

## Ventura College Sabbatical Leave Proposal for Spring 2015

"Exploring Instructional Tools to Improve Poor Continuation Rates for ENGL 2 Students: A New Course Reader and Portfolio Process"

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### **Instructor's Sabbatical Leave Status**

**Full-time hire date:** August 2007 at VC, August 2006 at OC

**Part-time district hire date:** June 2005 at VC, August 2005 at OC

**Previous Sabbaticals:** 0

### **Background and Purpose**

Until 2009, the English composition course one level below transfer – and thus a developmental or basic skills class (ENGL 2: Fundamentals of English Composition) – fulfilled the graduation requirement for an A.A. degree. When the standards changed for English and Math in 2009, now requiring students to pass a freshman composition class (ENGL 1A) in order to receive an AA degree, we faced new challenges in retaining students who placed into ENGL 2 through the assessment process. Research from the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office suggests that in 2009, 74.7% of VC students taking ENGL 2 passed, but only 49.4% of those successful students enrolled in ENGL 1A the subsequent semester. Of those continuing VC students, 75.5% succeeded at the 1A level. The numbers have not changed significantly over the past 3.5 years. From fall 2009 to spring 2013, the average percentage of students passing ENGL 2 was 72% with only 49.9% of those students enrolling in ENGL 1A the subsequent semester, and of those students who immediately continued in the English sequence of courses, 78.3% succeeded at the 1A level. Clearly, enough students who pass ENGL 2 are prepared to succeed at the next level and fulfill their graduation requirement. However, over the past 3.5 years at Ventura College, an average of only 28.1% of students who assessed into and passed ENGL 2 succeeded in passing ENGL 1A within the span of two semesters. Although the success rates of students who continue through the sequence are high enough at 78.3%, the number of students who do not immediately enroll in ENGL 1A the subsequent semester is discouraging: these poor continuation rates indicate that successful course completion is only one facet of student success when placed in the context of new graduation requirements and, more significantly, the idea of student success needs to be expanded if Ventura College wishes to fulfill its mission to "serve a highly diverse student body by . . . focusing on associate degree . . . completion, transfer, workforce preparation, and basic skills" ("Our Mission").

In response to the data showing the hemorrhaging effect of students falling out of the sequence between ENGL 2 and ENGL 1A, the English department has tried to guess at the many possible reasons for this trend, generating explanations that range from students needing a break from English to the fear students may experience after hearing that ENGL 1A is too hard. Suspecting lack of academic guidance as a possible reason for abysmal continuation rates – and perhaps as a way to use momentum while students complete their ENGL 2 work – English department chair Eric Martinsen encouraged faculty to talk with students and distribute a handout outlining the importance of registering for ENGL 1A the following semester, thereby bringing up the continuation rate by 9% points between spring and fall 2012. This relatively

small gesture is evidence that faculty-driven change can significantly impact student continuation rates. However, there is still room for major improvement; consequently, at our most recent Program Review meeting, the English department has asked research analyst for the Title V HSI *Velocidad* Transfer Project, Chelsea Guillermo-Wann, to conduct qualitative research to find out what students report as their reasons for leaving the course sequence. Needless to say, the synchronicity of these collective efforts to address the problem of poor continuation rates bodes well for any project that focuses on course-level improvements as a way to impact retention. Moreover, since the 2009 change in graduation requirements, the department as a whole has not discussed the impact of this major change on a course like ENGL 2 that now acts as a feeder into ENGL 1A instead of an end-point for those students presumed not to be interested in university transfer or transfer-level work. This missing conversation became even more pronounced at the last department-wide norming session of sample student essays (from each level) at the beginning of this school year: participants noted a huge gap between the quality of student papers from our ENGL 2 and ENGL 1A samples when work was evaluated on content, logic, essay structure, and sentence skills. Faculty impressions at our last norming session suggest that the English department has not fully addressed the fact that ENGL 2 has become preparation for our gatekeeper transfer-level course ENGL 1A. I see this gap as an opportunity to take leadership in trying to improve instruction at the ENGL 2 level so that students are more clearly presented with a clear path to success in ENGL 1A.

Thinking of ENGL 2 as a feeder into ENGL 1A requires faculty to re-evaluate the course and change our underlying beliefs and sedimented teaching practices, possibly even leading to an eventual revision of course content and objectives in an effort to prepare students more thoroughly for ENGL 1A. Similarly, *The Basic Skills Handbook* published by the Academic Senate for California Community College's Basic Skills Initiative suggests that

In order to help meet the new standards, colleges may want to consider revising writing courses that are one-level below freshman composition in order to help students smoothly and seamlessly transition from developmental course requirements to the more rigorous requirements of the freshman composition course. (Nancy Cook 3).

The purpose of this sabbatical project is precisely to offer interventions that could potentially lead to increased retention within the English department and positively impact retention across campus for the large number of students (approximately 75%) assessing into basic skills classes. My project focuses on two main areas that fall within the scope of instruction and are described more fully under the section titled "Components of Sabbatical Project": a new course reader and a new portfolio process.

### **Preliminary Research and My Motivation**

It is my contention that English faculty need to assume their roles more fully as "institutional agents . . . [who] are in a position to transmit knowledge and resources that are particularly characteristic of the social networks and social ties of the middle and upper classes" (Stanton-Salazar qtd. in Estela Bensimon 2). A sabbatical leave will provide me with an opportunity to explore my own role as an "institutional agent," someone with practitioner-based knowledge acquired from years of field research in the classroom and the power to make incremental changes that potentially align with institutional goals to improve student retention in the completion of transfer-level requirements and ultimately to impact "student success" beyond mere course completion at each level. My focus on improving instruction intersects with our current Title V HSI *Velocidad* Transfer grant's focus on "*improv[ing] student academic success*

*outcomes at barrier points*" or high enrollment courses that meet English, Math, or General Education requirements for degree or transfer and show lower success rates for Hispanic students than VC's average. Specifically, both ENGL 2 and ENGL 1A are listed as high-risk barrier courses that "Negatively Impact VC Transfer Velocity and Contribute to [a] Transfer Gap for Hispanic Students" ("Title V HSI *Velocidad* Transfer Project" 10), clearly suggesting the importance of exploring possible instructional interventions to the problem of poor continuation rates from ENGL 2 into ENGL 1A.

Having started out as a basic skills English teacher over seventeen years ago at a community college in Canada and then moving to the U.S. in 1998 to pursue my Ph.D. and continue teaching, I know anecdotally and from research that immersion in college culture, acquisition of academic literacy, and the development of a feeling of belonging to "the academic club" (Mike Rose 142) all contribute heavily to a student's sense of achievement, engagement, and motivation in college. Having taught the full range of composition – ENGL 3, ENGL 2, and ENGL 1A – every year since being hired to teach for the District in 2005, I know that most basic skills students, despite appearing apathetic or indifferent to the learning experience, *want* to succeed but often have difficulty understanding the value of academic subjects in their daily lives and/or need assistance in improving "attitudes toward learning, self-concept, autonomy, ability to seek help, and a host of other influences having nothing to do with students' intellect or academic skill" (Boylan and Saxon 7). For faculty to conceive of their roles as institutional agents in the context of basic skills instruction, they must also acknowledge the failure of past educational models that tried to target "at-risk" students by implementing therapeutic strategies to promote students' "welfare" needs above academic needs,

a rationality predicated on a bizarre affective principle, specifically the idea that its students need to feel "good" about themselves, from which academic performance will follow. The problem with this argument is that once the student leaves the school feeling "good" about themselves [sic], they haven't the academic skills and social where-withal to enter the existing social milieu in a manner that allows them to preserve that "good" feeling. (Juan Sanchez Muñoz 14)

In contrast to what is popularly referred to as a "handholding" approach to teaching, truly effective basic skills instruction emphasizes contextualized learning in the form of assignments that help students connect the skills they acquire in a composition class like ENGL2 to tasks and motivations – for example success in college – that are perceived to be "real." Basic skills scholar W. Norton Grubb defines contextualized learning as "the practice of making linkages between classroom learning and the world outside the classroom" (13). Instead of compromising on academic standards in the name of educational behavioral remediation, effective basic skills practitioners assume that lifelong skills, much like academic skills, are about learning how to apply critical thinking and intellectual flexibility to situations that pose a challenge to one's sense of self in various immediate and long-term contexts. Acquisition of these skills often coincides with a student's struggle to redefine his/her self as a student (a process that *rarely feels good*), resulting in a student's understanding of the difference between empty self-esteem and more nourishing forms of self-awareness. Progressive basic skills instruction involves teaching students how to persevere despite setbacks in school and life: as educators we are not guaranteeing success, only showing students *how to be successful in our current world*. While the promotion of that message takes a team of experts and practitioners, I would like to use my sabbatical leave to engage in a rigorous process of self-inquiry, research, and course development that would not only help to improve my own ability to meet my students' needs in

the ENGL 2 classroom but also lead to greater camaraderie in the English department and higher rates of student success in English and across the campus.

### **Components of Sabbatical Project**

Both areas of my project – a new course reader and portfolio process – represent attempts to improve instruction and engage in a more collaborative approach to addressing basic skills challenges within the English department and across the campus. These attempts coincide with the belief that basic skills students are

more likely to be motivated . . . in well-structured educational environments, with clear purposes, a challenging curriculum, high expectations, and a strong emphasis on achievement; when students have multiple paths to competence; and when students can enhance their understanding of school and its relation to future goals. But most teaching in basic skills, especially the remedial pedagogy. . . , does not look like this. To move to more engaging instruction, more balanced approaches are necessary. (Grubb 5)

More specifically, I plan to expand my knowledge of contextualized learning strategies by completing the following tasks while on sabbatical: **a.) researching course readers that have been used in basic skills classes; b.) compiling developmentally appropriate readings across the curriculum that focus on the theme of issues facing students in higher education (from historical, sociological, economic, to mental health perspectives on the topic); c.) developing a writing portfolio process to be used at the ENGL 2 level that helps students take “responsibility for the quality of the work, the choices that were involved in the writing, and the learning that has occurred . . . a powerful metacognitive act . . . [or] thinking about thinking” (Edward White 581); and d.) sharing insights on portfolio scoring models that differ from the holistic scoring currently used at the ENGL 3 (Basic Composition, C/NC) level.**

### **Themed Reader**

Since 2007, I have changed my ENGL 2 textbook a total of six times and, having talked with colleagues about their challenges in teaching this course, I am not alone in my frustration to find a developmentally-appropriate textbook that covers ways to improve sentence skills (a handbook), provides lessons on the rhetorical modes (a rhetoric) and offers engaging readings (a reader). Part of the problem lies in the lack of choices for a course like ENGL 2 that straddles basic and transfer-level skills and, therefore, is precariously positioned as both a basic skills and feeder course. While I've been able to use our online course management system *Desire2Learn* to create lessons on grammar, syntax, mechanics, and the rhetorical modes that could be used at the ENGL 2 level, I have faced many problems trying to find a reader that is developmentally appropriate and motivates students to improve their reading strategies, engage in critical thinking, and feel inspired for their paper topics (since all of the essay topics in my classes are reading-based so that students learn how to analyze, synthesize, and integrate sources in their own writing). My initial sabbatical work will be to research course readers currently being used at other institutions in courses similar to ENGL 2. Kathy Scott, dean of Institutional Effectiveness, English and Learning Resources at VC, has mentioned several thematic readers she has encountered in her own research that have been successful in basic skills classes, and I plan to devote at least the first few weeks of my sabbatical leave to exploring these options more thoroughly.

For my own course reader, I would like to research and compile a number of articles and/or book chapters that focus on the theme of “Issues Facing Students in Higher Education,”

each section of the reader devoted to a unit upon which a rhetorically-driven paper topic will be developed. I imagine a range of readings across the curriculum, from historical, sociological, economic, to mental health perspectives on college students, their lives, and the forces that impact their choices in higher education. This kind of theme-based reader is representative of a contextualized learning approach because it has "real world" – namely college success – applications. Basic skills students, many of whom are Hispanic and first generation, are brought into the very conversations that impact them the most as students: their place in higher education, the value of pursuing a college degree, and the difficulties some students face in terms of access, socioeconomic backgrounds, and mental health. For the final section of the reader, I would like to offer a series of "Case Studies" of students who have faced challenges, shown academic perseverance, and progressed through the education pipeline. I have already consulted with VC counselor Scott Brewer about my plans to develop this themed course reader and we are currently exploring options to collaborate on a learning community between English and counseling so that my new ENGL 2 course can be paired with a student success course after I return from sabbatical in fall 2015. This collaboration comes at a time when state senate analysis of the bill SB 440 "[s]pecifies that CCC may require college success courses in preparation of obtaining an associate degree and that these nontransferable courses shall not be counted as part of the transferable unit limitation" (3). In this way, the work I'll be completing on the reader, and my eventual collaboration with counseling to offer this course within a learning community, directly relates to my personal goal of more fully embracing my role as an "institutional agent" who "transmits knowledge and resources that are particularly characteristic of the social networks and social ties of the middle and upper classes" (Stanton-Salazar qtd. in Estela Bensimon 2).

### **Portfolio**

The National Council of Teachers of English defines a portfolio as

a collection of student writing designed to track students' writing progress over the course of a semester or a year. . . [and can] include. . . both formal and informal writing assignments, at least some of which have undergone revision[, and a] variety of genres or modes of writing. (Anne Gere et al.)

Portfolios emerged from the work of Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff in the early 1990s as a viable assessment tool (Edward M. White 581), but earlier holistic models – the one our English department currently and successfully uses at VC to assess student work at the ENGL 3 level, a C/NC course – can lead to potential problems when used in grade-bearing courses like ENGL 2. A holistic assessment relies on a process of teachers assigning a general impression score based on 1.) assessment of a common writing assignment using an established rubric (what our department calls "essay norming"), 2.) public discussion of the reasoning behind individual grades on the common assignment, and 3.) blind review of individual portfolios belonging to students in other teachers' classes. This process can certainly be effective for C/NC courses like ENGL 3 that assesses student work as "passing," "not passing," and "borderline." In fact, according to the English department's 2013-2014 Program Review report,

data shows that on average students who enroll in ENGL V02 immediately after passing ENGL V03 succeed in ENGL V02 at a higher rate (78.2%) than students who are placed directly in ENGL V02 (72.0%) . . . Part of the success of ENGL V03 may well be the portfolio evaluation process at the end of the semester when each student prepares a

collection of his/her best writing to present to a committee of English faculty who provide a holistic assessment. (Eric Martinsen 22-23)

While effective for a course like ENGL 3, a holistic assessment may pose the following problems at the ENGL 2 level: peer influence during the discussion phase; difficulty determining a "common" or shared assignment that can be "normed" without running the risk of applying "a much-expanded essay test" first developed in 1960 by the Educational Testing Service or ETS (White 581); and inefficiency of the assessment process for a grade-bearing course (a labor issue for those participating in the process). Instead, my sabbatical work will explore the use of the "reflective cover letter" as a solution to these problems, an assessment tool that requires the following:

- teachers discuss rigorously the goals of the ENGL 2 portfolio in terms of course and program outcomes and then generate a clearly worded "Portfolio Goals" document to distribute to students at the beginning of the semester;
- teachers discuss and reinforce with students the bullet points presented on this "Portfolio Goals" document throughout the semester as students complete their writing assignments (the decision to grade or not grade individual assignments is left up to the teacher, though I have always assigned grades in my own ENGL 3 classes so students can gauge their progress and readiness for the next level as the semester progresses);
- near the end of the semester, perhaps during week fifteen, students work on a 3-page "reflective cover letter" assessing whether the contents they've included in their portfolios support their argument for what they have achieved in terms of "Portfolio Goals" throughout the semester;
- teachers discuss and develop a rubric that acknowledges the revision work students complete on individual writing samples included in the portfolio but also takes into account several possible scenarios like "weak reflective cover letter but strong portfolio contents" (and vice versa)
- a portfolio is assessed on whether or not i.) it supports the argument offered in the "reflective cover letter", ii.) the student has taken responsibility for evaluating his/her own work; iii.) contents of the portfolio meet the established rubric's standards and iv.) the course and program outcomes have been achieved (as stated in the "Portfolio Goals" document distributed to students).

This contextualized learning model is predicated on i.) the idea that collaboration should occur not only between faculty but also between faculty and students, ii.) the goal that students will develop metacognitive skills that will enhance their sense of ownership in pursuing a higher education, and iii.) the theory that teachers are "institutional agents" who have the potential to bring students into the conversation about standards and their function in higher education. Since students and teachers often see "standards" as the key problem or challenge in assessing student work, I see this new portfolio process as a chance to implement what Vincent Tinto calls a pedagogy of engagement: "Pedagogies of engagement -- such as cooperative and problem-based learning -- have been shown to be particularly effective in enhancing student success."

Ultimately, however, moving toward a new portfolio assessment process for ENGL 2 would help the department re-conceive of the course as a more rigorous "stepping stone" or feeder into ENGL 1A because it would help to establish a more standardized approach to assessment, motivate students to see the "larger picture" of the skills they would be gaining to succeed at the next level, and also shift the conversation away from seeing students' progress through the sequence of composition courses, or lack thereof, as a series of road blocks or

barriers. What most practitioners know, in other words, is that progress can occur whether students pass or fail a course. Indeed, students who have failed my own courses often take the same course with me a second time the following semester and do much better. The new portfolio process I wish to research over my sabbatical leave would help to engage students in the conversation about assessment and help them to see stumbling blocks as tools for growth, potentially impacting retention for those who succeed at the ENGL 2 level (by building a sense of trust in the way they've been assessed so they know, too, they may be just as successful in ENGL 1A) and even for those who fail (by providing a context for success that could result from students having been prompted to internalize the motivation to succeed based on their ongoing discussions of the "Portfolio Goals" document).

During spring 2014, I will be working closely with English department chair Eric Martinsen and qualitative researcher Chelsea Guillermo-Wann to create a questionnaire to distribute to students enrolled in ENGL 2 classes to find out whether or not they plan to enroll in ENGL 1A the subsequent semester. Using this questionnaire, I will be asking for student feedback on the reasons they might hesitate to continue through the sequence. This preliminary research should provide some necessary context for my work as a lead faculty member on the Portfolio Pilot planned for Fall 2014, and I plan to use the lessons I have learned in leading this effort to inform my process of inquiry during sabbatical leave. During my actual sabbatical leave, moreover, I will be inquiring about portfolio processes already in place for basic skills classes at CSUN, CSUCI, and Santa Barbara City College, potentially visiting these campuses during their marathon portfolio assessment sessions in order to take and share notes with my own department.

### **Value of Sabbatical Project to Instructor, Students, the College and the District**

Embracing one's role as an institutional agent requires time for self-reflection, research, and a flexible process of inquiry. Given that English composition instructors teaching a regular load at VC are required to provide feedback on and grade between 2300 and 2700 pages of student writing each semester, the pace of teaching can often feel so overwhelming that one rarely has time to embrace one's role as an agent. A sabbatical leave would allow for a more comprehensive study of best practices in basic skills instruction and the development of teaching tools that could greatly improve student learning in the ENGL 2 classroom and these students' success rates in continuing on to accomplish their transfer-level goals and graduation requirements. Given that VC's English department offers more sections of basic skills classes than the other two colleges in our district, it is clear that VC is more heavily invested in a concept of success that takes into consideration the full sequence of composition courses. I would invite interested parties at OC and MC -- colleges that do not currently have a portfolio process in place for any of their basic skills courses -- to inquire about my research in portfolio use and contextualized learning in general.

I feel that I am uniquely positioned as someone in our department who can bring faculty together on the use of portfolios and reading-based essay assignments because of my history of involvement on various department and campus-wide projects related to student success and basic skills, and the credibility I have gained from regularly teaching the whole sequence of composition courses:

- consistent participation on basic skills committees (English co-leader with Kelly Peinado on Basic Skills Title V grant from 2007-2012, co-leader with Gabe

Arquillevich on ENGL 3 portfolio process, current member of basic skills committee),

- basic skills training of S.I. leaders and tutors almost every semester since 2008, specifically basic skills sensitivity trainings structured around research and exercises included in the 21-page handbook "Helping the Basic Skills Student in Reading and Writing" I authored in 2008,
- co-leading various professional development workshops on i.) writing across the curriculum (WAC workshop with Jenna Garcia in 2008, with Jenna Garcia and Kelly Peinado in 2009, and with Jenna Garcia and Jaclyn Walker in 2010), ii.) reinforcing soft skills in the classroom ("The Student-Centered Syllabus" with Ted Prell in 2008; and "The Interactive Syllabus" and "Follow-up Roundtable" with Tania DeClerck in 2013), and iii.) basic skills issues (compilation of the Faculty Toolkit and creation of a campus-wide flex activity on basic skills with Ted Prell in 2012 and, most recently, a basic skills workshop with Steve Turner in 2013),
- establishing credibility from i.) having participated in "norming sessions" across the sequence of our composition courses and teaching the full range (ENGL 3, 2, and 1A) every semester since being hired in the District in 2005; and ii.) winning teaching awards for basic skills instruction (I'm the recipient of EOPS' "Nickel and Nails" award for 2008 and EAC's "Outstanding Faculty Award" in 2009)
- collaborating with other programs and departments (EAC, Criminal Justice, counseling, EOPS, and the Transfer Center) to develop a new "College Success"-themed ENGL 3 that I've taught since fall 2008,
- current leadership efforts to engage my colleagues in a discussion about the impact of unit changes on our program and the need for more instructional consistency at the ENGL 2 level, resulting in taking on a leadership role in the implementation of a pilot ENGL 2 portfolio process scheduled for fall 2014 (from which I plan to draw some of my initial research for my sabbatical work in spring 2015).

VC's sense of commitment to basic skills students expressed in its mission statement must coincide with instructional improvement, and I see my sabbatical work as an opportunity to offer my department and campus some tools and practices that could greatly improve our efforts to retain basic skills students. I am also currently working closely with Scott Brewer (VC Counselor) to explore the option of linking my own ENGL 2 course with a "College Success" course, eventually moving in the direction of a learning community model. Eventually, I would like to publish my findings or present my research and ideas as part of the efforts of the California Community Colleges' Success Network (3CSN) that showcases attempts to develop best practices. My work on contextualized learning approaches, themed readers, portfolio assessment, and eventually learning communities could potentially place VC on the map of colleges making efforts to improve the success of students who are most struggling.

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