a new genre; they help writers adjust their old situations to new locations" (222). Many of our students, however, have done such little writing that they have limited awareness and experience of multiple genres.

Since there is such a diversity of writing experience and preparation among our students, we cannot assume that all of our students are familiar with any particular "old location." Some of our students come to us with a great deal of experience writing five-paragraph themes or simple argumentative essays, but they have never written a narrative; others are quite comfortable writing narratives but are unfamiliar with thesis-driven arguments. Devitt writes, "Each genre a writer acquires well increases the likelihood of having a genre to use with a situation more similar to the new genre" (222), yet some of our students have very few genres to call upon as they face the various rhetorical situations of their first year of college. Thus, one semester of instruction is simply not enough time to allow for the growth and development of writers limited by this lack of experience.

After the state issued its mandate in 2008, we quickly realized that we had to create a new, credit-bearing, basic writing course that would meet the needs of our most at-risk students, a course that would not be identified as "remedial" and would thus circumvent the vagaries of the state legislature. While the state's actions were extremely troubling, we viewed the directives with which we were faced not as a threat to our "turf," but as an opportunity to re-make basic writing instruction in ways that would be more effective for both students and faculty at our institution. What emerged was a new basic writing course, theoretically sound and pedagogically appropriate, that provides some students with an additional semester of writing instruction and that meets the needs of our institution, our students, and our faculty to a far greater degree.

Who We Are and Who We Serve

IPFW is a joint, regional, four-year campus of two large, Research 1 institutions (Indiana and Purdue Universities), and our writing program is part of the Department of English and Linguistics, the largest department in our college and one of the largest at our university. A major problem facing our university is retention. *The Journal Gazette*, a local newspaper, reports that students entering IPFW in 1999 had a four-year graduation rate of 4% and a six-year graduation rate of 18%. These rates are the second-lowest of any four-year public institution in the state (Soderlund). First-year retention rates are also lower than peer institutions' benchmarks. According to William Baden, senior analyst in the university's Office of Institutional Research and Analysis, of the Fall 2006 entering class, only 60% were enrolled by Fall 2007. First-year retention rates for basic writers are lower still. For students enrolled in basic writing courses who began their college education in the fall semesters of 2003-2007, the retention rate was 56.7%; for first-year writing students, the retention rate was 64.6% (Baden). While these low retention and graduation rates are affected by students who transfer to other institutions (especially Purdue-West Lafayette and Indiana-Bloomington) and by students who are enrolled part-time, those two factors alone cannot completely explain our university's poor student success rates.

Our programmatic data also showed a disturbing pattern of high DWF (drop, withdraw, fail) rates. In 2006 our basic writing (BW) program enrolled 2300 students. 80% of those students passed one of the basic classes. Of the students who completed the two course sequence (one of the BW courses and the FYC course), 70% passed FYC. However, when we included students who dropped the basic writing or first-year writing course at some point in the sequence, that FYC pass rate dropped to around 50%.

We were losing half of our first-year writing students to failure or attrition—a highly disturbing phenomenon.

The diversity of the 17-county region from which we draw students is a factor in complicating retention and student preparedness for our curriculum. A little less than half of our students come from Fort Wayne; the rest come from rural Allen County and the 16-county region surrounding the city (Office of Institutional Research). The level of underpreparedness we see in our first-year students doesn’t appear to be simply a matter of students from suburban schools succeeding while students from urban schools fail. For example, some students from our local, urban, public school system—Fort Wayne Community Schools (FWCS), the largest feeder system for our program and the second largest school district in the state—compete on at least equal footing with students from the most well-funded suburban and private schools in our area, while other FWCS students do not; many times, issues of race and class emerge here, as students from the poorest and majority-minority high schools in the district tend not to succeed at the same rate as students from FWCS high schools with more racial and socio-economic integration. However, virtually all FWCS students outperform their peers from some of the rural, outlying school districts, as our faculty’s teaching experiences have shown that these rural students are far more likely to come to our program with virtually no experience composing drafts of even moderate length (i.e., 4-5 pages) and can be completely overwhelmed by the rhetorical tasks asked of them in college. IPFW students who responded to the 2009 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) showed that 20% of first-year students completed a paper of 20+ pages in their first year, and 9% completed more than 10 papers between 5 and 19 pages in their first year. This volume of writing is a challenging task to underprepared students.

Past as Prologue: The History of Our Program

Due to the diverse needs of our student population, our department has always offered more than one entry point into the writing curriculum. Until the Fall 2008 semester, we used the College Board’s Accuplacer test to involuntarily place students. This multiple-choice test used a series of questions focusing on grammar and sentence structure to place students. Students who performed well placed into our FYC course, which is required by the university’s general education curriculum. Students who performed poorly were placed into a non-credit, BW course. Students on the borderline took the FYC course along with a two-credit, studio-style course which was designed to give these students extra instruction and support as they grappled with the demands of the FYC course. A few students bypassed FYC entirely, earning credit through school-based programs or AP exams. Many of those students took our second-level composition course in the first year. ^{2} [\[#note2\]](#) This “bypass” option is still available to students, and most of them continue to take second-level writing during their first year.

Involuntary placement into so-called “remedial,” non-credit courses frustrated many of our students (as well as their parents, who sometimes pay the tuition bill), resulting in attitudes which mitigated success in those courses. Another challenge we faced was that the various sections of the basic writing course did not always offer consistency in instruction, leading to frustration among students and faculty. When Sara arrived at IPFW in the fall of 2006, there was no defined curriculum or philosophy of instruction that was consistent across the many sections of the basic writing course and few, if any, program-wide outcomes. The writing program did not articulate its outcomes until 2007; as a result, for several years the course did not have a clear identity or sense of purpose, other than the rather nebulous notion of “preparing” students for our first-year writing course.

This lack of clarity led to instructors—almost all TAs and adjuncts—using a variety of texts and assignments, some of which overlapped with texts and assignments used in FYC; others were not

aligned with the theoretical understandings and best practices of our field and instead relied on skill-and-drill workbook-style approaches that emphasized grammatical correctness and focused on sentences and paragraphs. Due to the overlap in some sections, a number of students who moved from BW to FYC understandably felt as if they were taking the same course twice, a fact they greatly resented. Other students complained that their section was much harder or easier than those of their peers, claims that were not without merit. We, too, had noticed that some sections of the course stood out as extremely undemanding or challenging. Grading practices were also an issue; there were no programmatic grading rubrics, and understandings of what passing work looked like varied from instructor to instructor. In short, the course was a hodgepodge of writing instruction that did not serve the needs of our students or our writing program.

Further compounding the problem of consistency was instructor turnover. Sara is the only tenure-line faculty member in IPFW’s Department of English and Linguistics who regularly teaches basic writing. The vast majority of our basic, first-year, and second-level writing courses are taught by part-time instructors and TAs, who often cycle in and out of our writing program—about 25% leave the program each year. Furthermore, almost all of our part-time instructors have terminal M.A.s, and some of them have not kept abreast of current theoretical and pedagogical developments in composition studies. Our T.A.s are M.A. students who, by the very nature of their position, are just learning about composition theory and pedagogy and are inexperienced instructors. Generally, adjuncts who expressed interest in Basic Writing were assigned to teach the BW courses, but in many instances, especially in the case of the studio course (explained in more detail below), instructors asked for these courses simply to maximize their teaching load at IPFW. Steve (as Director of Writing) usually has about 60 adjuncts and TAs to oversee in a semester, and while we have many fine instructors working for us, it’s all too easy for a person or problem to slip through the cracks. We do provide seminars devoted to writing pedagogy at the beginning of each fall semester and periodically during the school year, but other than the mandatory session at the beginning of the academic year, attendance at many of these seminars is disappointing. We know that some of our adjuncts teach courses at other institutions in our area, and their ability to volunteer their time for pedagogical improvement is limited.

Kairos Enacted: The Program Revision

All of these issues—state mandates, retention, diversity of student and faculty preparedness, and student and faculty dissatisfaction—created the kairotic conditions for a major overhaul of the writing program. The problems we faced were too complex to simply fix in piecemeal fashion by changing assignment sequences or textbooks. The approach we took was threefold; we will outline it here, with further explanation to come in forthcoming subsections:

1. We needed to replace the non-credit course which the state had identified as remedial as well as the unsuccessful studio course that aimed to “mainstream” some basic writers into FYC but failed to do so successfully, due to a variety of factors.
2. Rather than involuntarily placing students in courses that, rightly or wrongly, the students perceived as remedial and for which they received no credit, we wanted to empower students to accurately self-place themselves into courses which best fit their needs.
3. We wanted a curriculum that offered consistency of outcomes but that wasn’t narrowly defined by a standardized, one-size-fits-all syllabus. We had contingent faculty and teaching assistants, many of whom were excellent instructors, who would have had difficulty making such a transition.

The Creation and Elimination of Basic Writing Courses

Because our department is relatively large and has diverse offerings, the Director of Writing—who is appointed by the chair of the English and Linguistics department—manages the administration of our basic, first-year, and second-level writing courses (i.e., the writing program). The Composition Committee designs and implements programmatic policies and advises the Director of Writing. A pivotal event that shaped the new direction of our writing program’s curriculum was the decision of the director and committee to eliminate the two-credit, studio course which had been designed to serve students who didn’t require as much intervention in order to succeed in FYC. There were several reasons this course was failing. First of all, registration management and scheduling issues placed students from multiple FYC sections into a single studio section. Since those students were on multiple course calendars, [\[3\]](#) [\[#note3\]](#) it was very difficult for instructors to prepare instructional materials that helped students. Too many of the studio course instructors were relying on error-based approaches which placed too much emphasis on sentence-level grammar and punctuation exercises. Although there had been for some time a consensus inside and outside the writing program that this studio course was not successful in improving outcomes, removing the course proved difficult, due to administrative turnover and objections from some faculty, who enjoyed teaching the course in spite of its problems. The state mandate provided the necessary impetus to remove the course from the curriculum.

In replacing both the studio course and the old, non-credit BW course with our new, credit-bearing BW course, we chose to standardize our approach to basic writing in order to prevent the wide variation in pedagogical approaches we saw. Some basic writing teachers took a process-based approach in this course similar to that of our FYC course, but once again too many instructors were still using archaic and discredited pedagogical approaches with a heavy emphasis on grammar worksheets, vocabulary drills, and punctuation exercises. The new BW course features a course cap of 18 students [\[4\]](#) [\[#note4\]](#) and has the same course outcomes as FYC; the achievement of these outcomes is stretched over two semesters, however (see [Appendix 1 \[ipfw-appendices.php#appx1\]](#) for a detailed iteration of our writing program’s outcomes). While the BW curriculum will later be discussed in further detail, our course design was built on the philosophy of stretch programs articulated by Greg Glau, which includes:

- a view of basic writing students as capable and intelligent but lacking experience in the kinds of writing expected at the university level [...];
- a belief that in order to learn to write, any writer must *write*, receive feedback on that writing, and then revise her work, over and over [...];
- a belief that students should receive course credit for their college work;
- and the notion that beginning writers, since they lack experience in writing, need more *time* to learn to work with and to develop appropriate writing strategies. (80)

In spite of this shared philosophy, we do not identify our basic writing program as a stretch program, because our new BW course is a separate course with books and assignments distinct from those of the FYC course. In other words, although our course outcomes are stretched over two semesters, our methods for assisting students in meeting those outcomes are not. Given the transience of our faculty and student populations, the traditional stretch course described by Glau did not seem viable for our campus and its particular set of issues and needs. Furthermore, as discussed in the introduction, our basic writing students need experience with a variety of genres as they grapple with unfamiliar rhetorical situations. Stretching the four major assignments of one course over two semesters would

not accomplish our goal of assisting students in developing their generic knowledge as broadly and deeply as possible.

The Move to Guided Self-Placement

In 2007, Stuart Blythe, who was at that time the Director of Writing at IPFW, successfully proposed replacing the university’s placement vehicle for writing courses, the *Accuplacer* test, with a guided system of self-placement. One of the earliest examples of self-placement we examined was at Grand Valley State University, which used a brochure with a series of student prompts to guide the student to their placement decision. The prompts asked students to evaluate their own readiness and confidence in their ability to succeed in first-year writing (Royer and Gilles). We liked the use of prompts, but we believed that our advisors and administrators would be more likely to have confidence in the placement recommendations if they were tied to more empirical measures. We realized that the Daly-Miller test for writing apprehension asked the same kinds of questions as GVSU’s prompts—questions that evaluated students’ experience as writers, confidence in their writing ability, and their own judgment of preparedness for college writing. It also had a reliability rate of about 90% over a 30 year history of use in research studies.^{5} [\[#note5\]](#)

A more recent example of guided self-placement, at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, used prompts for initial placement, but also used a diagnostic essay in the first week of class “as a check on the process” (Blakesley 18). We rejected the use of the essay because one, we wanted to demonstrate trust in the students’ self-efficacy to make their placement decision, and two, research suggests that timed essays are not reliable predictors of success in FYC. We also weren’t convinced our large group of instructors would be able to consistently make placement decisions, and we were concerned that some of our instructors would agonize over the decision, which we felt was best left to the students themselves (Haswell, Huot).^{6} [\[#note6\]](#)

After much consideration and study, we designed a system of guided self-placement that offers students two options into which they place themselves after reviewing information to help them with their placement decision: (1) students who feel they are ready for the general education writing course place themselves in FYC; or (2) students who feel they need more time to complete the FYC outcomes place themselves in a two course sequence which begins with our new credit-bearing, basic writing course, after which they take FYC. Our students complete an [online placement instrument](https://webapp1.ipfw.edu/pls/appdb1/f?p=194:1:4067066360842999) [\[https://webapp1.ipfw.edu/pls/appdb1/f?p=194:1:4067066360842999\]](https://webapp1.ipfw.edu/pls/appdb1/f?p=194:1:4067066360842999) which combines data that includes (1) students’ high school class standing; (2) students’ SAT scores (we actually use the math score since it correlates more reliably with FYC success at our institution than the verbal score), and students’ level of writing apprehension as determined by the Daly-Miller test. A combined score is generated, and students are informed that the placement vehicle recommends that they take either the BW or FYC course. Students then make the final decision.

The design of the self-placement vehicle was based upon a statistical analysis of scores and high school grades commonly used in placement systems. The students’ class standing and SAT math scores were chosen because they were readily available and were the only data which an analysis by our Office of Institutional Research found to meet commonly accepted standards of statistical significance in correlation studies. We added the Daly-Miller test because we also wanted to factor in student confidence, which as we noted earlier, can play a major role in some students’ success. At our university, while we have found that a high degree of writing apprehension correlates with student failure in our courses, so, too, does a low level of writing apprehension combined with a poor academic record. The use of statistically valid measures in our self-placement design played a major role in ensuring support from upper-level administration for our proposed changes.

The Development of the New Basic Writing Curriculum

As the new coordinator of the basic writing program and an instructor of the revised course, Sara developed a revised curriculum, drawing on her work with basic writers at the University of Cincinnati and The Ohio State University. [\[7\] \[#note7\]](#) Utilizing the theoretical model of Bartholomae and Petrosky's *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts: Theory and Method for a Reading and Writing Course*, the new basic writing course stresses the connection between reading and writing, as both are foundational skills for success in college. All instructors of the course (with the exception of some who are teaching in learning communities [\[8\] \[#note8\]](#) or teaching non-native speakers of English) now share a common theme, texts, and assignments (see Appendices 2-6 for examples of a recent syllabus and assignments). We want to honor our instructors' knowledge of students and pedagogical expertise, as well as insure that they have a voice in, and feel ownership for, what they teach. Therefore, the theme is chosen by the instructors and changes every year. Recent themes have included education, American politics, and the Millennial generation. All instructors use our writing program's handbook and the same rhetoric (Barbara Fine Clouse's *A Troubleshooting Guide for Writers*). In addition, after choosing a theme for the course, the instructors select one of two book-length expository texts which address the theme in some way; for example, instructors used Jean Twenge's *Generation Me* or Neil Howe and William Strauss's *Millennials Rising* as the expository text for the Millennial theme. The expository text selection changes each year, in conjunction with the theme. Homework assignments, including short summaries of the assigned readings, also reinforce the reading-writing connection and seek to enhance reading comprehension skills while further developing students' writing abilities (see [Appendix 2 \[ipfw-appendices.php#appx2\]](#) for Sara's most recent syllabus and daily schedule).

Our general course outcomes state that students who complete the BW course should be able to demonstrate their competence in the four following areas:

- **Rhetorical Knowledge**, including the ability to focus on a purpose and audience; to respond appropriately to different kinds of rhetorical situations; to adopt appropriate voice, tone, and level of formality; and to write in several genres.
- **Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing**, including the ability to use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating; to manage a writing assignment as a series of tasks, including finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources; and to integrate one's own ideas with those of others.
- **Writing Processes**, including the use of multiple drafts to create and complete a successful text; the development of flexible strategies for generating, revising, editing, and proof-reading; and participation in collaborative and social processes that require the ability to critique one's own and others' works.
- **Knowledge of Conventions**, including the ability to follow common formats for different kinds of genres; to practice appropriate means of documenting one's work; to control such surface features as syntax, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Thus, in order to develop the students' rhetorical knowledge and knowledge of conventions, the major writing assignments of the course ask students to engage in four kinds of rhetorical tasks: a personal narrative ([Appendix 3 \[ipfw-appendices.php#appx3\]](#)), a textual analysis ([Appendix 4 \[ipfw-appendices.php#appx4\]](#)), a self-designed research project ([Appendix 5 \[ipfw-appendices.php#appx5\]](#)), and a self-reflection ([Appendix 6 \[ipfw-appendices.php#appx6\]](#)) that assesses their performance in the course and their development as writers. All of these assignments

require the students to engage in critical thinking, reading, and writing. Students’ writing processes are developed through the use of revision, a foundational part of the course, as all of these assignments are revised multiple times. Peer review (whether face-to-face or electronic) and instructor commentary (in the form of written feedback, conferences, or both) are offered in various stages of the composing process.

The sequence of assignments is designed to gradually move students’ writing from personal to public purposes and audiences, as well. The course begins with a narrative that asks students to write about a personal experience related to the theme, but by the third assignment—the self-designed research project—the students are required to write for a public audience of their choice, using the genre and format that is most appropriate for the rhetorical situation they have devised. While instructors are expected to utilize the four rhetorical tasks when designing the major assignments and to integrate the course theme and texts, our curriculum offers instructors the flexibility to design their particular sections (including the assignments) in ways that build on their pedagogical strengths while also meeting the course outcomes. We believe this flexibility encourages our instructors to buy into the course and invest in the programmatic goals. The assignment design also encourages students to take more ownership of their writing.

The first two assignments (the narrative and textual analysis) impose audience, genre, and length requirements; the later assignments push students towards taking responsibility by choosing their own audiences and genres, once again building the students’ repertoire of generic tools they can bring to varying rhetorical situations. Finally, the first three assignments address the common theme; these three writing tasks are unique to the new BW course and are not repeated in FYC, a situation which sometimes occurred in the old basic writing course. However, these assignments do help prepare students for the assignments and outcomes they will be expected to meet in FYC.

In an attempt to better coordinate our efforts across sections, Sara set up a listserv that is exclusive to our basic writing instructors, where we can (and do) share our assignments, our experiences teaching the course, and challenges we are facing. She also established teaching circles, small groups of instructors who choose to meet together to collaborate. As part of the mandatory fall workshop discussed previously, Sara leads a workshop on teaching basic writing at IPFW, and throughout the academic year she also hosts workshops on topics ranging from using electronic response and conferences to recognizing and adjusting to the differences between BW and FYC students. Because of the previously mentioned difficulties many of our instructors have with attending these workshops, Sara confers with individual or small groups of instructors via email and meetings as well, and many instructor resources are available online. Updating [this website](http://new.ipfw.edu/departments/coas/depts/english/resources/) [<http://new.ipfw.edu/departments/coas/depts/english/resources/>] is one of our projects for Summer 2011. Finally, during the Spring 2011 semester, Sara is teaching a graduate seminar on teaching marginalized populations of students, particularly basic writers; this seminar has high enrollment and will offer many of our TAs the opportunity to further explore, develop, and theorize their basic writing pedagogy. All of the measures we’ve described here have enabled the course and its instructors to develop a shared sense of identity and purpose that we are told did not really exist before these changes were made.

Where We’re Going, Where We’ve Been: Reflections on the Changing Nature of Basic Writing

The factors we have considered in analyzing the new curriculum are student satisfaction, success, and retention rates, since they were major contributors to our decision to give students more decision-making power in their curricular placement. Many of our advisors and administrators, and even some of our faculty, were skeptical about this change, despite the fact that guided self-placement had been

successfully implemented at other universities, including ones with a similar mission to IPFW. They doubted that students would elect to voluntarily take the new basic writing course when they could bypass it.

This concern has proven to be unfounded. In the first two years since implementation, we have seen about the same 30/70 ratio of students placing themselves into the basic writing course that we saw while using Accuplacer. What we have also seen is a great deal less student dissatisfaction with the new basic writing course, as compared to the old, non-credit course and the studio course. Evidence for this can be found in improved student evaluations of basic writing faculty and the curriculum as compared to the same evaluations for the courses which were eliminated. Looking at 2002 student evaluations as a baseline and 2009 evaluations as an endpoint, we have seen overall student satisfaction in composition courses increase from 3.86 to 4.14 on a five-point Likert scale. [\[9\]](#) [\[#note9\]](#) Another indicator of student satisfaction with the course is that grade appeals for the new course have dropped by about 75% as compared to the previous courses.

We have also seen major improvement in programmatic retention and success rates. Whereas basic writing students previously withdrew from the university at a rate that meant less than 60% of students completed FYC successfully during their first two semesters, today that percentage has risen to around 70%. We have also seen a decrease in students failing basic writing. During the last five years that the old basic writing and studio courses were offered, the combined DWF rate of these courses ranged from a low of 40.46% to a high of 55.93%. In comparison, during the first two years of our new basic writing course, the DWF rate has averaged 31.05% (Baden). While we only have two years of data so far, these preliminary findings are very promising.

Furthermore, self-placement has not led to lower grades in FYC. The percentage of students dropping, failing, or withdrawing from FYC has remained steady at around 25%. Quite simply, self-placement has not led to an increase in FYC failure rates that some at our university feared, while BW failure rates have improved markedly. These data indicate to us that self-placement is at least as effective as Accuplacer, if not more so.

The trends that led in part to our own programmatic changes—the outsourcing of basic writing instruction to community colleges, flatlining budgets, and the linking of university funding to retention and graduation rates—are only likely to accelerate in the current educational climate. Our concern as compositionists is that these pressures have led, and will continue to lead, universities to abandon basic writers, as some universities have already raised admission standards in an attempt to shut out underprepared students who are more likely to adversely impact these rates. Our success in developing a course for basic writers at our university gives us hope that all is not lost for basic writers at institutions like ours.

Of course, convincing curriculum committees and administrators that a basic writing course that requires college-level work can be developed and successfully implemented is challenging. We believe we succeeded because we kept the needs of our stakeholders in mind while designing a course that, in keeping with the best practices of our field, transformed basic writing instruction from an error-based approach to a course which emphasizes rhetorical genres and the writing process. We also believe that, in order to be successful, significant attention has to be paid to instructor preparation, continuing support, and investment; without such moves, instructors are more than likely to return to approaches that are mistakenly thought to be “tried and true.” We have implemented these ideals in our program.

While the statistical data encourage us that we are on the right track, we are far more impressed with the reports of satisfaction we are receiving from students, faculty, and administrators. Given the changing demographics of our university, rapid growth in enrollments, and the increasing diversity of

our student population, statistical data by itself cannot adequately measure the effectiveness of the program and these changes. The fact that our students, instructors, advisors, and administrators are satisfied with the changes is the measure that matters most.

Some challenges, however, remain. The trend to outsourcing writing instruction is not limited to remedial education—some officials in our state would like to see most, if not all, first year writing instruction delivered through the community college system, a new online governor’s university, or through high-school based, dual-credit instruction. In the future, we expect to see even more diversity in the level of preparation for college writing among our entry-level students. This may lead us to consider an even more nuanced placement system, and multiple entry points into our second year course, which, although not a General Education course, is required by the course of study of 80% of our graduates. As we address these challenges—and others we will probably face, but can’t yet predict—the lessons we learned in revising our placement system and the BW curriculum will help us face that uncertain future.

Appendices

Because of their length, appendices are available on a [separate web page \[ipfw-appendices.php\]](#) (see links below) and [as a PDF document. \[ipfw-appendices.pdf\]](#)

1. [Appendix 1: Outcomes for English W131 and W233 \[ipfw-appendices.php#appx1\]](#)
2. [Appendix 2: Syllabus for English W129, Introductory Elementary Composition \[ipfw-appendices.php#appx2\]](#)
3. [Appendix 3: Personal narrative assignment, ENG W129 \[ipfw-appendices.php#appx3\]](#)
4. [Appendix 4: Textual analysis assignment, ENG W129 \[ipfw-appendices.php#appx4\]](#)
5. [Appendix 5: Self-designed research project assignment, ENG W129 \[ipfw-appendices.php#appx5\]](#)
6. [Appendix 6: Self-reflection assignment, ENG W129 \[ipfw-appendices.php#appx6\]](#)

Notes

1. Sara is grateful to IPFW’s Office of Research and External Support for awarding her a 2010 Summer Research Grant, which helped ease the writing of this profile. ([Return to text. \[#note1-ref\]](#))
2. Most, but not all, IPFW students are required to take a writing course beyond first-year composition; this requirement varies among the programs and colleges. Furthermore, not all students who are required by their college to take such a course enroll in the English department’s course, as some departments offer their own “writing for majors” course that fulfills this requirement. Even English majors do not take the generalized second-level writing course so many IPFW students take; instead, they take a writing course designed specifically for English majors. ([Return to text. \[#note2-ref\]](#))
3. When we instituted common course outcomes in 2007, we did not have common course outcomes or a mandatory, common syllabus. ([Return to text. \[#note3-ref\]](#))
4. The former, non-credit bearing course also had a cap of 18; the studio-style course was capped at 22. Due to record enrollment during the Fall 2009 and 2010 semesters, the dean of our college raised the cap of the new basic course to 20. The cap reverted to 18 for the Spring 2010 and 2011 semesters, however. ([Return to text. \[#note4-ref\]](#))
5. Readers interested in exploring the Daly-Miller test can find the test here: <http://www.csus.edu/indiv/s/stonerm/The%20Daly-Miller%20Test.htm> [<http://www.csus.edu/indiv/s/stonerm/The%20Daly-Miller%20Test.htm>]. A scoring guide can

be found at http://www.csus.edu/indiv/s/stonerm/daly_miller_scoring.htm

[\[http://www.csus.edu/indiv/s/stonerm/daly_miller_scoring.htm\]](http://www.csus.edu/indiv/s/stonerm/daly_miller_scoring.htm) ([Return to text. \[#note5-ref\]](#))

6. See Blythe et al. for a deeper discussion of our institution's efforts to institute self-placement. ([Return to text. \[#note6-ref\]](#))
7. For a discussion of the history and philosophies of these basic writing programs, see Nicole Pepinster Greene and Patricia McAlexander's *Basic Writing in America: The History of Nine College Programs*. ([Return to text. \[#note7-ref\]](#))
8. On our campus, learning communities consist of two or more courses that enroll the same students; for example, students register for a learning community in which they will take the same section of our BW course and the same section of Intro. to Sociology. The courses are "linked" by virtue of having the same set of students, and instructors of the linked courses meet with the students every week during a mandatory community hour in which the students and faculty together engage in co-curricular activities, such as attending a campus lecture or workshop. ([Return to text. \[#note8-ref\]](#))
9. A Likert scale is commonly used on surveys to gauge the extent to which the respondent agrees or disagrees with a particular statement. For example, our five-part Likert scale course evaluation asks students to rate how strongly they agree or disagree with fifteen statements about their instructor, course materials, and the course itself, with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree." ([Return to text. \[#note9-ref\]](#))

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