The Viability of “Stretch” Courses for Underprepared Students in English 1510

Preliminary Report

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**Understanding Stretch Programs**

The “Stretch Program” model for basic writing came about at Arizona State University in the early 1990s as a way to incorporate students who were traditionally placed in remedial classes outside of the department and college’s purview. These remedial classes were not only separated administratively—run by a local community college—they also had different objectives, more focused on “skill and drill” grammar lessons than the outcomes put into place by the university freshman writing requirement.

The stretch model, then, was proposed as a way to get these students into courses that taught to the outcomes of the first year requirement, but that allowed more time to do so. Accordingly, students identified for the stretch program would take two courses over two semesters of their freshman year. Both of these courses would be designed around the first year requirement, but would involve more course work, and more process/time allotted for that course work to ensure that students writing at “basic” levels be supported adequately (Glau, 1996).

* Stretch programs are designed to help underprepared students succeed in the first year composition course by “stretching” the course work and outcomes fulfillment of one term course across two courses over the same academic year.
* Stretch programs are founded on the premise that learning writing skills is a recursive process and that underprepared students will benefit from extra time and support working on the same outcomes required in the 1-semester requirement.

**Identifying Good Candidates for a Stretch Sequence**

At Arizona State University, candidates for the Stretch Program are identified by ACT or SAT scores, in line with the following specific standards:

Students with an SAT verbal score of 530 or lower, or an ACT Enhanced

English score of 18 or lower are placed into the Stretch Program.

Students with a 620 or higher on the SAT verbal or 26 or higher

on the SAT English can take our one-semester class, ENG 105. (Glau, 2007, 47)

Other implementations involve using in house placement exams developed by the composition program to assess student needs (CSULA Composition Committee, 2010).

**Administrative Implementation: Course Credit and Cohort Instruction**

From an administrative viewpoint, students identified as candidates for the stretch program take two separate college courses and receive college-level credit for each. This is indirect contrast with “remedial” models that posit any kind of basic writing coursework as pre-college (a stigma received negatively by many students). At Arizona State, “Stretch Program students earn three hours of elective credit for the first part of the Stretch course sequence,” given the course designation of WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum) 101, and “three hours of ENG 101 credit for their second semester’s work” (Glau, 2007, 35).

Based on the research on Arizona State’s program (Glau, 1996; Glau, 2007) as well as other reports (CSULA), the Stretch Program is more effective if students on this track are placed in cohorts that are retained throughout the sequence. Community building, both between students and instructor, aid in the development of a “useful ‘writing community’” (Glau, 2007, 35) in which students can trust each other and the instructor can “determine pacing and even curriculum appropriate to a specific cohort of students” (CSULA, 3)

**Are Stretch Courses Working for Students?**

Stretch Course Programs represent an ideal strategy for supporting underprepared student-writers and ensuring course objectives are met. The use of student-teacher cohorts increases “student engagement” and allows students to “build on content and skills from prior [terms] and achieve nearly seamless curricular alignment” (CSULA, 3). Furthermore, the increased attention to careful process in a stretch courses “effectively teachers writing and revision as a task to be completed over time,” which helps students “perform better on writing tasks in their majors” (CSULA, 4).

A study of Arizona’s use of the Stretch Program over a ten-year time span also found encouraging results, claiming “most of the data indicates that the Stretch concept actually works and that thousands of students have benefited from the extra time and guided writing experience they receive with the [Stretch sequence]” (Glau, 2007, 36). Their data sets are extremely comprehensive, but a few of their findings include:

* Retention Rate at ASU improved as more students passed the first class in the sequence compared to the previous remedial course. The pass rate of ENG 071, the remedial course was 66.22%. Compare this to the pass rate of WAC 101 (first part of the stretch sequence), at 90.15 (40).
* Stretch program students often perform better than their non-stretch peers:

“Clearly, the WAC 101 semester, which gives these at-risk students more guided writing experience, helps them. Stretch Program students consistently

pass ENG 101 at a higher rate than do their counterparts who take traditional ENG 101 (40).”

* Perhaps even more encouraging, in Arizona’s three part sequence, Stretch Program participants even outscore their non Stretch peers in the third course (ENG 102), after they’ve left the 2 course sequence Stretch program: “Stretch students consistently pass ENG 102 at a higher rate than do their traditional ENG 101 counterparts” (40).

The data presented here is a limited sampling of the results of this ten-year study, yet they have immediate significance for the efficacy of such a program. For Arizona, as well as for other programs, the stretch model for first year composition has been found to be effective.

**Works Cited**

CSULA Composition Committee. “Proposal to Study the Feasibility of Implementing Stretch Composition at CSULA.” California State University Los Angeles, English Department. January, 2010. Web. 30 Sept. 2013.

Glau, Gregory R. “The ‘Stretch Program’: Arizona State University’s New Model of University-level Basic Writing Instruction.” *WPA* 20.1 (1996): 79-91.

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