

# “My ACT Score Did Not Let Me Take AP English as Dual Credit”: A Survey on High School Experiences of Basic Writers

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*ABSTRACT: At a four-year public comprehensive university in 2017, a mandated attempt to implement a corequisite model for Basic Writing education challenged assumptions about the types of students enrolled in the existing program. Students, who by institutional placement measures (ACT scores) would be placed in First-Year Writing, were voluntarily enrolling in Basic Writing courses despite administrative assumptions that they did not need the course. Additionally, I found that students who took AP English and Dual-Credit in high school were also enrolled in Basic Writing. Findings from three years of survey data from students (enrolled in both prerequisite courses and corequisite courses) and institutional data indicate programs need to revise curriculum and placement practices to meet the needs of the students enrolled, rather than the needs of the hypothetical deficient writers institutions presume enroll.*

*KEYWORDS: ACT; AP English; Basic Writing; basic writers; corequisite; placement*

Much of the data on corequisite programs for Basic Writing is based in work at two-year institutions, but state legislators and university administrators often appear to operate under a one-size-fits-all mentality with regard to developmental education, and much of the field’s conversation on placement revolves around the skills and needs of students in the First-Year Writing (FYW) course. Understandably, many programs have shifted focus to align with what administrators ask for, often to preserve and maintain what they can, but this can result in flattening local concerns and student voices in favor of applying broader solutions that may or may not even apply in a program’s context. My work takes a localized look at the experiences of students in a Basic Writing program at a four-year public university, during

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© Journal of Basic Writing, Vol. 39, No.2 2020

the early stages of implementing a corequisite model for Basic Writing. I experienced firsthand how the differences in the student population change the ways that students approach and interact with a corequisite writing course. It is no secret that the implementation of these courses is changing the landscape of Basic Writing, eliminating developmental education altogether in some cases. With Basic Writing courses gone, students who may wish for additional support in their writing lose that opportunity. Legislators and university administrators wouldn't know that, because they haven't asked the students themselves. If they had, they would see that many of their so-called cost-effective measures have hindered students' preparation for college-level writing.

As changes were implemented by my department's administrators, I wanted to understand more about the students in our Basic Writing courses, so I decided to ask the students about their experiences directly through a survey. In the prerequisite course, students take Basic Writing before they are eligible to enroll in First-Year Writing. The new corequisite model would shorten this process and make it more intensive: students would take the two courses concurrently, resulting in six credit hours of English in one semester. The program and I needed information on how this change was being received.

When I set out, I initially had a few main questions for the students: Why did they choose the corequisite? What experiences with writing were they bringing to the classroom? Did they see a benefit in taking the corequisite over the prerequisite? I originally hoped that this data set would provide our program with information on the effectiveness of the corequisite compared to our existing prerequisite course. However, as the project progressed, from the initial survey in Fall 2017 to the most recent in Fall 2019, the insight from the students led to the survey itself evolving alongside my understanding of what the students wanted (and needed) from a Basic Writing course. Perhaps most striking was that I found our program had students enrolled in Basic Writing who had taken advanced English courses in high school, such as AP or another Honors designation, but had lower placement scores, which then forced them into Basic Writing. Others had high placement scores and took the class voluntarily. These discoveries changed the tenor of conversations we had as a Basic Writing program. Our program's goals shifted immediately from understanding how to structure the corequisite best for administration purposes to getting a better understanding of the students enrolled in *both* versions of the course so we could make necessary changes to placement procedures.

This project has also encouraged reflection within the program about how, potentially, to revise the Basic Writing curriculum to better support the students we have in the classroom rather than the theoretical underperforming students we presumed we had. With a more nuanced understanding of why students are voluntarily taking support classes that some administrators, legislators, and teachers deem unwanted and unnecessary, we can revise curriculum for those courses to better meet the needs of the students present. Administrators and educators making decisions about the future of Basic Writing programs should not make assumptions about students' need for the course based on test scores and high school transcripts alone. Our field lacks data, specifically, on the high school writing experiences of students who enroll in Basic Writing, and much First-Year Writing research works on the underlying assumption that students who take Honors or AP courses in high school won't need Basic Writing. This study begins to address that gap in our research on the previous writing experiences of our students and the assumptions about who needs or wants a Basic Writing course.

In 2018, Hope Parisi encouraged Basic Writing scholars to “refocus our founding question to ‘*Who are you here?*’ and ‘*Who is Basic Writing for?*’” (122). While she highlighted these questions then, it is clear she was echoing a sentiment and concern prevalent in the field, because those questions existed at the heart of my survey in Fall 2017. My work provides some initial possible answers, and additional questions, to extend Parisi's call to our field. Basic writing instructors and administrators are pulled in many different directions given the current landscape and changes at hand. Many outside actors are trying to push narratives about the type of preparation our students need and how they should get it, but the students' voices are missing from those conversations. To better understand the needs of our basic writers and develop courses that meet those needs, we have to actually ask our basic writers. My survey began with that key goal. I present some initial program context surrounding the implementation of a corequisite pilot that informs the circumstances that prompted my survey, and my results emphasize placement into the Basic Writing courses and the previous high school experiences these students reported. What my results indicate is that our students' experiences need to factor into our programmatic decision-making process more as the field evolves.

## **BASIC WRITING AT MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY**

During Spring of 2017, Missouri State University became involved in initiatives proposed and promoted by the national non-profit organization Complete College America (CCA). CCA states that its mission is “[l]everaging our Alliance to eliminate achievement gaps by providing equity of opportunity for all students to complete college degrees and credentials of purpose and value” (“About”). CCA presents many initiatives that are intended to aid in student success in higher education. Missouri House Bill 1042, resulting from Complete College America data and lobbying, called for Missouri institutions to implement what they defined as “best practices of remedial education” (*Missouri House Bill 1042*, 3). A pilot corequisite course was recommended by administration outside the English Department at Missouri State University to meet this legislative requirement.

In November 2016, department administration informed the Basic Writing coordinator that a pilot would take place the following spring. The initial pilot (one section) of the corequisite in Spring 2017 provided some initial data on issues that would need to be addressed if the institution wanted to move forward with plans for 100% scaling, that is, converting all offered sections of ENG 100 into corequisite sections. The program proceeded with 50% scaling for Fall 2017 (four prerequisite sections offered and four corequisite sections).

Even in prerequisite format, the Basic Writing program at Missouri State University is small, offering only 7-8 sections each fall semester, capped at 20 students each. For comparison, the First-Year Writing program offers approximately 40 sections each fall semester, capped between 20 and 22 students, with 1-2 sections set aside for international students. Additionally, the majority of Basic Writing and First-Year Writing courses are taught by MA-level graduate students in the English department and some per-course faculty. For the sake of brevity, all mentions of ENG 100 refer to the institution’s Basic Writing course and mentions of ENG 110 refer to the First-Year Writing course. Distinctions between prerequisite and corequisite Basic Writing sections will be made as needed.

### **Basic Writing and First-Year Writing Placement Measures**

Since 2005, Missouri State University has used the ACT English sub-score for placement in writing courses, and Missouri State University does not require the ACT Writing exam or the SAT equivalent. The institution overall does not have a minimum required ACT score for admission, and

admission eligibility is determined by a scale that considers ACT (or SAT) score alongside class rank percentile and GPA (“Admission Requirements and Deadlines”). Prior to 2005, the English department used a placement essay for ENG 110 that was proctored during the summer registration events for incoming students. However, the choice was made to use ACT scores when both the department could no longer afford to pay readers for the essays and few qualified readers were available. Without the resources to continue a writing-based placement process prior to the start of the semester, the more cost-effective measure became the only viable option available to the program.

Students with ACT English subscores of 18 or higher (or equivalent scores on other standardized exams) usually enroll in the First-Year Writing course. Students with scores lower than an 18 subscore are required by the university to take Basic Writing before proceeding. However, any student may voluntarily enroll in ENG 100 if they desire. Sometimes, due to miscommunications with advisers, students enroll in ENG 100 when they intend to take ENG 110. As a result, the Basic Writing coordinator instituted a second check, so to speak, at the start of each semester to ensure more accurate placement. At the start of each semester, ENG 100 instructors review placement scores (ACT or otherwise) of students who have enrolled in their courses. Any students who have placement scores that would allow them to enroll directly into ENG 110 are approached by their instructor to verify their choice to enroll in ENG 100. This verification happens during the first week of classes so that any students who wish to change classes are able to do so. This process is as close to multiple measures as the program could achieve with limited resources and institutional support. This process was initiated by the Basic Writing program due to lack of influence in campus-wide advising practices. Often, on our campus, students were placed into courses based less on their *need* for additional writing support than on how well it fit into their schedule and met other graduation requirements. Ongoing research from my study indicates this does play a factor in student choice of corequisite over prerequisite Basic Writing courses, but it is not the only factor.

I must also note here that the placement process for international students differs from that of domestic students. Before most international students reach the First-Year Writing course, they often are enrolled into English Language courses outside the English department, and that placement is based on TOEFL scores. Upon completion of their English Language courses, most are advised on which possible course to take. Advisers offer ENG 100, ENG 110, and international-student-designated sections of ENG

110. However, some students only attend the institution for a single semester, and those students are most commonly advised based on their TOEFL scores.

Students who have completed Dual Credit coursework in English in high school have multiple options. Many high schools in Missouri have Dual Credit options through Missouri State University, and students who complete those courses with passing grades, pay the requisite fees, and meet the eligibility requirements receive credit through the institution that then exempts them from ENG 110 (“Am I Eligible”; “Participating High Schools”). The ACT English subscore of 18 is also used to determine eligibility for enrollment in Dual Credit courses offered by the institution. Students who have completed Dual Credit through other institutions (either in or out-of-state) are allowed to transfer that credit in from the offering institution. If the course is deemed equivalent to ENG 110 by administration, credit is granted on the student’s transcript and they are exempt from taking ENG 110. Students who receive a minimum score of 4 on the English Language and Composition or the English Literature and Composition Advanced Placement (AP) exam receive credit for ENG 110.

### **The Corequisite at Missouri State University**

Unlike corequisites based on the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) model, the Missouri State University corequisite model did not intentionally populate the course with a designated percentage of students eligible for First-Year Writing (Adams et al. 57). In form, the corequisite model resembles David Schwalm and John Ramage’s *Jumbo* course model at Arizona State University (Glau 33). The institution would not allow a new course number designation without a full curricular proposal, so this necessitated back-to-back scheduling of linked sections, creating an extended six-credit hour course. All students enrolled were enrolled concurrently in a section of the Basic Writing course, ENG 100, and a section of the First-Year Writing course, ENG 110. The linked sections were taught by the same instructor. Additionally, articulation agreements for transfer credit in place with other institutions made administrators (within and outside the department) wary of making the course a single five or six-credit hour class officially, but in practice, that is what the course most resembles.

ENG 100 is credit-bearing for financial aid purposes only. The credits do not count toward graduation. The ENG 100 course is graded Pass/No Pass and has no effect on a student’s GPA. ENG 110 is fully credit-bearing, and it counts toward graduation and is a general education requirement. It

is graded on a standardized letter scale, A-F. Because the institution did not allow a separate course designation for the corequisite model, the students enrolled received two grades, one Pass/No Pass and one letter grade.

Placement in the corequisite model was not restricted. The same students who could enroll in the prerequisite model could enroll in the corequisite. In the initial Spring 2017 pilot, 11 of 19 students enrolled in the corequisite section had ACT scores that would have placed them in First-Year Writing (Weaver). The ACT English exam does not require students to compose any writing of their own. Potentially, students with scores that would place them in ENG 110 might still feel they require additional assistance in production of writing. When students have only had to complete tests like the ACT or short answer essays in high school to prove they are proficient in writing, it skews the perception of what college-level writing looks like. Without a writing sample in the placement process, these disparate perceptions of even what writing is, let alone perceptions of preparation for college writing, becomes the first issue the Basic Writing instructor must address before they can proceed further.

This data set, the limitations of institutional placement measures, and the understanding that the pilot was a limited sample of information, led to additional questions about which students were drawn to the course and their reasons for choosing to enroll in a Basic Writing course. The writing program moved to increase the number of corequisite sections offered, even though we still knew little about how this corequisite would work on a larger scale. To address this lack of information, I designed a survey to collect information from the students on their previous writing experience and on their perceptions of the corequisite and prerequisite versions of the course. While I had underlying interests in their perceptions of this new course, I knew that we had little information about our students collected by the program, so understanding their previous experiences with writing became a priority in my survey design and data collection.

## **PLACEMENT AND HIGH SCHOOL COURSE CREDIT**

Writing program administrators and Basic Writing educators at-large advocate for placement that involves multiple measures in order to ensure that students are placed into a writing course that best meets their needs (Hansen, Andelora et al. 185). Much of the literature on placement is framed specifically as placing students “into” First-Year Writing courses rather than emphasizing the placement into a Basic Writing course. Often

the conversation is determined by the outcomes of the First-Year Writing course. If students are not prepared in some way for that level of writing, they are placed in Basic Writing.

Daniel J. Royer and Roger Gilles identify the problem with this implicit mentality toward placement; it “denies student agency” in the process and can have ramifications for the formation of their scholarly identity (“Basic Writing”). But Basic Writing educators understand this. We have all had students in our classes who have confessed to being told they were a “bad” writer, and we see them internalize that label. Though we implement multiple placement measures and work in our classrooms to alleviate this pressure to help them succeed, the process that put them in our class at all can be part of the problem. Changes in the field of Basic Writing, often due to legislative and institutional pressures, have resulted in changes to placement measures that remove the student and their experiences from the conversation. Depletion of program resources, like removing funding for writing sample readers, has long lasting effects that change the classroom environment more than administrators realize. Test scores, high school GPA, and other measures that do not directly assess student writing are often used for the sake of expediency and as cost-saving measures (if the Basic Writing program is allowed to continue at all). Unfortunately, this means we know less about the writing experiences of the students placed into our Basic Writing classrooms. Because we have neglected to ask these questions of our students, we have also neglected to address how their own perceptions of their writing ability changes the way they might engage with a Basic Writing course of any model.

As a field, we have not studied in detail the experiences basic writing students bring from high school. Some work from scholars of writing transfer is applicable here, notably that of Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi. Their work studies the previous writing contexts that students have experienced in high school with regard to how that transfers to a college or university First-Year Writing environment (Reiff and Bawarshi). Their study is an example of D.N. Perkins and Gavriel Salomon’s “backward reaching” transfer, as it examines how previous experiences can create skills to be applied in a current context (Perkins and Salomon 26). However, the majority of work on writing transfer that has been done on student experiences in high school aligns more with Perkins and Salomon’s “forward-reaching” transfer, in that it focuses on FYW students rather than basic writing students, or on FYW students’ ability to transfer skills into other college-related or professional contexts (Perkins and Salomon 26; Moore). For example, key questions center on



how credit is granted for AP courses to bypass FYW altogether, the effect of dual-enrollment FYW courses, and how students with different experiences proceed in upper-level writing courses (Hansen, Jackson et al.; Hansen and Farris). Jessie L. Moore and Chris M. Anson emphasize that transfer takes place “across critical transitions” and the role that Basic Writing plays in that transition for many students is overlooked because the emphasis places FYW at the center (3).

My research, with this concern in mind, circles to the 2006 work of Kristine Hansen, Jennifer Gonzalez, Gary L. Hatch, Suzanne Reeve, Richard R. Sudweeks, Patricia Esplin, and William S. Bradshaw who ask, even in their title, whether “Advanced Placement English and First-Year College Composition [are] Equivalent” (461). While they found that students who took AP and FYW “performed significantly better than those who had only AP English or only FYW,” the work assumes that students who take AP English will place into FYW courses (461). My work indicates, however, that there is a student population who have taken AP English and place into Basic Writing instead. This calls into question many of the field’s assumptions about the role of AP courses and the preparation they provide for college-level work. As a field, we’ve internalized that if a student takes an AP course, they’re high-achieving and well prepared for college in some way. Our students are telling us that’s not always the case though. By placing them into courses without having a conversation about their goals and comfort with writing, let alone the new contexts of college-writing, we’re doing them a disservice.

## **METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS**

The primary method for data collection in this study was IRB-approved surveys that were conducted in the Basic Writing (prerequisite and corequisite) classrooms in Fall 2017, Fall 2018, and Fall 2019.<sup>1</sup> Fall 2017 functioned as a pilot of the survey, and modifications were made to improve the survey instrument for Fall 2018 and Fall 2019 (see Appendix A). Prerequisite and corequisite sections received different surveys to account for different potential contexts for their course placement choice (Survey Question #1 in Appendix A).<sup>2</sup> All other questions were given to both prerequisite and corequisite sections. In the classroom setting, with permission from the instructors (who would then step out of the room), participating students were given ten to fifteen minutes to complete a survey at the start of a class session that included multiple-choice and open-ended response questions.

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Student participation was voluntary, and instructors were not informed which students took part.

Data from the surveys were disassociated from student identity by assigning a code to each student respondent in order to track the completed surveys. All students in a given section of a course were assigned a letter group (A-H for Fall 2017, I-O for Fall 2018, and P-U for Fall 2019). Each individual was given a randomly assigned number based on the total number of participants in a section. Table 1 indicates how the total respondents for each survey year and how the participants were spread across prerequisite sections and corequisite sections.

**Table 1.** Total Unique Survey Respondents in 2017, 2018, 2019 and Combined

	<i>Respondents</i>	<i>Enrolled</i>	<i>Response Rate</i>
<i>2017</i>			
<i>Prerequisite Sections</i>	58	77	75%
<i>Corequisite Sections</i>	59	73	81%
<b>Total</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>78%</b>
<i>2018</i>			
<i>Prerequisite Sections</i>	51	79	65%
<i>Corequisite Sections</i>	38	56	68%
<b>Total</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>66%</b>
<i>2019</i>			
<i>Prerequisite Sections</i>	51	74	69%
<i>Corequisite Sections</i>	20	38	53%
<b>Total</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>63%</b>
<i>2017, 2018, 2019 Combined</i>			
<i>Prerequisite Sections</i>	160	230	70%
<i>Corequisite Sections</i>	117	167	70%
<b>Total All Years</b>	<b>277</b>	<b>397</b>	<b>70%</b>

Additionally, some data in findings was collected through institutional sources, as allowed by the IRB in place. After the drop period for the university, institutional data were collected about students enrolled in ENG 100 during Fall 2017, Fall 2018, and Fall 2019. While it was known to program administrators that occasionally students with higher test scores would choose to remain in ENG 100, I did not believe this would transfer to sections

of the corequisite model, and I did not have clarity for possible reasons why these students would choose to take ENG 100 when they were eligible for the first-year course. This process also allowed me to analyze institutional student placement scores alongside data on student perceptions of their placement as well as their perceived need for the course at all.

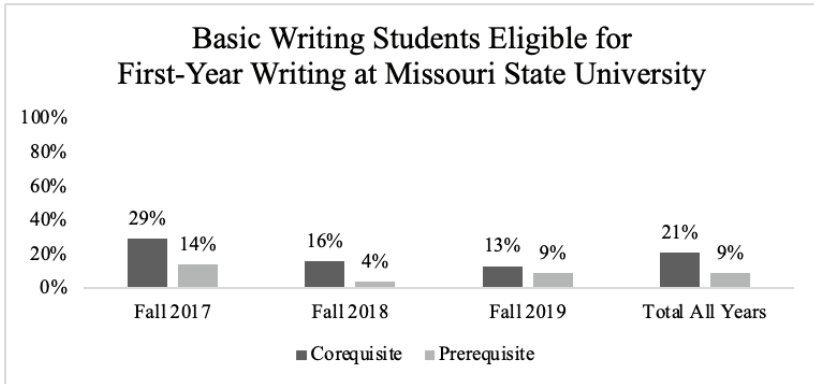
To further understand this potential desire for assistance with writing, and under the assumption that students' preconceptions about writing would have an impact on their perceptions of the Basic Writing course, questions on the survey in all years asked what kind of writing classes students had taken in high school. On the Fall 2017 pilot survey, students were given the choice of Honors, Standard, or AP (Advanced Placement) courses. In Fall 2017, initial analysis of responses from students indicated I had neglected to include "Dual Credit" as a choice for previous high school experience. The question was modified for the Fall 2018 and Fall 2019 data collection to include a "Dual Credit" option, as well as an indicator for students who did not attend high school in the United States.

Many students selected more than one response to multiple-choice questions, so results reflect percentage of the total number of students rather than total selections. This variation also indicated that students had the potential to pursue different tracks in English in high school rather than being constrained to one path based upon performance in earlier years of schooling. However, it may also indicate different enrollment standards for Honors and AP courses at various schools.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Placement: Required or Not?**

Figure 1 shows the percentage of students enrolled in sections of ENG 100 who were eligible to take ENG 110 based on their ACT scores. In Fall 2017, 29% of students enrolled in corequisite sections of ENG 100 were not required to take it based on test scores reported to the institution. In the prerequisite sections, 14% of students enrolled were similarly eligible to take ENG 110. In Fall 2018, even with much lower enrollment, 16% of students in the corequisite were not required to take ENG 100 and could have taken ENG 110 as a single course rather than our six-hour model. Additionally, 4% of students in prerequisite sections were not required to take ENG 100. In 2019, 13% of corequisite students and 9% of prerequisite students were eligible for ENG 110 instead of ENG 100.



**Figure 1.** Basic Writing Students Eligible for FYW at Missouri State University

Additional data to ascertain *why* students are choosing to take a Basic Writing course when they are eligible to take the first-year course were collected during this study, and analysis of their responses is ongoing. The initial numbers show that among the students who make this choice, more are likely to be enrolled in a corequisite course than the prerequisite model, and it seems that desire to enroll may be connected to the students’ perceptions of their writing ability or desire to complete a general education requirement more quickly. Across all three years of the survey, 21% of corequisite students were not required to take Basic Writing compared to 9% of prerequisite students. However, this can possibly be attributed to the marketing for the corequisite at Missouri State University and placement measures used for ENG 110.

While standardized test scores are understood to be a less effective method for placement, more work is required to develop effective ways to place students into corequisite and other Basic Writing courses in ways that are feasible for programs locally. Directed Self-Placement is one possible solution that also attends to input from students on their experiences and needs in the classroom (Royer and Gilles, “Directed Self-Placement”). Becky L. Caouette’s “Directed Self-Placement, Corequisite Models, and Curricular Choice” indicates additional support for the student-centered benefits of combining corequisite course offerings and Directed Self-Placement: it creates “an opportunity for sincere inquiry” with our students about their educational needs with relation to our programs, enabling us to better our courses program-wide (64). The results from this survey also led to more detailed conversations with campus academic advisers about the purposes of ENG 100 and ENG 110 in order to better advising practices. The Basic

Writing coordinator also worked with our Summer Advising administrators during Summer 2018 to ensure that the correct information about course models was being given to incoming students. Due to the impact of this study and changes in institutional policies, the program has more recently (as of 2020-2021) adopted Directed Self-Placement for incoming students without test scores.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 2.** 2018 and 2019 Respondents' High School English Courses

<i>2018</i>	<i>Honors</i>	<i>Standard</i>	<i>AP</i>	<i>Dual-Credit</i>	<i>International</i>	<i>Other</i>
Prerequisite n=51	20%	53%	16%	16%	10%	6%
Corequisite n=38	13%	82%	8%	0%	2 (5%)	3%
Total n=89	17%	65%	12%	9%	7 (8%)	4%
<i>2019</i>	<i>Honors</i>	<i>Standard</i>	<i>AP</i>	<i>Dual-Credit</i>	<i>International</i>	<i>Other</i>
Prerequisite n=51	8%	80%	8%	6%	4%	0%
Corequisite n=20	20%	70%	5%	10%	0%	0%
Total n=71	11%	77%	7%	7%	3%	0%

### **High School English Experiences**

Key to Basic Writing education is meeting students where they are and providing them with what they need to succeed. Understanding a student's previous writing and schooling experiences is necessary to adapt our classrooms. Allowing students a choice of which writing course will best meet their needs is the first step, and we need to acknowledge that our definition of prepared may not align with the students' perception of their ability. Initial analysis of the Fall 2017 survey data indicated that students enrolled in both Basic Writing course models had taken advanced English courses in high school. In 2018 and 2019, students responded similarly, and their selections

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are shown in Table 2. The majority took what they identified as Standard courses in high school. In Fall 2018, 17% indicated they had been enrolled in Honors level courses, and 12% responded they had taken AP courses in English. Additionally, 9% indicated they had taken a class perceived as Dual Credit and 8% indicated status as international students. A few students (4%) chose “Other”, and provided responses such as “College Prep Courses,” “Pre-AP English,” and “Literature as Film.” In 2019, these numbers decreased, on average, but still had students selecting those options.

As shown in Table 2, there continues to be some variation between corequisite sections and prerequisite sections. In 2018, more corequisite students indicated taking Standard courses (82% against 53% in the prerequisite), and more prerequisite students indicated enrollment in Honors courses (20% against 13% in the corequisite). In both 2018 and 2019, more prerequisite students indicated previous enrollment in AP courses, nearly double that of corequisite students in 2018 especially (16% versus 8%). Additionally, more international students (of the surveyed population) were present in prerequisite sections than in the corequisite. In 2019, these breakdowns flipped. More prerequisite students indicated taking Standard courses (80% against 70% in the corequisite) and more corequisite students indicated taking Honors courses (20% against 8% in the prerequisite). In 2019, more corequisite students indicated previous enrollment in a course designated as Dual Credit. The reasons for this shift are unclear but may be attributed to better advising practices and more detailed information about the differences between the prerequisite and corequisite models.

The data collected did not indicate a correlation between students who identified taking AP courses in high school and those who were not required to take the course. In the initial 2017 data collection, only 2 of 14 (1 prerequisite and 1 corequisite) students who indicated they took AP had ACT English subscores that would have placed them in First-Year Writing. In 2018, only 1 of 11 (a prerequisite student) claimed to have taken AP in high school and had an ACT score eligible for ENG 110 placement. In 2019, 2 of 5 (1 prerequisite and 1 corequisite) who took AP were eligible for ENG 110 placement. Students who take AP courses in high school are eligible for college credit, depending on their scores on the associated AP exam. At Missouri State University, students who score a 4 or higher on the AP Language and Composition or AP Literature and Composition exam are eligible to receive credit for ENG 110 regardless of their ACT score.

Follow up questions on the survey asked for specifics on which AP courses and tests the students had taken. While results showed a mix of

students who had taken AP Language & Composition, AP Literature & Composition, and both courses, the majority of these students indicated they did not take the accompanying AP exam. Some who took Dual Credit courses did not receive transfer credit because they did not pay for the course, or in some cases did not pass the course. While fewer students indicated having taken Dual Credit courses than AP, the most striking response from the surveys was that while the students passed the Dual Credit course at their high school, the university would not transfer credit because of a low ACT score.

Although there are documented issues with only using ACT scores for placement in college-level courses, the disparity between students who claimed to have taken AP courses and ACT scores that place students in Basic Writing was unexpected. Of the 25 students who indicated they took AP English courses in high school, only 3 had ACT scores that would have placed them in the First-Year Writing course. This raises concerns about curriculum structure at the secondary level and placement measures at the post-secondary level. This conflict in perceptions of student achievement lends credence to the need for multiple measures for placement, especially those with an emphasis on evaluating student writing. It also potentially highlights a conflict in post-secondary assumptions *about* secondary curricula, as well as the reverse. The AP exam does require student writing and could serve as a more reliable measure of placement; however, my data indicated (even in small scale) that some students taking the course do not take the exam.

Additional research is needed to verify why students taking AP courses are not also taking the accompanying exams. Economic hardship is likely a factor, but more research is required. Some schools cover the cost of the exam (\$94 per exam as of this writing), while others put test costs on the students and their families. So, potentially, a student might take an AP course but may not have the resources to pay for the test in order to reap the benefits associated with it. As of this writing, the College Board does offer fee reductions of \$32 per exam for students with financial need, and students are encouraged to speak with counselors about other offers and regulations in their state (“Exam Fees”; “AP Exam Fee Reductions”) However, the reduction still brings the cost of the test to \$62, for just one exam. The argument can be (and has been) made that this cost is a benefit to students compared to paying for course credit once they begin college, but this argument presumes students have resources and institutional knowledge of the process, and therefore suggests additional implications for first-generation students.

Additionally, the data collected revealed that 7% of the survey population, 15 students (7 in 2017 and 8 in 2018), indicated they had been enrolled

“My ACT Score Did Not Let Me Take AP English as Dual Credit”

in a writing course labeled as Dual Credit in high school. None of the 15 students had ACT scores that would have placed them into ENG 110. The survey included questions about students’ experiences in AP and Dual Credit courses, but response was limited (only 43 students total across all three years). Additional research on these questions is necessary, but of that small sample, some students indicated they took the AP course but did not pay to take the exam, and similarly some students took a Dual Credit designated course but did not pay for the credit hours. Additionally, some indicated they weren’t even sure if they passed the course (which would result in no credit transferring). This is possibly due to disparities between state requirements for high school graduation and college transfer credit requirements, but also could be the result of parental pressure to enroll in high school courses with college prestige before the student is prepared for them.

Even with those possibilities in mind, a student not knowing if they passed a high school class they took before coming to college was something I wanted to better understand. I knew I needed more information on the high school context, because this response was particularly shocking and troubling, so I spoke with a local high school English Language Arts instructor, Stephanie M. Hasty. Hasty has taught at Lebanon High School for twenty-two years. In her tenure, she has taught AP, standard-level, and elective English courses. While some districts may have programs that pay for students to take the AP exam, this is not standard practice, and Hasty spoke of many students taking AP courses with no intention of taking the exam. Over the course of our conversation, it also became clear that, for some students, the AP and Dual Credit designations for the classes exist in name only. Placement measures do not exist, and all students can enroll. Some enroll when electives do not count toward their English graduation requirements (Hasty). While this is only a single high school, it clarifies some of the data collected in the survey, and these types of practices at the secondary level need more research. It appears that in efforts to make high schools more prestigious, some schools offer AP and Dual Credit courses, but perhaps without the necessary resources to provide the level of preparation the titles imply.

While initially I presumed that further understanding the classes the students took in high school would lend clarity to the students’ decisions regarding placement in the Basic Writing course, it instead raised more questions about secondary English education curriculum and placement practices overall. Often students in Basic Writing courses are perceived by many as lacking some specific skill or ability in writing. While much of the literature



in the field has shown this perception is not accurate, the assumption and stigma still exist among students, teachers, administrators, and legislators.

Further, it appears that students are aware of this perception and make enrollment choices in order to address these issues. The survey also asked students to identify their reasons for enrolling in the course, and analysis of that data is ongoing. Initial results do lean toward students desiring more preparation for college-level writing and an internalized view of their own preparation. As we continue our conversations in the field about *who* our basic writers are, we must continue to involve their voices when we make choices about practices as programs and in the classroom so we are meeting the students' real needs and not hypothesized ones based on old information.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The presence of students who took AP courses in high school in Basic Writing courses in college has future implications for both secondary and post-secondary writing education. It has long been assumed that AP courses are structured in ways to prepare high-achieving students for college-level work. Colleges and universities acknowledge this by granting college-level credit for those who achieve specific scores on the affiliated exams. Even with a small sample size, evidence of problems with this model emerge. While College Board requires that AP course syllabi follow specific guidelines and course goals, it is unclear how often these guidelines are followed after initial approval. Placement measures are also unclear, and they are not standardized across states or districts. For courses without an AP designation, the process is more locally controlled. In Missouri, individual school districts determine what an "Honors" class is and then the description is approved at the state level when curriculum is submitted (Hasty). There is no formal process to ensure that the curriculum submitted is the one followed in the classroom.

Students, those placed in Basic Writing and those eligible for the First-Year Writing course, have agency in the decision process, and that is evidenced by those students who chose to take Basic Writing despite eligibility for First-Year Writing. This indicates that multiple factors are involved in students' perception of their writing ability and having additional venues to mediate that in higher education is a necessity. My initial questions sought to understand if the corequisite was an effective model for the institution's Basic Writing program. While the data collected highlighted other issues, it does also appear that a corequisite can present a possible solution for students wishing to have additional writing assistance while still earning credit for

the first-year course. It also serves as further evidence that students must be well-informed and involved in the placement process, and a more holistic view of a student’s previous experiences is necessary in that process. Basic Writing scholars are studying the effectiveness of corequisites in multiple contexts, due to changes in the way our field is perceived by those outside it. It’s important here that in that research, we give due attention to the students at our institutions, their experiences with writing, and their needs locally, and that we advocate for institutional changes that will serve them best. This attention to student needs often takes place at the classroom level with individual instructors, and that mentality needs to carry through into programmatic decisions as well. So many of the arguments from legislators are couched in doing what’s best for the students. As instructors and program coordinators, we need to engage with students to keep our programs in line with their real needs. My data are localized, but it tells one story that many legislators would be shocked to hear: students *want* a Basic Writing class. If we’re focusing on giving students what they need, it’s *not* removing Basic Writing courses. In fact, a further benefit to students would be increasing the modalities of Basic Writing that we offer, whether through corequisites or other course models yet undefined. Students deserve a choice in their writing course and not one dictated by a lack of options.

The issues my survey highlighted were unanticipated but indicate a gap in our research and understanding of institutional processes that result in students arriving in our Basic Writing classrooms. As with any writing program, some of these concerns are localized, but my analysis indicates that previous assumptions about the types of students who take Basic Writing courses are steeped in assumptions about lack of preparation for college-level work. My data show that, in fact, more students than anticipated are entering Basic Writing courses having taken advanced courses in English in high school. We need closer analysis of curriculum for upper-level English courses at the secondary level. We need more data on the structure of Dual Credit and AP courses and how credit for that work transfers (both in skill retention and in transcript form) to higher education with special attention to the effect on basic writing students. Understanding why and which students choose to enroll in Basic Writing courses, as well as their perceptions about their own writing abilities, will aid in the development of curriculum for future pilots of the corequisite as well as restructuring of the prerequisite courses.

## **NOTES**

1. IRB Protocol Number IRB-FY2018-121 at Missouri State University.
2. Survey documents provided to students reflected their enrollment. Students were not responsible for choosing to answer the question that matched their enrollment (prerequisite or corequisite). However, for the sake of space in this publication, the survey document appended shows both versions of Question #1 in a single document with a note indicating on which survey version it appeared. Additionally, some short answer spaces on the survey have been truncated from their original form to aid in reproduction here. Students were given ample room to write answers to open-ended questions.
3. This is one example of the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the landscape of Basic Writing at our institutions. Due to the initial issues with ACT proctoring in Spring 2020, the university removed all ACT requirements for the incoming first-year class. This resulted in the program moving to implement directed self-placement as an emergency fix to the issue of having no placement measure.

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**APPENDIX A: 2018-2019 STUDENT SURVEY**

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_

ENG 100 Section/Instructor: \_\_\_\_\_

(Author Note: Answer choices for **PREREQUISITE** SECTIONS SURVEY)

1. Why did you take this class? Please select all that apply.

- I was encouraged by a SOAR representative to take this class.
- I did not want to take both ENG 100 and ENG 110 at the same time.
- I wanted to work on my writing skills before taking ENG 110.
- I was encouraged by my parents to take this class.
- The course was required.
- It fit into my class schedule.
- I was encouraged by my advisor and/or a faculty member to take this class.
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

(Author Note: Answer Choices for **COREQUISITE** SECTIONS SURVEY)

1. Why did you take this class? Please select all that apply.

- I was encouraged by a SOAR representative to take this class.
- I desired additional assistance when taking ENG 110.
- I wanted to complete my general education Writing I requirement in one semester at MSU
- I did not pass ENG 100 or ENG 110.
- I was encouraged by my parents to take this class.
- It fit into my class schedule.
- I was encouraged by my advisor and/or a faculty member to take this class.
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Which English classes did you take in high school?

- A. Honors Courses
- B. Standard Courses
- C. AP (Advanced Placement) Courses
- D. Dual Credit Courses (or equivalent of ENG 110)
- E. Did not attend High School in United States
- F. Other \_\_\_\_\_

- If you answered C: AP (Advanced Placement) Courses for Question #2, please answer 2a, 2b, and 2c. If not, proceed to Question 3.
- If you answered D: Dual Credit Courses for Question #2, please answer 2d. If not, proceed to Question 3.

2a. If you took AP English, which AP Course did you take? Select all that apply.

- AP Language and Composition
- AP Literature and Composition
- Both AP Language and Composition and AP Literature and Composition

2b. If you took AP English, did you take the exam?

- Yes, I took the AP Language and Composition Exam.
- Yes, I took the AP Literature and Composition Exam.
- Yes, I took both the AP Language and Composition Exam and the AP Literature and Composition Exam.
- No, I did not take an AP English Exam.

2c. If you took an AP English exam (as noted in question 2b) what was your score? \_\_\_\_\_

2d. If you took a Dual Credit English course, please indicate any that apply:

- Yes, I passed the ENG 110 Dual Credit course and the credit transferred to MSU.
- Yes, I passed the ENG 110 Dual Credit course, but the cost of the course was not covered.
- Yes, I passed the ENG 110 Dual Credit course, but test scores placed me in this course.
- No, I did not pass the ENG 110 Dual Credit course.
- I am unsure if I passed the ENG 110 Dual Credit course.

3. In what ways has your family influenced your decision to attend college?

4. Are you a first-generation college student? (i.e., the first person in your family to attend college or university)

Yes, I am a first-generation college student.

No, I am not a first-generation college student.

I am unsure if I am a first-generation college student.

5. Have you declared a major with the university, or are you undeclared?

6. Have you taken ENG 100 before?

Yes, I have taken ENG 100 before this semester.

No, I have not taken ENG 100 before this semester.

6a. If you answered Yes to Question #6, at which institution did you take ENG 100 (or an equivalent)?

7. Do you feel like a part of the MSU Academic Community?

Yes, I feel like a part of the MSU Academic Community.

No, I do not feel like a part of the MSU Academic Community.

I am unsure if I am a part of the MSU Academic Community.

7a. In a few short sentences, describe why you do or do not feel like a part of the MSU Academic Community. If you are unsure, please describe why.

8. What have previous teachers said about your writing?

9. Do you believe writing can improve with practice? Yes or No

10. In what way has your family encouraged writing?

11. What type of writing is your favorite?

12. How confident are you with academic writing?



13. In writing, what do you struggle most with?

14. In writing, what are your strengths?

15. What is your classification?

Freshman

Sophomore

Junior

Senior

Nontraditional

I am unsure of my classification

16. Are you a military veteran?                      Yes      or      No

16a. If you answered YES to question #16, are you active duty?

Yes      or      No

17. Do you believe that some people are naturally better writers?

Yes      or      No

18. What makes an effective piece of writing?