

Students' Writing Success at the University of North Carolina Charlotte:
The Effects of Advanced Placement Exemptions

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First-Year Writing
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Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Grant Proposal
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Abstract

Effective written communication is an institutional-level outcome at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNC Charlotte). For many of our undergraduates, foundational writing instruction comes from the first-year writing (FYW) UWRT 1103 or 1104 course, “Writing and Inquiry in Academic Contexts.” Recent Board of Governors changes in the system-wide policy requires college credit for first-year writing be given students who pass the high school Advanced Placement (AP) exam with a score of three or better. This means a greater number of UNC Charlotte students will be exempt from taking UWRT 1103 or 1104 than ever before. This project investigates how well undergraduates transfer the writing knowledge and skills they developed in high school AP classes to subsequent writing in their courses during their first-year at UNC Charlotte. We intend to conduct a mixed-methods study of the writing of students with AP scores of 3, 4, and 5 that exempt them from UWRT 1103/1104. The results will complement our existing research on students’ transfer of writing skills from FYW to subsequent classes and will inform the FYW curriculum.

January 15, 2019 to May 30, 2020

BUDGET:

Lead Principal Investigator: Dr. Angela Mitchell, University Writing Program

Principal Investigator 800#: 800975930

Title of Project: Students’ Writing Success at the University of North Carolina Charlotte: The Effects of Advanced Placement Exemptions

Fiscal Year One (January 15, 2019 to May 30, 2019)		
Faculty Stipend	Paid directly from Academic Affairs fund on May 15, 2019	
911250	Graduate Student Salaries	
911300	Special Pay to Faculty other than Grantee	\$2500
915000	Student (Undergraduate or Graduate) Temporary Wages	
915900	Non-student Temporary Wages	
920000	Honorarium (Individual(s) not with UNCC)	
921160	Subject Incentive Fee	\$25x50= \$1,250
925000	Domestic Travel	
926000	Foreign Travel	
928000	Communication and/or Printing	
930000	Supplies	
942000	Computing Equipment	
944000	Educational Equipment	Dedoose: 12.95 x 3mos \$38.50
951000	Other Contracted Services	
Year One Subtotal		\$3,788.50

Lead Principal Investigator: Dr. Angela Mitchell

Fiscal Year Two (July 1, 2019 to May 30, 2020)		
Faculty Stipend	Paid directly from Academic Affairs fund on May 15, 2020	
911250	Graduate Student Salaries	
911300	Special Pay to Faculty other than Grantee	\$2,500
915000	Student (Undergraduate or Graduate) Temporary Wages	
915900	Non-student Temporary Wages (see PD-17)	
920000	Honorarium (Individual(s) not with UNCC)	
921160	Subject Incentive Fee	\$25x50: \$1,250
925000	Domestic Travel	
926000	Foreign Travel	
928000	Communication and/or Printing	
930000	Supplies	
942000	Computing Equipment	Dedoose: \$12.95x 3m \$38.50
944000	Educational Equipment	
951000	Other Contracted Services	
Year Two Subtotal		\$3788.50
TOTAL FUNDS REQUESTED (Year One + Year Two)		\$7,577

SoTL Proposals that do not receive SoTL funds may be eligible for support from the Office of Assessment and Accreditation. If your SoTL proposal is not recommended for funding, would you like for your proposal to be shared with the Office of Assessment for review and consideration for funding from that office? YES

Budget Narrative

Much of the budget goes to student incentives for focus group participation and to upload writing from their first-year in college (See Methods section). Students will be asked to participate in Spring 2019 or Fall 2020 focus groups. In Spring 2019, we will create subsets of 50 students: those with 3s who have taken FYW and those with 4s and 5s who taken FYW. In Fall 2020, we will create subsets of 50 new students with 3s, 4s and 5s who have been exempted from FYW. The incentives will be gift cards in the amount of \$25/participant for each semester (\$1,250 per semester, for two terms).

The budget for the proposed project also requests a stipend (\$2,500) for faculty to code and transcribe data from focus groups, to assemble it with other data collected from the institution (Grades, AP Scores, NSSE surveys, Writerly Survey, and other readily available institutional data), and to help prepare findings for dissemination in various context. The stipend will cover work in Spring 2019 and Spring 2020.

The project requires equipment fees for six months use of Dedoose at \$12.95/month (\$77 for the

period needed for the grant). Dedoose was used for the previous longitudinal study, and we will want to use it again so data can be easily aggregated.

Has Funding for the project been requested from other sources? ___ Yes __x_ No

If yes, list sources.



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October 29, 2018

SOTL Grants Committee
Center for Teaching and Learning
ctl@uncc.edu

Dear Committee Members:

On behalf of Dean Nancy Gutierrez in the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences, I am writing this letter in support of the SOTL proposal submitted by Dr. Angela Mitchell from the University Writing Program which is entitled, "Student Writing Success at the University of North Carolina Charlotte: The Effects of Advanced Placement Exemptions." The Director of First Year Writing proposes to examine the impact of the new UNC System "Policy on Awarding Undergraduate Credit on the Basis of Advanced Placement Exam Scores" (Policy #700.10.1) on the First Year Writing Program. The proposed study aims to determine if the new policy will affect students' ability to succeed in their current and future courses that require critical writing skills.

I support this proposal. As a result of this study, the University Writing Program may become more informed of whether additional writing supports are necessary for incoming students or if a placement process into First Year Writing must be developed in order to assure student success in writing later in their academic progress.

Sincerely,

Banita W. Brown
Associate Dean for Academic and Student Success
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
Associate Professor of Chemistry



Project Narrative

Specific Aims

Amidst first-year writing curricular changes at UNC Charlotte three years ago, data indicated a clear difference in student writing success between those entering with an AP of 3 and those with 4 or 5. That data informed our current policy: those with an AP score of 3 take 1104 (a four credit course) and any students who score 4 or 5 are directed to 1103. A new UNC System policy, effective Fall 2019, requires all system universities to accept an AP scores of 3 or better as credit in lieu of first-year college writing courses. The proposed study aims to provide evidence that will help determine how this policy affects students' ability to succeed in courses that demand critical writing skills.

If students with an AP score of 3 or better are successful in meeting college writing expectations, then we will continue using our recent longitudinal study to inform the First-Year Writing (FYW) curriculum, assessment, and revision goals. However, given the new policy and the change in AP assessment algorithms, we need now to find whether all AP students exempted from FYW are succeeding in their first year. This proposed study will form the basis for future longitudinal research that follows students to see if they continue to succeed in their subsequent, and more demanding, writing tasks as they enter their majors.

If this study indicates that any one group of students with AP scores of 3 or better are not prepared for the demands of writing in college, then the University Writing Program will need to work with FYW faculty to create a placement test (allowed by the System's ruling) and will need

to conduct more research to determine if and what types of additional writing supports are necessary for the underprepared group.

Specific Research Questions

- 1) Does evidence indicate that targeted group of students with AP scores of 3, 4 or 5 who take FYW are prepared to meet writing requirements in subsequent courses?

- 2) Does evidence indicate that targeted group of students with AP scores of 3, 4 or 5 who do not take FYW are prepared to meet writing requirements in subsequent courses?

Proposed Project Rationale and Impact

The FYW Program teaches writing in various academic contexts, developing students' conceptual and applicable knowledge of writing by focusing on five key student learning outcomes (SLOs) as determined by the National Council of Teachers of English's Council of Writing Program Administrators:

- 1) knowledge of disciplinary and grammatical conventions and how these influence readers' and writers' expectations;
- 2) rhetorical knowledge to identify and apply strategies across a range of texts;
- 3) composing process strategies writers use to conceptualize, develop, and finalize projects;
- 4) critical reading abilities to analyze, synthesize, interpret, and evaluate information; and
- 5) critical reflection to articulate what choices were made in a piece of writing and why.

Determined by decades of research on student writing, writing in the disciplines, writing in the professions, information literacy, and transfer of knowledge, these SLOs are designed to equip students with effective critical reading, analysis, and rhetorical strategies that are adaptable to any writing task. The College Board acknowledges that their exam does not test for the same SLOs:

UWRT 1103 and 1104 Learning Objectives	AP Test Demonstration
Rhetorical Knowledge	Partially Demonstrated
Critical Reflection	Not Demonstrated
Critical Reading	Partially Demonstrated
Knowledge of Conventions	Not Demonstrated
Composing Processes	Not Demonstrated
Inquiry/Research Methods	Not Demonstrated

The College Board also recently changed their exam and will not make public the algorithm used to assess AP scores. Thus the proposed research is needed to determine the effect the UNC System AP exemption has on student success and retention and to determine immediate needs, i.e., whether a placement test should be designed to test AP student knowledge. However, in conjunction with our previous IRB-sanctioned longitudinal study, funded by a 2015 SoTL grant, findings from this proposed study would also shape future research on student writing at UNC Charlotte: if all AP students are succeeding in their first year, are they continuing to succeed in

their subsequent, and more demanding, writing tasks as they enter their majors? If they are not succeeding in their first year, where are they failing? Are there other supports that need to be put in place besides a placement test?

In, “Assessing our Claims for General Education: A Longitudinal Study of the Transfer of First-Year Writing Instruction Across the Curriculum” (IRB #15-1102), the FYW program assessed whether students who completed FYW coursework at UNC Charlotte were able to successfully transfer the five FYW SLOs to subsequent writing undergraduate assignments. Data indicate students are successfully transferring key FYW outcomes to later writing assignments. However, the study also shows that the struggles students (and faculty) experience can be addressed through explicit pedagogies of knowledge transfer. This proposed study, focusing on students who are exempt from UWRT 1103/1104 with AP credit, will:

- broaden our portrait of whether first-year students master written communication during their undergraduate careers;
- provide evidence of whether students with AP scores of 3, 4, and 5 are able to meet the writing tasks demanded of them their first year at UNC Charlotte;
- affect the direction of our future longitudinal study of student writing from the first year through graduation;
- indicate whether revisions to the delivery of writing instruction, placement tests, or additional writing supports may be needed.

The impact is wide-ranging, affecting not only FYW, but also the efforts to support students’ spiral development of writing as currently planned from FYW to the Critical Thinking and

Communication course (LBST 2301), to “W” and capstone courses in the majors.

Literature Review

Student Success

Although there is extensive use of AP exams to determine exemptions for first-year writing courses in college, there needs to be much more independent research regarding the academic benefits of AP classes and exam exemptions for college students. The scholarship in the field of Writing Studies strongly suggests that even students who do well on the AP English Language and Composition exam should take first-year writing in college (Hansen et al., “An Argument”; “Are Advanced” 2010). Hansen et al. found that students who complete both AP and FYW experiences perform significantly better than those who had either experience alone. The researchers recommend that advanced placement, not credit or course waivers, be granted for AP English scores of 4 or 5, and noted that students scoring 3s did not do as well in future courses. Reflecting an extensive review of available research, the CWPA Position Statement on Pre-College Credit for Writing also notes that “Pre-college AP, IB, and DC/CE courses may be highly valuable to high school students’ educational development but should perhaps be considered as preparation, not substitutes, for strong FYW courses taken on the campus where each student matriculates.”

Composing Processes

Composing processes lie at the heart of all learning outcomes in FYW, and AP exams represent little, if any, focus on composing processes. Students’ reflections on their writing processes in their final portfolios in UWRT 1103/1104 show awareness of themselves as developing writers,

not as writers who have learned all they need to know about writing, reinforcing the conclusion reached in one early study (Spear and Flesher, 1989) that AP students believed they were finished developing as writers after they passed the exam.

Inquiry and Research Methods

Studies from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) demonstrate that high-impact practices, such as undergraduate research, not only improve retention and graduation rates, but also promote deep learning of general, personal, and practical knowledge. Kuh (2008) traces the value of high-impact practices to the ways in which they require students to invest considerable energy in purposeful intellectual activities; to be engaged with faculty and peers in substantive work and to receive feedback on that work; to connect with people from diverse backgrounds; and to transfer their developing knowledge and skills across contexts, including classrooms, campus organizations, the workplace, and the wider community. The AP Placement exam does not allow for or test the ability to conduct sustained research and inquiry methods students learn in FYW.

Transfer

Scholarship in the field indicates that writing transfer is a complex practice that needs to be reinforced from the first-year throughout the curriculum (Nowacek, Moore, Bass). Noweck (2011) demonstrates that transfer relies on repurposing writing knowledge for new situations and claims. Since AP students learn limited genres, purposes, and context to succeed in an AP exam, it is difficult to expect them to transfer any writing strategies learned for this timed test to college

tasks aimed at multi-disciplinary audiences, purposes and contexts for writing. Moore (2017) indicates that although writing transfer is a complex phenomenon, university programs can teach and assess transfer across campus writing situations, as they recognize that writing transfer assessment requires mixed methods.

Methods

Our study participants will be students recruited from FYW courses, Critical Thinking and Communication (CTC), and 200-level W courses: specifically, first-years with AP English scores of 3, 4 or 5 who take FYW for credit (2018-2019 academic year), and first-years with AP English scores of 3, 4, or 5 who are exempt from FYW (2019-2020 academic year).

Institutionally- available academic records on first-year grades, credit hours, and retention will be examined to indicate how these students fare overall during their first academic year.

Participants (Spring 2019, students enrolled in FYW: 25 students with AP English scores of 3, and 25 with scores of 4 or 5; Fall 2020, students exempted out of FYW: 25 students with scores of 3, and 25 with scores of 4 or 5) will submit one semester's worth of academic writing assignments from their courses. Trained raters will score writing samples for evidence supporting the use and mastery of each of the 5 FYW SLOs (rubric scale: 0, no evidence for outcome - 4, strong evidence of mastery of outcome). Focus group participants will review their academic writing experiences and verbally analyze writing projects from their first year. During the previous longitudinal study, this helped determine if students can point to and critically reflect on transfer of writing strategies and will indicate what may transfer from AP prep classes to college writing.

Finally, we will also examine data on two surveys. We will invite first-year students (n=400) to complete the Writerly Self-Efficacy Survey (a measure with established validity and reliability; Schmidt & Alexander, 2012) in early Fall 2019 and late Spring 2020 to assess how students with different AP scores develop self-efficacy. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) will be administered to a broad cross-section of freshmen (n=1,000) in Spring 2020. We will investigate how first-year students respond to items regarding writing, and if there are any differences among first-years who took a FYW course compared to exempted students.

Evaluation

This study will produce a rich quantitative and qualitative dataset on first-year students who have taken or been exempt from taking FYW, given their AP scores of 3, 4, and 5. Our evidence will help determine if students show differing or equal levels of writing success depending on what AP score they earned in high school. This information will be of high significance and impact, as a baseline evaluation of the effect the new UNC System ruling has on students' subsequent university writing tasks.

Quantitative analyses: Academic records will be aggregated based on student AP score (3, 4 or 5), and means by AP score group compared via a one-way *ANOVA*. This will provide insight into how these students fare academically during their first year. Writing sample scores for each SLO for each participant will be averaged together and submitted to a FYW status (enrolled students, exempted students) x AP Test Score (3, 4, or 5) x SLO (5 outcome levels) *ANOVA* to determine

if student mastery of SLOs differs as a function of AP test scores and FYW course experience. This will allow us to determine if students exempt from UWRT courses with presumably different levels of in-coming abilities (as evidenced by AP test scores) show differing levels of success in first-year writing assignments, compared to the success of students who complete FYW coursework. Writerly Self-Efficacy Survey scores will be submitted to a Semester (Fall, Spring) x AP Score (3, 4, or 5) *ANOVA* to determine if students grow in self-efficacy from Fall to Spring semesters and if this growth varies for students with different AP scores. NSSE freshmen data will be linked to AP Test Scores and FYW enrollment, and writing-relevant item means compared via one-way *ANOVAs* (FYW students, exempt students with AP score 3, 4, 5) to determine if students with different preparation self-rate their writing abilities differently.

Qualitative analysis: Focus group sessions will be recorded and the discussions theme coded in order to provide qualitative evidence to supplement the quantitative data provided.

Knowledge Dissemination

The proposed work would meaningfully expand an ongoing collaboration between the University Writing Program/ FYW faculty and the Office of Assessment and Accreditation. Past work by this group was presented at national and international conferences. We seek to present our study at Conference on College Composition and Communication and the Conference (CCCC) and the Conference of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA). We will prepare publications for the CCCC's journal and the WPA journal. This information will also be shared with the FYW faculty at large in order to inform FYW curricular changes and with other

stakeholders on campus, such as the Center for Teaching and Learning, the library, and faculty teaching LBST 2301 and “W” and capstone courses in the majors.

Human Subjects

All study procedures will be conducted with the approval of UNC Charlotte’s Institutional Review Board. As soon as the application is granted, the PI will submit the IRB.

External Funding

Our next step would be to plan and apply for an external grant for a longitudinal study that tracks exempted students further through UNC Charlotte and analyze retention numbers for participants in the original study. We aim to apply for a research grant from our national organization, the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

Proposed Study Timeline

Jan-May 2019: Create focus group questions; Recruit participants

February 2019: Gather institutionally available data

March 2019 Assign focus groups

April 2019: Conduct focus groups

May 2019: Finish focus groups; assemble data; coding/transcribing; assess spring assignments

August 2019: Recruit participants

September 2019: Writerly Survey

October 2019: Assign fall focus groups

November 2019: Begin focus groups

December 2019: End fall focus groups

January 2020: Assemble data; coding and transcribing

Assess Fall assignments; administer NSSE

February-June 2020: Writerly Survey; gather, analyze data; prepare for dissemination

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