

# Forum for International Research on Students and Teaching

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## RECOGNITION OF PREVIOUS EDITORS

The *Forum for International Research on Students and Teaching* is the evolution of *Research and Teaching in Developmental Education* (RTDE), the scholarly journal of the New York College Learning Skills Association. For over thirty years, RTDE provided a space to share best practices for faculty and staff engaged in the often-challenging task of supporting students as they transitioned – either from high school, work, or international studies – to the college classroom. It is with sincere thanks that we recognize the editors of *RTDE*.

Rita Pollard, Fall 1985 1(1) – Fall 1987 3(1)

Rob Erwin & Janet Snoyer, Spring 1987 3(2), Spring 1988 4(2), Spring 1989 5(2) – Spring 1990 6(2)

Janet Snoyer, Fall 1987 4(1), Fall 1988, (5)1

Patricia A. Malinowski and Susan D. Huard Fall 1990 7(1) – Spring 1994 10(2)

Patricia A. Malinowski Fall 1994 11(1) – Spring 2006 22(2)

Mary Ellen Mulvey Fall 2006 23(1) – Fall 2010 27(1)

Marie Hannan-Mandel Spring 2011 27(2) – Spring 2017 33(2)

Kim Ballerini, Fall 2017 – Spring 2019

Jesse M. Redlo and Emily S. Ryan Radder, Fall 2019, Special Issue

Jesse M. Redlo, Fall 2021 and Spring 2022, Special Issues

## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

It is my honor to share with you the second issue of *FIRST*. I trust you will find the works included in this issue to both inform you and inspire you to consider contributing to our journal.

This issue of *FIRST* presents an academic article by Dr. Kathryn DiTommaso, an opinion essay by Jane Neuburger, and a dissertation spotlight on the work of Dr. Marcia Mahler Bouloy. While these three pieces may at first seem disparate, they really do resonate with one another. Dr. DiTommaso shares a quantitative research study of the academic writing skills of a cohort of community college students. DiTommaso's study affirms the importance of understanding what our students know (and do not know), intentionally crafting our classes to support learning, and encouraging our students to take advantage of campus resources. Our dissertation spotlight presents a qualitative study on the transition from secondary school to a junior college. Dr. Mahler Bouloy shares the significant insights that can be gained by asking students about their experiences. Bridging these two research articles is Jane Neuburger's opinion essay. Her look at the shifts in our profession connects with the strategies highlighted in both DiTommaso's and Mahler Bouloy's research. Closing our issue is a highlight from the first issue of *RTDE*, which shares five strategies to encourage student persistence and success. The strategies Eaton and Ginsberg suggested could be adapted to the 21st-century learner and provide an opportunity to create a qualitative or quantitative research study of your own.

If you are interested in submitting an article for consideration by our editorial board and peer reviewers, you may find the brief statement of the journal's aims and scope helpful. These statements will move to the end of future issues and will be included on our webpage. If you have questions or feedback about the aims and scope, please let me know. I welcome the opportunity to discuss *FIRST*.

Safe journeys,

Nichole LaGrow  
*FIRST* Editor

# FIRST JOURNAL VISION AIMS AND SCOPE

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Nichole LaGrow

*Forum for International Research on Students and Teaching*

Journal Editor

The Editorial Board of the *FIRST* have been hard at work reframing our journal's vision, aims, and scope. As a board, we have made a commitment to revisit these statements biannually in order to assure that our journal remains current within the field of higher education.

These resources not only guide our editorial board in selecting and including articles in our journal. They also guide our authors in determining if the journal is a good space to showcase their scholarship. And, they also guide you as the reader, to alert us if content we share is not in line with our purpose or does not help us reach our aspiration.

## Vision Statement

Our journal is a space to explore those intersections of our field where developmental education, academic support, and student support programming overlap and can inform one another.

## Aims and Scope

*FIRST* exists to serve the community of secondary and postsecondary professionals in sharing research and best practices in the intersectionality of developmental education, academic support, and student support programming for secondary and postsecondary education. It is particularly interested in promoting inclusive research that leverages sound research design practices and their application in diverse teaching and learning settings.

*FIRST* is sponsored and made possible by the New York College Learning Skills Association (NYCLSA), a regional chapter of the International College Learning Center Association (ICLCA). We have a strong heritage of publishing a scholarly journal as *FIRST* is the evolution of *Research and Teaching in Developmental Education* (RTDE). The current scope balances honoring the traditional definition of developmental education as a core foundation, while also seeking to keep up with current trends to expand what developmental education encompasses.

Published biannually (Fall and Spring issues) as an open-access journal, *FIRST* accepts articles from scholar-practitioners, graduate-level students in relevant fields, and undergraduate students working with faculty in the field. Specifically, *FIRST* seeks articles on topics such as, but not limited to:

- Theories and applications of teaching and learning in developmental education (both literacy and mathematics) and academic program courses;
- Social, emotional, and cognitive support and preparation programming, e.g. STEM-specific strategies, PLTL, student services, and summer bridge programs;
- Engaging specific learner populations, e.g. dual credit, early college high school, and returning adult learners;
- Leveraging student success interventions, e.g. academic support, academic advisement, and tutoring;
- Exploring assessment practices, both student and programmatic, and their implications;
- Sharing innovations in research in teaching and learning; e.g., corequisites, embedded tutoring, technology inclusion, etc.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of acceptable topics. Articles on other topics may be considered; please direct any inquiries to *FIRST* editor, Dr. Nichole LaGrow, (lagrowna@mlc-wels.edu) for more information.

### Open Access Journal

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# ASSESSING WRITING SKILLS OF DEVELOPMENTAL STUDENTS IN A FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION COURSE

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## Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a study of student writing that assessed the skill needs of a cohort of developmental writing students enrolled in a co-requisite composition course at a community college that is part of the City University of New York (CUNY). This credit-bearing course fulfills the first half of the required composition component at the college and includes additional instructional hours to support developmental writing students. A cohort of students who were enrolled in the course over three separate semesters (Fall 2020, Fall 2021, and Spring 2022) completed a diagnostic writing assessment, which asked students to compose an essay in response to a writing prompt. The assessments were graded with an analytic rubric to determine if any particular skill areas were most challenging for these students. Course pass rates were also compared to student performance on the diagnostic assessment to explore if overall skill level, entering the course with particular skills, and mastery of specific skills in the course might relate to course success. Findings indicated that while students exhibited developmental needs in a wide variety of skills, essay organization and development challenges were most common in the cohort and might complicate successful course completion. Recommendations include the following: the routine use of diagnostic skills assessment; the use of pedagogical approaches that are proven effective for students with developmental needs (e.g., scaffolding, strategies-based instruction, low-stakes writing assignments, essay models); and proactively connecting students with tutoring services.

Keywords: writing skills, developmental education, course success



## Introduction

For over 25 years, Bronx Community College of the City University of New York (CUNY) has offered a co-requisite English Composition I course, English 110 (ENG 110), which allows developmental students to receive instruction in basic writing skills while enrolled in a college level, credit-bearing class. Prior to Spring 2020, students were placed into this course if they passed the college's reading assessment exam and were close to passing the college's writing assessment exam. Students who failed the reading and writing assessment exams were instead placed into one of two levels of noncredit, developmental courses offered at the college. For decades, ENG 110 was quite successful in preparing students for the writing requirements of college-level courses, with pass rates in the course consistently close to or in excess of 70%.

Beginning in Spring 2020, however, English faculty who had taught ENG 110 for many years commented that they were observing lower student skill levels in this course, experiencing greater difficulties with student retention, and noticing a wider variation in writing ability among students within the same class. In addition, the

department began experiencing a significant and steady drop in the pass rate of students in this course from 70-74% in Spring and Fall of 2018 and 2019 to 55.8% in Spring 2020, 48.1% in Fall 2020, 47.6% in Fall 2021, and finally to a low of 46.2% in Spring 2022. This drop in course pass rates, in conjunction with instructor feedback regarding the increasing developmental needs of their students, indicated an urgent need for the department to determine the skill areas in which entering students were struggling the most.

The ability of English faculty to determine how best to meet student needs was further complicated by several policy changes at the college. CUNY has phased out offering noncredit-bearing developmental courses in favor of co-requisite models, increasing the enrollment of students with basic writing skills in ENG 110<sup>1</sup>. In addition, in Spring 2020, CUNY eliminated the use of assessment testing for student placement in favor of an English Proficiency Index (EPI), an algorithm largely based on high school grade point average.<sup>2</sup> This shift in CUNY's placement policy was a result of the large body of research that has indicated that assessment tests are poor indicators of student ability, poor predictors of success in college, and unreliable placement procedures (Roueche

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<sup>1</sup> The college had historically offered two levels of stand-alone remedial coursework for students who did not pass the reading and writing assessment exams and one co-requisite course (ENG 110) for students who passed the reading exam and were close to passing the writing exam. When stand-alone remedial courses were eliminated, the college instead began offering two co-requisite courses (a new course, ENG 100, in addition to ENG 110). While the courses are equivalent in terms of college credit and

degree requirements, ENG 100 is intended for students with more developmental needs than students in ENG 110.

<sup>2</sup> While the EPI algorithm purportedly determines placement based on high school GPA combined with standardized test scores (e.g., NYS Regents, SAT, ACT, etc.), many Bronx Community College students do not take those tests and are placed solely based on GPA. Furthermore, even when test scores are available, the EPI is almost entirely based on high school GPA.



& Roueche, 1993; Scott-Clayton et al., 2014; Van, 1994). Instead, research in developmental education suggests that the assessment of academic needs of underprepared students requires multiple measures of skill level such as a review of high school transcripts, test scores, and diagnostic on-site placement testing (Bahr et al., 2019; Barbitta & Munn, 2018; Barnett et al., 2018; Clery & Frye, 2018; Cullinan et al., 2019; Morante, 1994; Spann & Calderwood, 1998).

While the implementation of the EPI represented a move toward a multiple measures approach to placement, it also eliminated diagnostic on-site placement testing that had previously been incredibly useful to faculty in determining the skill areas in which incoming students struggled the most. CUNY's previous assessment test in writing asked students to write an essay in response to a reading and included an analytic scoring rubric with five writing skill areas that were each scored on a scale of 1-6.<sup>3</sup> Professors in the English Department could view a breakdown of student scores in each area to get an overall impression of the skill levels and needs of students in their classes and could tailor their instruction accordingly. In contrast, the EPI did not provide any specific information about student writing skills, complicating the ability of the department to assess the current student landscape in the course, determine if student skill levels were a contributing factor to lower pass rates, and

develop course content based on entering students' instructional needs.

The usefulness of diagnostic assessments of students' academic skills at individual colleges has also been indicated by developmental education research, which often shows a wide variability in student needs. Some research on the academic habits of developmental students has indicated that underprepared students need training in motivation, fear of failure, self-regulation, goal-setting, self-concept, self-efficacy, study skills, and comprehension (Yaworki et al., 2000). According to other researchers, developmental students need instruction in word recognition, vocabulary, reading comprehension, reading rate, organization, summary writing, and following directions (Ferguson & Bitner, 1984). Other studies have found that developmental students need instruction in understanding the requirements of a summary, providing an adequate number of important ideas, accurately utilizing outside sources, and avoiding plagiarism in their compositions (Brown & Day, 1983; Perin, 2003). In addition, students may be underprepared for the academic requirements of higher education due to a wide variety of causes including, but not limited to, a history of frequent moving, illness, truancy, emotional problems, learning disabilities, inadequate educational opportunities, negative home conditions, and/or negative attitudes (Oudenhoven, 2002; Palmer, 1998; Ross & Roe, 1986). As a

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<sup>3</sup> The college's writing assessment exam, CUNY Assessment Test in Writing (CATW), scored students in each of the following five skill areas: Critical

Response, Development, Structure, Sentences/Word Choice, and Grammar/Usage/Mechanics.

result, developmental students across various colleges and even within the same cohort of entering students at an individual college may vary considerably in their specific academic challenges. In order to understand the complicated and varying cognitive needs of these students, colleges must develop accurate assessment tools that can assist them in designing creative and flexible programs. Diagnostic skills testing can be particularly useful in this regard in that these assessments can provide a profile of individual student needs to assist in effective co-requisite program design. Diagnostic assessment of entering students' academic skills can be useful in ensuring that colleges are better able to make accurate placement decisions and provide the necessary support to meet the needs of their developmental students (Isaacs & Koehane, 2021).

At Bronx Community College, the first-year composition course is a prerequisite for all English courses and a requirement for all majors. Not passing it can lead to a delay in credit accumulation that can be devastating for CUNY students, who often have limited time and financial resources. The significant drop in pass rates in conjunction with the elimination of the writing assessment exam prompted the department to conduct a study aimed at determining the skill areas in which these students struggle the most and the appropriate interventions that could effectively achieve desired learning outcomes and improve course completion rates. The study included a diagnostic writing assessment exam that asked students to read an excerpt from an article and write an essay based on a writing

prompt. Professors of the course in Fall 2020, Fall 2021, and Spring 2022 assigned the diagnostic writing sample to their students in the first few weeks of class. These diagnostics were scored using a rubric that included various grammar and writing skill areas to determine any common areas of challenge for this cohort of students. The study also searched for patterns in student performance on the diagnostic by comparing pass rates to diagnostic scores to explore if overall skill level, entering the course with particular skills, and/or mastery of specific skills in the course might relate to course success. This paper describes the methods, findings, and recommendations of this three-semester study.

## Methods

In the Spring of 2020, English department faculty members discussed the potential use of a writing diagnostic assessment to determine student skill levels in the co-requisite first-year composition course. They approved an exam that asked students to read a selection of text, summarize the main points, and write an essay in which they responded with their own views. The directions asked students to agree or disagree with the author, state their own points on the issue, develop those points with examples and evidence, and quote and paraphrase from the reading selection. Students were told to view the diagnostic as an in-class writing assignment and not to spend more than approximately 90 minutes writing their essays. Professors of all sections

of the course in Fall 2020<sup>4</sup>, Fall 2021, and Spring 2022 were asked to administer the diagnostic to their classes and forward the exams to the department for assessment. The participation rate across these three semesters remained relatively consistent with 49% of Fall 2020, 46% of Fall 2021, and 50% of Spring 2022 co-requisite students completing the diagnostic for a total sample size of 576 student writing samples.

The diagnostic exams were scored using an analytic rubric that I developed as the college's Developmental Writing Coordinator in collaboration with the English Department's Assessment Coordinator. The rubric had a 3-point scoring scale with a 1 indicating "Very Developmental," a 2 indicating "Somewhat Developmental," and a 3 indicating "Proficient" for each of its eleven separate writing skills to determine if any particular areas were most challenging for this cohort of students. The assessed areas included the ability to refer to the reading selection's author, title, and main idea, to state a thesis, and to write multiple paragraphs with a pattern of essay organization. Other areas included the extent to which students could provide support for their points, integrate ideas from the reading, stay on topic, and avoid sentence-level errors that hinder the clear communication of ideas<sup>5</sup>. For each semester

studied, I conducted norming of a selection of student diagnostics with the English Department's Assessment Coordinator to ensure that I was accurately interpreting the skill areas and score points on the rubric. Comparing scores on each exam showed consistency across all skill areas, only varying by a point in several diagnostics.

After scoring the diagnostics, I tallied student scores to explore potential patterns or common areas of difficulty for students. I tabulated the number of students who scored 1, 2, and 3 in each of the 11 skill areas, calculated the percent of total participants receiving each score, and calculated each student's total diagnostic score (range 11-33). I also searched for patterns in groupings of skill areas to determine if specific combinations of proficiency levels and skills were most common among this cohort of students. At the end of the semester, I also compared the most common combinations of skills to student pass rates to determine if any grouping of skill areas seemed particularly related to course outcomes. In every combination of two skills (e.g., Refers to Reading and Understands Main Idea, Refers to Reading and Essay Structure, etc.) on the rubric, I tabulated and compared pass rates of students who received a score of Very Developmental (total score 2), Somewhat Developmental (total score 4)

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<sup>4</sup> Analysis of the Fall 2020 diagnostic sample, which took place in Spring 2021, provided significant data for the department regarding student skill levels and needs and demonstrated that more longitudinal research in student performance was necessary for the college to determine the most effective ways of improving student success in the course. As a result, the department repeated the study of student diagnostic exams in the Fall 2021 and Spring 2022

semesters. The goal of these follow-up studies was to determine if findings in student skill level could be more generalized to this student population as a whole.

<sup>5</sup> The 11 skill areas were as follows: Reference to the Reading, Understanding the Main Idea, Essay Structure, Thesis, Paragraph Structure, Sufficient Support, Idea Integration, Focus, Tone/Voice, Sentence Structure/Syntax, and Grammar.

and Proficient (total score 6). I determined that the most commonly linked scores included Essay Structure, Paragraph Structure, Sufficient Support, Idea Integration, and Grammar. Using these skill areas, I tabulated and compared pass rates of students who received a score of Very Developmental, Somewhat Developmental, and Proficient in every combination of three and four of these specific skills.

The study also included exploring any patterns in pass rates in the course and student performance on the diagnostic to determine if overall skill level, entering the course with certain skills, and/or mastery of specific skills might relate to course success. At the end of each semester, I examined pass rates of the students whose diagnostics had been previously assessed, comparing student course outcomes divided by scores of 1, 2, and 3 in each of the 11 skill areas, by total diagnostic score (11-33), and by the most common combinations of skills.

## Findings

### Individual Skills

Findings from diagnostic scores in all three semesters showed variation in skill levels among students within each section, ranging from Very Developmental in nearly all skill areas (Total Diagnostic Score 12) to Proficient in all skill areas (Total Diagnostic Score 33). Comparing student diagnostic scores in each area to pass rates showed some patterns in skill levels and course outcomes. In all three semesters, for each of the 11 skills assessed on the diagnostic, the

groups who scored higher in any skill area at the beginning of the semester had higher pass rates than students who had lower scores in those areas. Strikingly, in Spring 2022, pass rates of students scoring 1 in any of the 11 areas ranged from 0%-39%, while students scoring 2 in any of the areas had pass rates ranging from 57%-72%. Students scoring 3 in any of the skill areas had pass rates that ranged from 72%-93%.

While students exhibited developmental needs in various skills, some areas emerged as more challenging for students in all three samples. The largest number of students (about a third of the cohort) scored a 1 (Very Developmental) in Essay Structure, Sufficient Support, and/or Paragraph Structure. These skills appeared to be incredibly challenging for students, and in all three semesters, over half of the students who received this score in Essay Structure and/or Paragraph Structure did not pass the class. In addition, over 60% of the students who scored a 1 in the Sufficient Support area did not receive a passing grade in the course, indicating that essay development was a significant challenge for this cohort. Diagnostics assessed for all of these semesters often contained only a few paragraphs or less and unduly brief paragraphs with little supportive material. These patterns indicate that developmental students in the co-requisite course struggle to generate ideas that address the topic, convey their ideas, and compose in a readable, clear, persuasive, and organized format. They may require specific instruction in learning how to structure their ideas into

Skill Area	Very Developmental (1 Score) Description	% of Cohort 1 Score n=576	Pass Rate with 1 Score in this Skill
<b>Sufficient Support</b>	The essay lacks adequate support to explain the ideas.	30.4% n=175	39%
<b>Essay Structure</b>	Paragraphs are absent or disorganized; the essay lacks a clear beginning, middle, and end.	30.2% n=174	43%
<b>Paragraph Structure</b>	Supporting paragraphs are disorganized and/or have many errors in topic sentences, details, examples.	29.3% n=169	47%

Table 1

an organized composition and how to add support to prove their arguments (See Table 1).

In all three samples, students who scored a 1 (Very Developmental) in the more basic writing skill areas on the diagnostic also tended to have significantly lower pass rates than the rest of the sample. For example, an attempt to state some version of a thesis, the ability to write sentences that related to the prompt, and avoiding an informal voice resulted in a score of 2 (Somewhat Developmental) in the Thesis, Focus, and Tone areas, respectively. Students who wrote only a few sentences or a couple of paragraphs could still score a 2 in these areas if their writing fulfilled these requirements. While only 5% of students scored 1 in Thesis or Focus, these students had a pass rate of 7% and 10%, and the 11.5% of students who scored a 1 in Tone had pass rates of 17%. Similarly, to receive a score of 2 in the area of “Understands the Main Idea,” students had to show a very basic understanding of

the reading, which was a page long and on an 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> grade reading level. While only 5% of the sample received a score of 1 in this area, the pass rate of these students was also 17%. Thus, scoring a 1 in these areas represents extremely developmental writing skills, and while fewer students received these scores, the students who scored 1 in these tasks had significantly lower pass rates than the rest of the sample. The consistency in these findings across the three semesters indicates that while challenges in these skills are less common among students, deficits in these very basic skills may greatly complicate the ability of students to succeed in the course (See Table 2).

Comparing Fall 2020, Fall 2021, and Spring 2022 diagnostic scores in individual skill areas also showed a trend in the decline of proficient skills. From Fall 2020 to Fall 2021 and Spring 2022, there was a decrease in

Skill Area	Very Developmental (1 Score) Description	% of Cohort 1 Score n=576	Pass Rate with 1 Score in this Skill
<b>Tone</b>	The essay lacks academic tone or is informal in voice.	11.5% n=66	17%
<b>Understands the Main Idea</b>	Student does not mention the main idea of the reading or shows a misunderstanding of it.	5% n=29	17%
<b>Focus</b>	The essay is not related to the topic or the support does not clearly relate to the central idea.	5.4% n=31	10%
<b>Thesis</b>	Student does not have a thesis or the thesis does not respond to the prompt.	5% n=29	7%

Table 2

instances of students scoring 3 (Proficient) from 42.5% in 2020 to 24% in both 2021 and

2022. Meanwhile, the frequency of students receiving scores of 2 (Somewhat Developmental) steadily increased across those three semesters from 41.9% in 2020 to 57.7% in 2021 to 62% in 2022. While students who place into this co-requisite course have always lacked overall writing proficiency, historically, these students entered the course with a mix of proficient and basic skills. However, findings in this study indicate that this student population is increasingly lacking proficiency in a variety of skill areas.

Combination of Skills

In all three semesters, diagnostics were examined for patterns in combinations of

two skill areas for all 11 skills to determine if any particular combined skills seemed more commonly scored as Very Developmental in the sample. In each semester studied, students most commonly scored Very Developmental in one or more of the following five areas: Essay Structure, Paragraph Structure, Sufficient Support, Idea Integration, and Grammar. In all three semesters, about a quarter of the sample received double scores of Very Developmental in Essay Structure and Paragraph Structure, and these students had a pass rate of 42%. In addition, although slightly fewer students scored as Very Developmental in Essay Structure or Paragraph Structure combined with Sufficient Support, these students had lower pass rates of 37-38%. About 11-13% of the cohort received double scores of Very

Developmental in Idea Integration<sup>6</sup> combined with Essay Structure, Paragraph Structure, or Sufficient Support, and these students had pass rates that ranged from 30-36%. While only 6-9% of the students received scores of Very Developmental in both Grammar<sup>7</sup> and any of these other four skill areas, their pass rates were lower at 18-30% (See Table 3).

As with individual skills, the large majority of students who scored higher in combinations of 2 skills had higher pass rates. This increase was most striking in the most commonly linked areas between students who scored

Very Developmental in two areas and students who scored Somewhat Developmental in the same two areas. In combinations of two skills, the pass rates of these students increased by an average of 39% in Fall 2020, 42% in Fall 2021, and 44% in Spring 2022 for students who scored Somewhat Developmental in two areas compared to students who scored Very Developmental in the same areas.

Some patterns also emerged in the areas most often scored as Very Developmental in combinations of three and combinations of four skills in all three samples. In each study,

<b>Very Developmental in Two Skill Areas (Total Score 2)</b>	<b>% of Cohort Score 2 n=576</b>	<b>Pass Rate with 1 Score in Both Skills</b>
Essay Structure and Paragraph Structure	25.9% n=149	42%
Essay Structure and Sufficient Support	23.1% n=133	37%
Paragraph Structure and Sufficient Support	21.7% n=125	38%
Sufficient Support and Idea Integration	13.2% n=76	36%
Essay Structure and Idea Integration	11.5% n=66	30%
Paragraph Structure and Idea Integration	10.9% n=63	35%
Sufficient Support and Grammar	9.4% n=54	30%
Essay Structure and Grammar	9.2% n=53	28%
Paragraph Structure and Grammar	9% n=52	29%
Idea Integration and Grammar	6.6% n=38	18%

Table 3

<sup>6</sup> The score description for Very Developmental in Idea Integration was as follows: The student does not mention the reading or makes many errors in integrating ideas from the text with his/her own ideas.

<sup>7</sup> The score description for Very Developmental in Grammar was as follows: The essay contains multiple errors in grammar and/or mechanics that interfere with the writer's meaning and make the essay difficult to understand.



Scores in Essay Structure, Paragraph Structure, and Sufficient Support	% of Cohort n=576	Pass Rate
Very Developmental (Total Score 3)	19.8% n=114	37%
Somewhat Developmental (Total Score 6)	22.4% n=129	64%
Proficient (Total Score 9)	6.1% n=35	80%

Table 4

in combinations of three skills, the largest number of students (20%) scored Very Developmental in Essay Structure, Paragraph Structure, and Sufficient Support combined, and these students had an overall pass rate of 37%. Across all three semesters, students who received scores of Very Developmental in these combined skills had significantly lower pass rates than students who scored Somewhat Developmental (64% pass rate) or Proficient (80% pass rate) in these three areas (See Table 4).

In combinations of 4 of these skills, the highest number of students (9%) had scores of Very Developmental in Essay Structure, Paragraph Structure, Sufficient Support, and Idea Integration, and these students had pass rates of 27%. In comparison, students who scored Somewhat Developmental had pass rates of 67%, and students who scored Proficient had pass rates of 89%. The number of students scoring Very Developmental in multiple skill areas became smaller as skills were combined, and

few students received Proficient scores in multiple areas. These patterns indicate that the more areas in which a student scored 1, the lower the pass rate; furthermore, writing skills related to structure, organization, and support seemed most challenging for this sample (See Table 5).

Student diagnostic scores in the Spring 2022 and Fall 2021 groups also indicated less variability in terms of student skill levels across multiple areas on the rubric. For example, in the Fall 2020 sample, the number of students who scored similarly across the various skill areas got significantly smaller the more that skills were combined, and individual students in the sample entered the class with a broad range of skills from Very Developmental in some areas to Proficient in other areas. In contrast, students in the Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 samples more often scored as Very Developmental in most areas or as Somewhat Developmental in most areas, and individual students showed less variability among the 11 writing skills. These patterns indicate that current students in

<b>Scores in Essay Structure, Paragraph Structure, Sufficient Support, and Idea Integration</b>	<b>% of Cohort n=576</b>	<b>Pass Rate</b>
Very Developmental (Total Score 4)	9% n=52	27%
Somewhat Developmental (Total Score 8)	17.2% n=99	67%
Proficient (Total Score 12)	3.3% n=19	89%

Table 5

the course may have less of a range of writing abilities and may be more likely to have developmental needs across many writing skill areas. This co-requisite course was originally designed as a combination of a noncredit, stand-alone developmental writing course with freshman composition, and it was intended for students who were proficient in some areas but had basic skill needs in other areas. Historically, students in the course were close to writing at a college level and required some additional review to prepare for college writing courses. In contrast, students in the college’s previous stand-alone developmental courses often required more significant remediation, including intensive, focused instruction at the sentence, paragraph, and basic essay level. Findings from these semesters indicate that the student population in the co-requisite course has changed and that students in the class are more developmental overall than previous students. As a result, faculty teaching this course may need to alter instructional approaches that they historically found

effective to meet the increasing developmental needs of students currently enrolled in the co-requisite course.

Total Diagnostic Scores

Findings from the three semesters demonstrate that students with higher total diagnostic scores had higher pass rates in the class. Because the analytic rubric has a 3-point scale with 11 skill areas, I compared total overall diagnostic scores below 22 (Very Developmental) and 22 and above (Somewhat Developmental through Proficient). Students with total diagnostic scores below 22 had pass rates of 30%, while students who scored 22 and above had significantly higher pass rates of 74%. Comparing student total diagnostic scores in the samples further indicated that the overall skill levels of students in the class have dropped since Fall 2020. While 24% of students received total diagnostic scores below 22 in Fall 2020, 30-34% of students in the later samples received these scores. In addition, over the three semesters, significantly fewer students scored in the

<b>Diagnostic Score Ranges</b>	<b>% of Cohort n=576</b>	<b>Pass Rate</b>
Diagnostic 11-18	11.3% n=65	6%
Diagnostic 19-21	17.7% n=102	45%
Total Below 22	29% n=167	30%
Diagnostic 22-27	44.8% n=258	72%
Diagnostic 28-33	26.2% n=151	76%
Total 22 and Above	71% n=409	74%

Table 6

highest range of 28-33, from 34% in Fall 2020 to 22% in Fall 2021 and 17% in Spring 2022. These patterns indicate that increasing numbers of students may be entering this course with fewer overall areas of writing proficiency.

Dividing total diagnostic scores also showed patterns in the degree of developmental need and course success. Specifically, students who scored in the 11-18 range over these three semesters had pass rates of 6%, while students in the 19-21 range had pass rates of 45%. Students who scored in the 22-27 range had pass rates of 72%, while students who scored in the 28-33 range had pass rates of 76%. Thus, the students in the sample who entered the course with diagnostic scores of at least a 2 in each of the 11 skill areas (or a combination of scores that totaled 22 or higher) seemed to be considerably more successful in the class. These patterns of skill level and course

success emphasize the necessity of the college to provide increased academic intervention for students with lower skill levels to assist them in successfully completing the co-requisite course (See Table 6).

**Limitations**

While this study noted some patterns between student skill level and course outcomes, the varying course modalities of in-person, online, and hybrid among class sections in these semesters complicates generalizing these results. In addition, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of the classes (80%) that provided diagnostic writing samples were online sections of the course. While instructors were given specific instructions in administering the diagnostics, with the online modality, professors had significantly less control over who submitted the diagnostic, how long students spent on the assignment, and the extent to which they

received assistance from internet searches or other individuals.

It must also be noted that the pass rates of students in all three samples were higher than the overall pass rates in the co-requisite writing course that was the focus of this study. In the Fall 2020 sample, the pass rates of students in the sample were 63.4%, while overall pass rates were 48.1%. Similarly, in the Fall 2021 sample, 57.5% of students passed, and overall pass rates were 47.6%. This pattern was even more evident in the Spring 2022 sample, as students who submitted diagnostics had pass rates of 63.2% while overall pass rates were 46.2%. Thus, it is possible that students in the sample had higher skill levels, were stronger students overall, and/or were better able to manage external variables that can hinder success than students who did not submit diagnostics.

In addition, while students in these studies exhibited some common areas of challenge, and students with higher skill levels frequently had better course outcomes, it is likely that the overall student population in this course experiences considerably more academic and/or affective difficulties that complicate their ability to pass the course. During the three semesters studied and in the current climate, there are many potential variables in addition to the skill level that could influence student success, including, but not limited to, issues related to childcare, lack of study space, employment, food insecurity, housing instability, live-in family members, financial hardship, COVID-related illness, and mental health. In addition, despite finding some patterns in student skill levels and

subsequent grades in the course, it is not possible to make a direct correlation between skill level and course grades due to the relatively small size of the sample. Nonetheless, findings from this study indicate that the current landscape of students in this course is characterized by a wide range of skill levels and that students with developmental needs struggle considerably in passing it; more longitudinal research with larger groups of co-requisite students is needed to determine statistically significant correlations between these multiple potentially complicating variables and course success.

### Recommendations

This study emphasizes the need for English faculty to conduct diagnostic assessments of entering students' writing abilities, particularly at colleges where placement testing data is not readily available to course instructors. The elimination of the writing assessment of incoming students at this college made it incredibly difficult for professors to have any specific information about the academic needs and writing skills of students entering their classes. Furthermore, many students currently enrolling in college attended high school remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, so placement measures based on high school grades may not accurately determine student skill levels. A multiple-measures approach to student placement should include a diagnostic assessment of student writing that is developed by a faculty committee and scored with a department-

approved rubric. Using these assessments in conjunction with other placement data would enable colleges to develop more comprehensive profiles of student needs and allow for well-informed placement decisions. In cases where the diagnostic assessments indicate that certain students might be misplaced in the co-requisite course, student profiles can be reviewed by the faculty committee to make appropriate placement recommendations and, if necessary, move students to courses that might more effectively meet their academic needs (Isaacs & Koehane, 2021). In addition to facilitating accurate student course placement, determining student needs at the beginning of the semester through diagnostic assessment can also enable faculty to better understand the various skill levels of students and identify students who require the most significant amount of monitoring, intervention, and support. Professors can then develop focused interventions that may effectively help developmental students in credit-bearing composition courses to catch up to required skill levels.

In addition, while co-requisite composition courses provide developmental students with the opportunity to obtain college credit, it is imperative that professors of these courses keep in mind that these students still have basic writing instructional needs despite being enrolled in a college-level class. As a result, pedagogical approaches that might be effective for first-year composition courses intended for college-ready students may prove too advanced and less successful for students enrolled in co-requisite composition

courses. Developmental writers need instructional methods that include significantly more support and a great deal of scaffolding in order for them to succeed in a first-year writing class. These students would likely benefit from professors starting with instruction and practice in the most basic writing skills (e.g., sentence clarity, academic tone, thesis writing, paragraph structure) and gradually adding skills of increasing difficulty (e.g., essay structure, sufficient support, quoting/paraphrasing, idea integration, critical thinking). In order for students to develop the necessary skills, they need a great deal of writing practice that provides repeated opportunities for improvement and skill acquisition through various types of informal, low-stakes writing assignments such as freewriting, weekly journal entries, and reader responses (Graham & Alves, 2021; Hartwell, 1985; Weaver, 1996). Students may need specific instruction in reading a writing prompt and developing a thesis that addresses the question, engaging in prewriting practices, organizing an essay that specifically proves that argument, structuring their paragraphs, and providing adequate support. Instructors should provide frequent, clear, and thorough feedback at every stage of the writing process, allow multiple opportunities for revision, and meet individually with students on a regular basis to discuss student progress and provide additional help as needed.

Teaching specific writing strategies can also help developmental students approach writing assignments more systematically and develop necessary academic skills. Instructors can choose from various writing

strategies to teach students how to approach each stage of the writing process, including generating ideas, notetaking, planning their compositions, integrating content, revising, and editing (Gillespie, 2001; Graham & Alves, 2021; McArthur et al., 2023). In the planning stages, for example, students can be taught to use the POW method (pick my idea, organize notes, write and say more), which teaches students to brainstorm, select ideas prior to writing, write a plan, and add information while composing (Mason et al., 2011). In paragraph writing, students can be taught the PLEASE method, which prompts students to pick the topic, list ideas, evaluate the ideas, activate the paragraph by writing a topic sentence, supply sentences that support the topic sentence, and end with a concluding sentence (Graham & Harris, 2005). When revising essays, students can be taught to read their essay, find the sentence that states their belief, add several reasons to defend that belief, scan each sentence (to check for clarity, relevance, and errors), make changes, and reread the essay to make final changes (Graham & McArthur, 1988; Mason et al., 2011). In teaching various writing strategies, instructors should first evaluate students' prior knowledge and writing abilities to determine which strategies might be most effective based on students' needs, discuss the strategies and their benefits, model the strategies, provide guided practice with instructor support, and then give students opportunities to utilize these strategies independently (Mason et al., 2011; Santangelo et al., 2008).

Self-reflective writing assignments and self-assessments can also help students develop

an understanding of the required steps in the writing process, monitor their learning, and improve their editing and revising skills. Metacognitive writing tasks allow students to reflect on their own writing experience to assist them in becoming more conscious of the ways in which writing is a recursive and evolving process (MacArthur et al., 2023; Pacello, 2019). For example, students can compose informal writing assignments where they reflect on the steps they took in writing their essays, what they learned, and any skill areas that continue to be a struggle for them (Pacello, 2019). These self-reflection exercises provide opportunities for students to monitor and evaluate their own learning while also assisting professors in continuously assessing student needs throughout the semester. Similarly, self-assessments such as checklists and rubrics can be useful to students during reading and writing assignments in that they facilitate the development of revision and editing skills and assist students in understanding the requirements of class assignments. As part of writing instruction, instructors can develop editing checklists for students depending on the particular difficulties that students in the class face and allow students to use these checklists to correct errors in their own compositions (Weaver, 1996). Instructors can also provide rubrics that clearly state the required elements of specific assignments to allow opportunities for students to review and evaluate their own compositions. These activities can clarify the requirements of successful writing for students and provide them with increased compositional self-awareness and writing confidence.

Opportunities to review and discuss composition examples as a class and in peer groups can also assist students in understanding essay requirements and developing writing skills. As students begin to draft their essays, they may benefit from analyzing and discussing essay models that provide a clear example of required essay components (Graham & Alves, 2021; Sublett, 1993). Instructors can provide students with examples of completed essay assignments and lead a class discussion about the extent to which the essay models fulfill the requirements of an effective composition. Modeling how to edit with student papers or a piece of the teacher's writing can also help students develop editing skills, thereby making the composing and revising process more productive in improving writing ability (Weaver, 1996). Collaborative learning activities such as peer review workshops can also help students improve their own editing, revising, and proofreading skills (Gomez, 1985; Pacello, 2019). Instructors can guide this process by providing evaluation sheets for peer review and by modeling how to complete the sheet with sample drafts (Gillespie, 2001; Sedgwick, 1989). Class discussion and peer reviews of whole compositions provide struggling writers with guided practice with editing, revising, and proofreading, which can improve the ability of developmental students to apply these skills as they complete writing assignments.

Developmental students who are in first-year composition courses may also benefit from supplemental academic support and opportunities for additional practice and skill reinforcement. Regular use of college

tutoring services provides individual instruction and multiple learning opportunities, which can result in increased skill acquisition, higher grades, and successful course completion (Boylan et al., 1997; Damashek, 1999; House & Wholt, 1991; Rheinheimer & Mann, 2000; Rigolino & Freel, 2007). However, despite the many benefits associated with tutoring, developmental student participation in these services has been historically low (Boylan et al., 1997; Hartman, 1990; Hodges & White, 2001). Therefore, professors of co-requisite courses should encourage and frequently remind students to attend college tutoring in writing. Strategies to encourage tutoring include proactively arranging for tutoring staff to attend their classes early in the semester to present available academic services, ensuring that students know exactly how to schedule a tutoring session, and frequently reminding students that the additional help can increase their chances of success. Professors should encourage students not to view tutoring as a remedial service or as only necessary when a student is failing a course but rather as a means of preventing failing in the first place. In addition, colleges should also make every attempt to bring tutoring to the students through the use of embedded trained tutors to provide additional remediation for students who have basic writing skill needs. Increased section tutors could assist students in receiving supplemental support in learning necessary basic writing skills within the classroom so struggling students can experience greater success and catch up to their better-prepared peers in the class (Gourgey, 1994). The additional academic support provided by tutoring services could



assist developmental students in experiencing success in the co-requisite writing course.

Results of this study also indicate that more longitudinal research on student performance in co-requisite composition courses is necessary to determine the most effective ways of improving student success. Due to the small sample size, largely online modality, and timing of this study, findings in common areas of academic needs cannot be generalized, nor can direct correlations between student skill levels and performance be made. Additional variables that can hinder student success were also not examined for the purposes of this study. In order to determine the extent to which multiple variables (e.g., misplacement, overall skill levels, skills in specific areas, the online modality, and non-academic challenges) complicate student success, longitudinal research in co-requisite courses is necessary. Future research that focuses on the areas in which students experience the greatest need through diagnostic testing scores and student and faculty interviews during several semesters could assist colleges in developing a better understanding of the needs of this student population; results from these future studies could facilitate the development of a focused and appropriate intervention to assist developmental students who are enrolled in credit-bearing first-year composition courses in experiencing course success and credit accumulation.

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# THE PAST IS ECHOED IN THE PRESENT

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## Prelude

We asked current NYCLSA President Jane Neuburger to craft the first opinion essay to share in the *Forum for International Research on Students and Teaching*. She was tasked with sharing her perspective on the state of our profession, what has changed, what continues, and where she sees our work leading us. As many colleges and universities wrap up another academic year, her essay provides a pragmatic look at what we have learned over the past forty years as well as where we have room to continue to grow. Her essay is an affirmation of the work that has come before us and an encouragement as we consider the work that continues before us.

I was recently asked to reminisce about how things have changed since I became involved with NYCLSA four decades ago. And wow, things have changed since 1984! And yet, strangely, the echoes of the past linger and inform our work today.

### Coursework

When I began in developmental education (1984), we taught workshops in reading, writing, and mathematics. Those were held outside of class hours, and students were encouraged and later required to attend. When these workshops became credit-bearing courses, the credit counted towards financial aid rather than graduation. We were cautious with placement, and instructors also repeated skills tests early in the first week of class to double-check on placement; we also used that first week of testing for diagnosing particular areas of need – and strength. Developmental instructors also taught the college-level courses, and through shared inter-departmental discussions and work, skills sequences were aligned from the developmental right through the 400-level courses.

So much of our work today is in companion workshops or courses, now often dubbed co-requisite courses or supports, or set up as required labs/workshops. *Have we continued, though, to do diagnostic work? Do we use such data to provide individualized and targeted instruction within the class? Do we intentionally sequence the skills right through to the upper levels? Do we determine what might be*

*missing in high school preparation that must be addressed in either preparatory offerings or college-level courses? Or do we hope that students simply seek assistance elsewhere?*

### Teaching & Learning

We knew from the research, both then and now, that good teaching matters. My readings in education way back in 1972 said that, too. That means we must hire the best faculty and learning assistance folks we can. Those with educational backgrounds in *learning*, experience in *teaching*, and demonstrated proficiency in both *research* and *assessment*. *Could that become a requirement – or at least a recommended skill – for those wishing to teach at the postsecondary level? Don't we do such training with tutors? Could we consider something similar for beginning instructors? If that isn't (currently) possible, how might we advocate including educational or teaching-learning work in annual, rank, and tenure reviews? Could we advocate for providing such opportunities? Could our education departments create such a thing at the colleges and universities where we work?*

Additionally, we have known for a long time that learning is not static – it behooves all of us to continually renew ourselves through professional development - reading and news in our respective academic fields; engaging in workshops and webinars; attending conferences; and taking courses. And we must consciously incorporate what we learn into our classrooms, our training, and our work with students. Good advice,

then and now, is to find “one new thing” a week to enlighten and inform one’s practice. Our programs and institutions must recognize, validate, and fund professional development. That remains true, no matter the decade. *But have we learned this? Do we practice it?*

### College Readiness and Placement

Best practices, even in the 1980s, told us that no single measure – of intelligence, of competence, of . . . just about anything – should be viewed without considering more than one measure. And yet, too often, a single high-stakes test determines students’ enrollment into either a developmental or a college-level course. We knew then that placement test results were better used *in conjunction with* high school grades, other scores available in students’ records, and faculty-derived testing. The results of what is happening now in New York are mixed; some schools accept high school grades for placement; others offer placement exams for those who have been out of school for more than five years; others require placement testing for everyone. A few colleges even offer free online study guides – what a great idea! However, it is difficult to see if we truly understand the definition of “using multiple measures.” It’s not “pick one of many;” it’s “use more than one.” *I am hoping that we can spend some of our energies on this in the near future.*

#### Use of Best Practice Evaluation

We have made great strides here! The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) has provided standards for Learning Assistance Programs

since 1986; the 2023 version will soon be available for [ICLCA members](#) and [CRLA members](#). We have tutor and mentor/peer educator training standards from the College Reading & Learning Association (CRLA), which began in 1989 and was updated frequently (see [CRLA Certifications](#) drop-down menus). Our own NYCLSA provided standards for tutoring in writing in our newsletter in 1994 and 1996. The National Association for Developmental Education (NADE, now NOSS) had the first two editions of standards for Teaching and Learning for Tutoring Services, Coursework Programs, and Course-based Learning Assistance Programs, which were published in 1995 and 2008 in the *NADE Self-Evaluation Guides*. The Alliance for Postsecondary Academic Support Programs and the International College Learning Center Association have updated these resources and shared them as publicly available [best practice guides](#). Hunter Boylan’s (2002) resource, *What Works: Research-based Best Practices in Developmental Education*, provides a valuable rubric for any educational program. And the various disciplines – writing, reading, mathematics – also have dedicated standards. *If you are not yet familiar with the standards, please look them up.* They take the guesswork out of (a) setting up a new program or service, (b) redesigning a program or service, (c) creating those annual reports and plans, short or long-term planning for improvement and growth in quality, and (d) conducting self-evaluation using an easy to use, ready-made rubric.

#### Data and Assessment

Again, we have made significant strides in using both self-evaluation (see above) and data to assess our programs and their impact



on student success, learning, and development. Having been a big part of this movement since 1995, I have witnessed our growth. In 1998, participants' eyes would glaze over when the word "assessment" was mentioned; that was not the case by 2015. In coursework programs, we know that "success," as measured by grade, persistence to the end of the course, retention to the following term, and ultimately graduation, is affected by many factors – some embedded in the student, some in the environment we provide. Assessment of the institutional measures of grades, GPA, retention, persistence, and graduation has been robust. We also knew that "learning" is not necessarily measured by GPA, and we have also made strides in this area. *Let's please continue this work!*

In tutoring and SI-like programs, we used the data recommended in 1973 by the National Center for Supplemental Instruction: contrast students' exam grades before and after SI participation; contrast grades, GPA, and retention of participating versus non-participating students. Tutoring programs have long measured student and faculty satisfaction with services. However, accrediting agencies' push on student success measures (grades, GPA, retention, graduation) meant that tutoring programs' use of statistical procedures became much more nuanced. Both sorts of programs also began to explore the program's impact on the tutors/study leaders as well – in terms of cognitive, non-cognitive, and metacognitive development. *This field is exciting; the more we learn, the more we want to learn.*

## And Finally, the Care of Our Selves

Our colleagues today need help with overloads, burnout, and large classes. These challenges are not new, but they seem to have worsened. We are looking at a demographic cliff – fewer high school-aged students from which to pull our enrollments, which perhaps is causing our leadership to load up our class enrollments and not fill vacancies. A movement in the United States is increasingly questioning the value of college degrees, and another movement is questioning the cost of higher education, both of which are likely impacting enrollment and persistence. Colleges and universities repeatedly share an attack on what we call "academic freedom" of instructors to present opposing views in their classrooms. Additionally, social media has had a severe impact on academic freedom by exacerbating divisional ideas – political, religious, judicial, abortion, freedom of speech, guns, and the Constitution itself. A pandemic-affected student body has increased and exacerbated variation in foundational learning and socialization challenges. Both our personnel and students have been deeply affected by death, sickness, and a feeling of loss of control. Gosh. More than ever, we MUST focus on the things that bring us together. And so, NYCLSA. In 1985, NYCLSA was a huge group of professionals with a shared commitment to student learning; our conference attendance rivaled that of NADE. We were focused on bringing together *all* our voices to support good programs and student learning through developmental education, learning assistance and tutoring,

advising, grant programs and their operations, and postsecondary teaching in general. Let's please do this again. Participate with us. Present with us. Read our journal and our newsletter. Write an article. Join or create a committee. Add your voice; we need you. Your students need you.

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# DISSERTATION SPOTLIGHT

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*Understanding the Factors Affecting College Readiness for First-Year, First-Semester Students*

## College Readiness for First-Year, First-Semester Students

The transition from high school to college can be a challenging period for students, and those from public, grant-aided, or private schools might face unique experiences due to the distinct educational environment and values they have been exposed to. Understanding the factors that influence these students' lived experiences of transitioning from high school to college is crucial for educational institutions to support and empower their incoming students effectively. The successful transition of first-year students to college is a multifaceted phenomenon. By investigating the lived experiences of first-year students during this transition, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges, triumphs, and obstacles they encounter as they navigate the complexities of college life. College preparedness, therefore, plays a crucial role in determining students' success in their initial college experiences.

Many first-year students come to college with a romanticized notion of the

experience, and approximately 90% of high school seniors noted that they expected college to mirror the experiences of high school (Harke 2011). Many struggled with academics, a new social environment, their lack of overall college preparedness, and the process of becoming independent (Harke, 2011). This sense of uncertainty is because undergraduate students enter the first year of college at different levels of college readiness (DeAngelo & Franke, 2016).

This qualitative phenomenological inquiry aimed to explore the experiential dimensions of first-year, first-semester college student. Four areas of inquiry drove this study: (a) What are the lived experiences of first-year, first-semester students during their transition from high school to college, and how do these experiences shape their overall sense of belonging and adjustment to the college environment? (b) What college readiness needs still exist for Belizean first-year, first-semester undergraduate students upon entrance to junior college? (3) How do first-year, first-semester undergraduate students perceive their readiness for college in terms of academic, social, and emotional preparedness? and (d) What are the key factors that contribute to the success and

challenges experienced by first-year students during their initial semester of college, and how do these factors intersect with sociocultural contexts? This study's literature review examined evidence-based research on (a) higher education in Belize and its impact on college readiness, (b) scholarly research on college readiness/preparedness, (c) first-year students' transition to college, (d) determinants of first-year student success, and (e) the applicability of the sociocultural theory.

Employing Leedy and Ormrod's (2016) methodology for data analysis, the researcher engaged a purposeful sample of 30 first-year, first-semester college students through in-person interviews using semi-structured interview protocols. The study was guided by the sociocultural theory and is applicable to understanding college preparedness because of the influence social expectations and contextual factors have on persistence and degree completion (Miller, 2005). The purpose of the theory is to analyze the subjective interpretations of a situation based on a person's historical and cultural norms (Creswell, 2007; Schreiber & Valle, 2013).

Six salient themes emerged from the rich tapestry of student interviews, each offering profound insights into the challenges and triumphs encountered during this pivotal transition period. Academic Rigor emerged as a cornerstone of college readiness, echoing the sentiments of prior research while emphasizing the need for proactive interventions to bridge the gap between high school and collegiate-level expectations. According to Roberts (2012), academic rigor denoted an intellectually

challenging and demanding learning environment, encompassing critical thinking, synthesis of knowledge, and application of complex concepts. The findings underscored the imperative of equipping students with not only content knowledge but also essential study and time management skills to thrive in the rigors of higher education.

Belonging and Adjustment emerged as intertwined threads woven throughout the students' narratives, highlighting the profound impact of social connections and campus integration on their overall collegiate experience. Peer relationships, mentorship initiatives, and extracurricular engagements emerged as vital avenues for fostering a sense of belonging and alleviating feelings of isolation among students. Brouwer et al. (2016) ascertained that social capital is critically needed for successful completion of the first semester of college when students are in a new environment without family, friends, and peers.

Preparedness emerged as a recurring theme, illuminating the stark reality of students feeling ill-equipped to navigate the academic and emotional complexities of college life. Many students left high school with major gaps in the educational preparation needed for a successful transition into college (Ross et al., 2012). Addressing foundational knowledge gaps and bolstering students' emotional resilience emerged as critical imperatives for enhancing college readiness and promoting student success (Mishkind 2014).

Social Support Networks" emerged as a lifeline for students navigating the

tumultuous waters of collegiate transition. The study underscored the pivotal role of familial, peer, and institutional support systems in bolstering students' resilience and facilitating their integration into the college community (Bryant, 2012). In addition, the study's findings regarding the role of extracurricular activities and student organizations in fostering social connections aligned with the sociocultural plane of social interactions proposed by Phillipson and Renshaw (2013).

Educational Infrastructure and Assistance emerged as key pillars supporting students' academic journey, emphasizing the need for tailored institutional interventions to meet the diverse needs of students. From enhanced internet connectivity to personalized advising services, the study underscored the importance of responsive institutional support mechanisms in fostering student success. Many students expressed feeling at ease in seeking assistance for various needs, such as academics, college and career planning, spiritual guidance, and personal matters. These conclusions aligned with the sociocultural theory, which emphasized the impact of social interactions and cultural contexts on individuals' experiences and development, as observed by previous researchers like Wertsch (2007) and Ku et al. (2015).

Academic Guidance and Empathy emerged as essential ingredients in the recipe for student success, underscoring the transformative power of compassionate mentorship and personalized academic support. The study highlighted the need for educators and advisors to adopt an

empathetic approach, recognizing the holistic nature of student support encompassing both academic and emotional well-being. In this context, the empathetic approach advocated by the study was seen as crucial in fostering a sense of belonging and confidence among students, which facilitated their transition to college. It also led to the participants being able to build and maintain relationships with other students, teachers, and administrators, as stated by Plagens (2011).

In light of these findings, the study offers a plethora of implications for policy and practice, urging educational stakeholders to embrace a holistic approach to college readiness. From precollege preparation programs to inclusive campus initiatives, the study advocates for a concerted effort to address the multifaceted dimensions of student readiness and foster a supportive ecosystem conducive to student success.

In conclusion, the study paints a nuanced portrait of the college readiness landscape in Belize, illuminating the challenges and opportunities inherent in the transition from high school to college. By heeding the lessons gleaned from student experiences, educational institutions can chart a course toward a more inclusive and empowering educational landscape, where every student is equipped to thrive and succeed.

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## FROM THE ARCHIVES

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Easton, J. Q., & Ginsberg, R. (1985). Student Learning Processes: How Poorly Prepared Students Succeed in College. *Research and Teaching in Developmental Education*, 1(1), 12–37.  
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### Abstract

Public concern over declining academic achievement at all levels of education has created a demand for improved teaching and learning for all students. This research paper concentrates on the effective learning processes of high-achieving community college students who have relatively low aptitudes for success in college. We have investigated in depth the learning characteristics of a sample of City Colleges of Chicago students who have achieved better than we would predict from their previous academic success and aptitude. The purpose of the study was to ascertain what common alterable attributes (Bloom, 1981) these students share. This work has centered on study habits and learning techniques that other students might acquire, rather than on traits like personality or family background that neither students nor educators can change.

In many respects, this study is modeled on previous research that identified common teaching processes of highly effective City Colleges teachers (Guskey & Easton, 1983). In seeking a more complete understanding of the teaching and learning process at the community college level, we designed our current study to discover what successful students with average or low ability do that other students might also do to improve their work in college. The design, methodology, and results reported here are considered a starting point for more detailed and well-controlled studies in the future.

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This research identifies a set of learning processes common to a group of low-aptitude, high-achieving students in the City Colleges of Chicago. High involvement, selectivity, review/ restudy techniques, and planning are part of the approach to learning taken by each student in this interview study. We believe each of these processes can be taught to other students; these are alterable processes.

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The Center for Improvement of Teaching and Learning conducted interviews of 26 students who began attending City Colleges of Chicago in the 1981-1982 academic year. In their analysis of the data, Easton and Ginsberg identified five themes in the students' answers that were indicative of persistence and success:

1. Involvement, both in and out of class.
2. Review or restudy systems that encouraged the development of needed proficiency

3. Selectivity in study practices that required an ability to reflect on what they knew and what they needed to review.
4. Planning, both short and long term, to manage course and program expectations
5. Goal and success orientation as a source of motivation.

In light of these five themes, Easton and Ginsberg provide several suggestions to guide program development and support for students who may begin their studies with academic deficits. Although some of their suggestions are dated by the technology available forty years ago, their article provides concrete strategies that could be adapted for a 21<sup>st</sup> century student.

As NYCLSA re-vision our organization and our journal, this article from the first issue of *RTDE* reminds us that there is a long, vibrant field of scholarship that focuses on implementing best practices of teaching and learning into our classrooms. While those best practices may refine or adapt over time, their article reinforces that the skills needed for academic success can be nurtured in our students.