

Challenging Assumptions about Basic Writers and Corequisites at Four-Year Institutions

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ABSTRACT: Despite the push for all institutions of higher learning to embrace a corequisite model for writing instruction, there is limited evidence that suggests this model is desirable for all students. This study seeks to expand our understanding of the characteristics of students enrolled in Basic Writing at a 4-year comprehensive university, and the reasons why students enroll in either a prerequisite or corequisite writing course. After surveying both prerequisite and corequisite Basic Writing students at our institution, our findings reveal that students who enroll in either model may not neatly fit within the description of basic writers found in the literature and in Complete College America data, and their reasons for enrolling are diverse. Their responses challenged our assumptions about who our basic writers are, and it became clear that in our program a shift to offering only a corequisite course model would not address the needs of our students who wanted more than a single semester to work on their writing skills. The accepted rationale for eliminating prerequisite Basic Writing courses is not supported by our data.

KEYWORDS: basic writer; corequisite; mindset; student choice; survey

As the nature of higher education changes around the country, Basic Writing administrators and instructors find themselves enmeshed in a debate regarding the efficacy of developmental education. Over the past 10 years,

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national attention has been given to students who are deemed “not ready” for college-level work. A cursory glance at article titles in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed* reveals a less than hospitable landscape for those engaged in developmental education: “Colleges Need to Re-Mediate Remediation” and “Overkill on Remediation” (Rose; Fain). These calls for reform reflect growing concerns about increasing college debt, retention and graduation rates, placement mechanisms, and social justice.

Research has not brought clarity to these concerns, especially given the contradictory nature of the findings. Some researchers have found students are less likely to graduate if required to take developmental courses (“Spanning the Divide”); other researchers have found students who take developmental courses are more likely to graduate (Attewell et al.). Some scholars link developmental courses to a decrease in retention rates (Cholewa and Ramaswami) while others argue such courses boost retention rates (Boylan and Bonham; Otte and Mlynarczyk). Similarly, some writing administrators have discovered that placement based on test scores can lead to underplacement (Toth), whereas other administrators have found that students may lack the ability to accurately self-place into writing classes as revealed in the lower pass rates in these courses (Barnett and Reddy; Blakesley).

Perhaps one of the more obvious examples that this debate has not subsided is the juxtaposition that Justin Nicholes and Cody Reimer share of two sessions at the 2019 Conference on College Composition and Communication. After a session of senior scholars waxing poetic about the inadequacy of Basic Writing to meet student needs, the Council on Basic Writing met in the same room to discuss “how BW from teacher-scholars’ perspectives provides students with an early ally and supports students’ rhetorical skills, writing know-how, self-efficacy, and persistence to graduation” (Nicholes and Reimer 37). These conflicts in perception make it difficult for Basic Writing instructors to advocate for the needs of their students, especially when program decisions ignore the importance of local context.

When William Lalicker conducted a survey of writing program administrators twenty years ago, he found a wide range of Basic Writing programs (i.e., prerequisite, stretch, studio, intensive). Today, however, many states and institutions are moving away from institutionally-specific programs and adopting a corequisite model of Basic Writing education with the public-facing purpose of helping students progress more efficiently through their college careers. Several states have even passed legislation that requires all institutions of higher learning to adopt a corequisite model (Scott-Clayton). Though a corequisite model is not explicitly required in the state of Mis-

souri, House Bill 1042 mandates that Missouri institutions of higher learning replicate “best practices in remedial education” (*Missouri House Bill No. 1042*, 3). Because this legislation was spurred by the national non-profit organization Complete College America (CCA), Missouri institutions have been strongly encouraged to adopt a corequisite model. The state funded a 2016 training workshop for Basic Writing program coordinators from all community colleges and public universities in Missouri unabashedly titled “Missouri Corequisite Academy.” Following this training, our institution was one of many in the state that piloted a corequisite model in 2017. This pilot prompted us to begin questioning our own context and the assumptions of our students that our program was built upon.

The majority of self-reported data collected by CCA regarding success of the corequisite model is from community colleges, and emphasis is placed on the corequisite model developed in 2007 at the Community College of Baltimore, the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) (Adams et al. 56). CCA does break down state-specific data according to 2-year and 4-year institutions, but no information is available for how many 4-year institutions are represented by this data. Hunter Boylan, Director of the National Center for Developmental Education, observes, “I’ve never seen, in my 30 years in higher education, such sweeping change made on the basis of so little evidence” (cited in Smith). Boylan is not alone in his assessment. He and others have expressed concern that too few controlled trials have been conducted to reach definitive conclusions about the corequisite (Belfield et al.; Goudas; Goudas and Boylan; Mangan). Nevertheless, dramatic claims are made about the corequisite: “Several states have scaled Corequisite Support and as a result have double or tripled the percent of students who are completing gateway math and English courses in one year” (“Corequisite Support”). Despite limited evidence, the underlying assumption of what Katherine Mangan labels the “Corequisite Reform Movement” is that the corequisite model can work for every institution. Agreeing with Boylan, Jill Barshay emphasizes in *The Hechinger Report* that state policymakers are rushing to pass legislation based on “a new ill-defined corequisite model before we know if it works and, if it does, for which students.”

We know that community colleges and comprehensive universities typically enroll different types of students. This study seeks to expand our understanding of the characteristics of students enrolled in Basic Writing at a 4-year comprehensive university and the reasons why students enroll in either a prerequisite or corequisite Basic Writing course. Despite the push for all institutions of higher learning to embrace a corequisite model, our

findings suggest that this model may not be desirable for all students enrolled in a 4-year institution. Even among 4-year institutions, the needs of Basic Writing students will vary. While the corequisite model allows students to complete the credit-bearing gateway English course in one semester, we have found that not all students desire this fast-track pathway. Contrary to the assumptions being propagated in the literature and state legislatures, a significant number of our students prefer a prerequisite model of writing instruction that affords them more time to work on their writing in a low-risk environment prior to enrolling in the gateway course. By taking away this option, we are limiting students' autonomy to choose.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Missouri State University is a public, comprehensive university system located in Missouri with 26,000 students who attend its seven colleges and graduate college and is the second largest university in the state. Each fall, Missouri State University welcomes approximately 2,600-3,000 first-time new in college (FTNIC) students and 1,500-1,700 new transfer students ("About Missouri State"). Of FTNIC students, 32-34% of students self-identify as First-Generation; though definitions of First-Generation students vary, the most commonly used definition, and the one that Missouri State University utilizes, is that neither parent graduated from a 4-year institution (Petty 133). This percentage is slightly higher than the national average for 4-year universities.

At Missouri State University, all first-time new in college students, regardless of their academic major, are required to complete the university's general education program, which includes 45 credit hours. Six hours within the general education program are assigned to Writing I (ENG 110) and Writing II (a course with variable prefixes based upon academic discipline). Historically, placement in Writing I has been determined by test scores, primarily the ACT English subscore. Some students receive credit for ENG 110 based on Advanced Placement (AP) exam scores or high school dual credit. Conversely, incoming students with less than an 18 on the ACT English subsection (or an equivalent) or those who do not have test scores are not eligible to take ENG 110. They are required to pass ENG 100, a prerequisite 3-credit Basic Writing course graded Pass/No Pass prior to enrolling in ENG 110. ENG 100 is credit bearing for financial aid purposes and enrollment, but not for graduation or degree requirements. Important to note, any student who desires additional assistance with writing may enroll in ENG 100.

In 2012, the Missouri Legislature passed House Bill 1042. This bill mandates that Missouri institutions of higher learning replicate “Best Practices in Remedial Education” (Thomson). The impetus for this bill was concern about the increasing amount of college debt, the high dropout rates, and the time it takes college students to graduate. Spurred by Complete College America (CCA), legislators link these concerns to the number of non-credit developmental courses students must take prior to enrolling in college-level courses. Although the Missouri Department of Higher Education emphasized that it did not want to be prescriptive and require all institutions to implement the same model, the Department of Higher Education funded a 2016 training workshop for Missouri institutions of higher learning titled Missouri Corequisite Academy.

At the two-day Academy, representatives from Missouri colleges and universities were all tasked with developing an Action Plan to implement the corequisite model on our respective campuses. As a result, the English Department Head, the Director of Composition, and the Basic Writing Coordinator of our university drafted an Action Plan for 2016-2019, which included developing and piloting a corequisite during Spring 2017, moving to 50% scaling of the corequisite by Fall 2017, and ultimately achieving 100% scaling of the corequisite by Fall 2018 (based on success of the course in terms of student persistence and pass rate). The goal, in other words, was to eliminate any prerequisite Basic Writing courses. This programmatic goal was set based on the CCA data and the self-reported data of several community college representatives who served as workshop leaders. We were aware that our student population did not seem to reflect CCA’s data regarding the high percentage of students enrolled in “English Remediation” at 4-year institutions. CCA reports that 12% of students at 4-year institutions nation-wide enroll in “English Remediation” (“Data Dashboard”). However, only 5% of our institution’s students are required to enroll in our Basic Writing course. This percentage has been consistent over the last ten years. Nevertheless, if the corequisite could increase student success rates and persistence at other institutions, we surmised it could increase student success rates and student persistence at our 4-year institution.

In Spring 2017, our institution piloted one corequisite course which allowed students to take ENG 100 and ENG 110 concurrently so that they could complete their general education writing requirements in two semesters instead of three semesters. The ENG 100 and ENG 110 courses were taught by the same instructor, scheduled back-to-back, to create one longer class, and both were populated by the same students who had voluntarily enrolled

in the linked courses. Our model did not resemble the common ALP model for a corequisite course; instead, it more closely resembled, as Hall notes, “David Schwalm and John Ramage’s *Jumbo* course model at Arizona State University” (Glau 33 cited in Hall 65). The curriculum was modified so that ENG 100 served as a support structure for the ENG 110 curriculum, rather than as a separate course. Preliminary findings suggested the corequisite was as effective as the prerequisite in terms of pass rates; however, many of the students who enrolled in the pilot were not required to take ENG 100. Eleven of the 19 students were eligible to take ENG 110 based on their ACT scores. Given the small number of students enrolled in the corequisite pilot and the unexpected number of students who were not required to take ENG 100, it was inconclusive if the corequisite could ultimately increase success rates and student persistence of our students beyond what we had already been able to accomplish with the ENG 100 prerequisite.

Moving forward with our Action Plan, we moved to 50% scaling of the corequisite in Fall 2017, four sections of prerequisite and four sections of corequisite respectively, and committed to gathering more data, particularly about the students who enroll in Basic Writing at our 4-year university. As the pilot progressed, however, administrative decisions made outside the Composition Program made us deviate from the proposed Action Plan we had created. The university reduced corequisite scaling from 50% to 43% in Fall 2018, offering four sections of the prerequisite and just three corequisite sections. Following a downturn in enrollment at the university in Fall 2019, the number of corequisite sections was again reduced. In Fall 2019, the university offered two sections of the corequisite and five sections of the prerequisite (one of which was offered online). Forces outside the program, in other words, were determining how Basic Writing was offered at the university. Enrollment shifts, FTEs for instructors, and reduced budgets were driving the Action Plan, not data about the students who enroll in Basic Writing at our institution.

PREVIOUS ASSUMPTIONS

The corequisite pilot and the subsequent study prompted us to acknowledge that we had made several assumptions about the students enrolled in our Basic Writing classes—assumptions that were grounded in the available literature rather than our own institutional research. We have chosen to make visible these tacit assumptions to contextualize our findings, in much the same way that Cheryl E. Ball and Drew M. Loewe

begin their edited collection *Bad Ideas about Writing*: “[T]he public’ in all its manifestations—teachers, students, parents, administrators, lawmakers, news media—are important to how writing is conceptualized and taught. These publics deserve clearly articulated and well-researched arguments about what is not working, what must die, and what is blocking progress in current understandings of writing” (1). Explicitly articulating these assumptions provides important insight into why we were surprised to discover who the students are in our Basic Writing program and how to best advocate for them in the face of many outside pressures determining their educational opportunities.

Assumption 1: Only Students Required to Take Basic Writing Enroll in ENG 100 (Either Prerequisite or Corequisite)

Students, faculty, and legislators are all concerned about the amount of college debt that students are accruing, and many attribute this debt to an excess credit “epidemic” (Barshay). Few students graduate with the minimum number of credits required. This is understandable because students often enter college “undecided,” whether they are officially undeclared or not. Students may also enroll in courses they do not need in order to meet financial aid requirements, particularly when students have not declared a major (Cuseo; Glaessgen et al.). Another cause for excessive credits is transferring to other institutions; courses may or may not transfer, depending upon articulation agreements. CCA contends, though, that the biggest culprit of excessive credits is the number of required remedial courses students must take prior to enrolling in college-level classes. Our particular state has embraced this narrative that developmental courses are the primary cause of the credit epidemic, hence the passage of HB 1042 and the Missouri Corequisite Academy.

Other states have passed legislation as well. In 2013, the state of Florida passed one of the most aggressive pieces of legislation to curb what CCA perceives as the biggest culprit in the excessive credit epidemic. Senate Bill 1720 prohibits institutions within the Florida Community College System from requiring remediation of any student with a Florida high school diploma (Scott-Clayton). Other community colleges have followed Florida’s lead and moved away from requiring developmental classes. By utilizing Directed Self-Placement (DSP), these institutions make enrollment in Basic Writing optional for students.

The majority of colleges that have moved to DSP have experienced a reduction in the number of students enrolled in Basic Writing classes; a higher percentage of students are choosing to enroll in credit-bearing college-level classes. On the surface, this solution seems to be reducing the excess credit epidemic (Barnett and Reddy 10). These findings fueled our programmatic goal of moving to 100% scaling of the corequisite by Fall 2018. We assumed at a 4-year university like ours that has extensive dual credit programs, students would not enroll in ENG 100 and take an additional three hours of credit unless it was required, regardless of whether the class was offered as a prerequisite or corequisite.

Assumption 2: A Higher Percentage of First-Generation Students Enroll in Basic Writing, Both the Prerequisite and the Corequisite

Researchers have documented that first-generation students typically have lower scores on college entrance exams than continuing-generation students (Martinez et al.; Saenz et al.; Terenzini et al.). Because the majority of 4-year institutions, including ours, use standardized test scores to determine placement, this translates into a higher number of first-generation students being required to enroll in basic classes. Indeed, Xianglei Chen confirmed this in her research (Chen, *Remedial Coursetaking* vi). She found first-generation students enrolled in 4-year institutions were more likely to take a remedial reading course in comparison to continuing-generation students, 12% to 4% respectively (Chen, *First-Generation Students* 11). Although her research did not look at writing classes, we assumed that the same trend would hold for students enrolled in our Basic Writing courses.

Many researchers have offered possible explanations as to why first-generation students are more likely to have lower scores on college entrance exams. The most common explanation is lack of academic preparation (Byrd and Macdonald 22; Snell). Peter J. Collier and David L. Morgan propose that many first-generation students also lack what they refer to as cultural capital: “knowledge about interacting successfully in academic settings” (429). Ideally, cultural capital is learned and reinforced by family members who have their own experiences to draw upon, but first-generation students do not have the parental advice to help them understand university expectations or to prepare for college entrance exams (Dennis et al.; Engle). These factors would then, we suspected, lead to these students enrolling in Basic Writing courses in higher numbers.

Assumption 3: Students Enrolled in Basic Writing Courses are Students Who Did Not Take Advanced Writing Classes in High School

Research shows that students in basic math courses often did not take higher level math courses in high school and first-generation students, in particular, usually limit themselves to taking courses that are required in high school rather than taking advanced courses (Chen, *Remedial Course-taking v*). Although little to no research has been done to identify if this holds true for writing courses, this assumption prevails at the administrative level. Perhaps the most obvious example is how math and writing are often combined when reporting institutional data for basic courses. At the Missouri Corequisite Academy, each institution was provided data about the percentage of students who are enrolled in developmental courses. Our institution's alarming percentage was approximately 25%. However, this provided a skewed representation of the percentage of students enrolled in Basic Writing at our institution. Only 5% of students enroll in Basic Writing. The significantly higher percentage reflected students who are required to enroll in basic math. At our institution, the goal of 100% scaling of the corequisite was based on data that combined math and writing. This combined data painted an inaccurate scenario of a quarter of our student population being placed in multiple semesters of writing remediation.

Assumption 4: Students with a Fixed Mindset or Negative Self-Perceptions Would be More Likely to Enroll in Our Prerequisite than the Corequisite

A fixed mindset perceives intelligence as something that is fixed at birth; no amount of effort can change it. This differs from a growth mindset. A growth mindset perceives intelligence as something that is malleable and can be expanded. These mindsets reflect how individuals perceive personal control. Someone with a fixed mindset will tend to attribute success or failure to external forces whereas someone with a growth mindset will tend to attribute success or failure to internal effort (Dweck).

Some research has suggested that mindset is a function of upbringing, particularly within the family unit. Parents who treat their child's abilities as fixed often engage with their child in unconstructive ways, emphasizing performance. Kyla Haimovitz and Carol S. Dweck found that "parents who see failure as debilitating focus on their child's performance and ability rather than on their child's learning, and their children, in turn, tend to believe

that intelligence is fixed rather than malleable” (879). In other words, the parents conditioned their children to adopt a fixed mindset. Anat Gofen’s qualitative research explores first-hand accounts of parent-child interactions that emphasize ability over effort (107). Using semi-structured interviews with first-generation students, Gofen collected personal stories about what led her subjects to pursue higher education. In almost every story shared, parental belief in the student’s abilities was emphasized. If the grades that the student earned were not good, parents blamed either the teachers or the system, not the student’s effort. As one college student explained, “When I got a bad grade my mom told me that it’s because this teacher cannot teach” (112–13). Ken Bain is quick to emphasize,

Even well-meaning parents and teachers can foster that fixed view. We’ve long assumed that positive feedback always has desirable results. But some recent research has painted a more complex picture. . . . When children are young and family members constantly tell them how brilliant they are (or how dumb), they get the message: Life depends on your level of intelligence, not on how you work at something. You’ve got it or you don’t. Nothing can change that reality they think. (110)

Students often carry this fixed mindset into college and assume that they have little to no control over whether they succeed or fail (“I will fail because I’m just not good at writing”). For example, research shows some first-generation college students perceive their writing skills as lower than the writing skills of continuing-generation students (Banks-Santilli; Penrose; Tulsa Junior College and Oklahoma Office of Institutional Research). The Cooperative Institutional Research Program’s (CIRP) Freshman Survey from 1971 to 2005 reveals that this gap is particularly wide between the self-ratings of first-generation students and continuing-generation students regarding writing ability. Only 37.2% of first-generation students rated their writing ability above average as compared “to an average person of the same age.” This self-rating is twelve percentage points lower than that reported by continuing-generation students—a gap that is significantly larger than even the percentage gap in self-ratings of mathematics and science (Saenz et al. 31).

Such self-ratings in writing ability are exacerbated by institutional inequities that fuel students’ negative self-perceptions, particularly for at-risk populations. As Zaretta Hammond points out, “the educational system has historically underserved culturally and linguistically diverse students of

color” (90). The result is that many students of color have underdeveloped “learn-how-to learn” skills and analytical writing skills (Boykin et al.). According to Complete College America, prerequisite coursework is a reality that is “disproportionally true for low-income students and students of color” (“Spanning the Divide”). Students’ awareness of this lack of academic proficiency can significantly reduce confidence and lead to a fixed mindset. “Many culturally and linguistically diverse students start to believe these skill gaps are evidence of their own innate intellectual deficits” (Hammond 90) and are, therefore, insurmountable (Cammarota and Romero; Duncan-Andrade).

Eileen Kogl Camfield investigated this concept of “learned helplessness” particularly for students placed in Basic Writing courses and found that “underdeveloped coping skills may stem from an inability to self-assess one’s work” (3–5). Examining narratives from students, Camfield and her instructional team found much that suggested poor self-perception and the anxiety some students felt about writing “could be compounded by a tendency to compare oneself unfavorably with others” (5). This tendency could translate to students avoiding situations in which they might struggle or fail because these experiences undermine their sense of their abilities and intelligence (Blackwell et al.). Because students enrolled in the corequisite model earn a letter grade, the possibility of failure is quite real; the student may earn an “F” for the writing course. As such, this could affect the student’s choice of which course to take. Students enrolled in the prerequisite model do not face the same potential for failure; students earn either a “P” or “NP,” neither of which have any impact on the GPA. We assumed, therefore, that students who have adopted a fixed mindset regarding writing would opt to enroll in the prerequisite. We assumed, in other words, that Adrienne Rich’s description of basic writers was fairly accurate—ENG 100 students are students who are “grim with self-depreciation and prophecies of their own failure” (11).

METHODOLOGY

Our corequisite pilot in Spring 2017 revealed how little we knew about the students in our Basic Writing courses. Although the student pass rate of the pilot corequisite was comparable to the pass rate of the prerequisite sections, many of the students who enrolled in the pilot were *not* required to take ENG 100. This unexpected discovery prompted us to gather more information about the students who enroll in ENG 100. When we moved to 50% scaling of the corequisite in Fall 2017, we collected institutional data about the students enrolled in both prerequisite and corequisite sections.

Challenging Assumptions about Basic Writers and Corequisites

Like previous years, the Basic Writing Coordinator checked the ACT score of each student enrolled in ENG 100 (both prerequisite and corequisite). Students who received an 18 or higher on the English portion of the ACT were reminded in the first week by their instructors that ENG 100 was not a requirement. This notification gave the students the opportunity to transfer into a stand-alone section of ENG 110 if so desired.

At the conclusion of the semester, institutional data was used to determine how many students enrolled in ENG 100 (prerequisite or corequisite) were required to take the course, based on ACT English score. Institutional data was also used to determine First-Generation status of students enrolled in the prerequisite and corequisite. Students self-identify as “First-Generation” and “First Time New in College (FTNIC)” on their admissions application to the university. Missouri State University defines First-Generation in admission applications as “neither parent has graduated from a four-year institution.”

Following IRB approval, all ENG 100 students enrolled in in-person sections of the prerequisite and corequisite were given a survey within the first three weeks of the fall semester.¹ The 10-15 minute survey asked students a variety of multiple-choice and open-ended questions. The full survey instrument is provided in Appendix A. One survey question asked students why they chose to enroll in ENG 100. Students were offered multiple options and encouraged to select all that applied. Due to unclear phrasing on the pilot 2017 Fall survey that affected how students answered, this question was revised for Fall 2018 and Fall 2019. Also, on this question, the survey instrument differed depending on if the student was enrolled in a corequisite or a prerequisite section. On both versions of the survey, an open-ended “other” option was also offered. The choices provided on the survey are shown in Figure 1, and in context as they were provided to students in Appendix A. Mentions in the question choices to SOAR refer to our institution’s summer pre-arrival advising for first-year students, where they determine their first semester schedules and acclimate to campus.

Although we assumed that students with a fixed mindset would be more likely to enroll in the prerequisite than the corequisite, our pilot Fall 2017 survey did not yield information that could help us determine this. We added two direct yes/no questions to the Fall 2018 and Fall 2019 surveys modeled after Dweck’s work: “Do you believe writing can improve with practice?” and “Do you believe that some people are naturally better writers?” We reasoned that these two questions would reveal if students leaned more toward a fixed mindset or growth mindset. If students had a growth

Corequisite Survey Q1 (2018-2019)	Prerequisite Survey Q1 (2018-2019)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 Missouri State University. • 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: _____ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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: _____

Figure 1. Student Choice Survey Question from Corequisite and Prerequisite Survey Instruments

mindset, we assumed that they would acknowledge the role of hard work and revision. Conversely, if students had a fixed mindset, we assumed that they would believe good writing is a function of natural talent determined a birth.

Another question asked students to identify which English classes they had taken in high school. On the Fall 2018 and Fall 2019 survey, students were asked to choose all that applied from a selection that included Honors courses, Standard courses, AP courses, dual credit, or that they had not attended high school in the United States.

Table 1 details the response rates from the pilot survey in Fall 2017, as well as the surveys in Fall 2018 and Fall 2019. The same survey instrument was used in Fall 2018 and 2019 for consistency and comparability of data despite variations in enrollment. The online prerequisite section in Fall 2019 was not surveyed due to limitations of the in-person, paper survey and is therefore not represented in these data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Assumption 1

Most of the assumptions we made about our students, though grounded in the available literature, were inaccurate. Contrary to CCA’s concern that students are being required to take Basic Writing, over a quarter of our

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%
Total	117	150	78%
<i>2018</i>			
<i>Prerequisite Sections</i>	51	79	65%
<i>Corequisite Sections</i>	38	56	68%
Total	89	135	66%
<i>2019</i>			
<i>Prerequisite Sections</i>	51	74	69%
<i>Corequisite Sections</i>	20	38	53%
Total	71	112	63%
<i>2017, 2018, 2019 Combined</i>			
<i>Prerequisite Sections</i>	160	230	70%
<i>Corequisite Sections</i>	117	167	70%
Total All Years	277	397	70%

students elected to enroll in ENG 100 even though it was not required. Time and money, in other words, did not seem to be the primary determiners for some of our students. Across all three data collection years, approximately a quarter of the students who were eligible to take ENG 110 (by the university's placement criteria of an ACT English score 18 or higher) enrolled and remained in ENG 100 after the add/drop period. Even though students would register for fewer total classes during the semester (given that the corequisite course is six hours), students eligible for ENG 110 were on average twice as likely to enroll in the corequisite course than the prerequisite.

Four-year institutions like ours that do not have directed self-placement (DSP) grant little autonomy to students when it comes to writing placement. The university system (both advisors and online registration) prohibits students from enrolling in ENG 110 unless they meet the ACT threshold number; however, students can exert agency by choosing to enroll in ENG 100 if they desire additional writing practice and support in consultation with their academic advisor.

Community colleges that have moved to DSP report a reduction in the number of students who elect to enroll in Basic Writing classes. Four-year

institutions that have moved to DSP report a similar reduction in the number of students who elect to enroll in Basic Writing classes, but interpretation of this decline differs (Blakesley; Toth). There remains an assumption that only students required to take the course will, especially when they are granted autonomy to choose. All of the existing research focuses on students being given agency to enroll in the gateway course through DSP and similar measures of placement, rather than their agency to enroll in the Basic Writing course.

Assumption 2

Although we incorrectly assumed that only students required to take ENG 100 would enroll in the course, the number of students enrolled in the prerequisite and the corequisite did include a higher percentage of first-generation students at our university. Though approximately 32% of our total student population self-identify as first-generation, this student population comprises a larger percentage of our basic course enrollment, which reaffirms the findings of other 4-year institutions (Chen, *First-Generation Students* ix; Chen, *Remedial Coursetaking* 5). In addition, we found that a slightly higher percentage of these students were more likely to enroll in the corequisite course over the prerequisite course. In 2017, 44% of total prerequisite students were first-generation compared to 48% of total corequisite students, and in 2018, 42% compared to 53%. However, in 2019, the trend flipped, with 43% in prerequisite compared to 39% in corequisite.

Assumption 3

We also found that a significant number of students enrolled in ENG 100 had taken advanced courses in high school based on their survey responses. In 2018, 31% of prerequisite respondents indicated they had taken at least one advanced level writing class in high school (categorized as either Honors, AP, or Dual Credit). An additional 10% of prerequisite students indicated haven taken at least two types of these courses (for example, both Honors and AP, rather than one or the other). Sixteen percent of corequisite student respondents took at least one advanced class in high school, with an additional 3% taking two course types. In 2019, this split between prerequisite and corequisite reversed. A higher percentage of students in corequisite classes in 2019 took at least one advanced writing course in high school, 25% plus 5% who took two course types, compared to 14% plus 4% of prerequisite students. What this suggests is that, contrary to our previous assumption, taking an advanced writing course in high school does not

Challenging Assumptions about Basic Writers and Corequisites

guarantee students feel prepared for college-level work (Hall). Additionally, experience in advanced high school writing classes does not, in some cases, transfer to success in standardized testing.

The presence of some students not required to take the course surprised us and prompted us to inquire why these students would take the course, especially given that some had taken advanced writing in high school. The most popular responses from students were what we anticipated. Across both survey years, the majority of students in the prerequisite indicated they enrolled in the course because it was a requirement. Students in both the prerequisite and corequisite who responded “Other” wrote in qualitative responses that indicated they had enrolled in the course due to low ACT scores or that the course was required. Furthermore, the corequisite students confirmed that they chose the course because it allowed them to complete their Writing I requirement in one semester. However, students could select multiple responses. This provided additional insight into factors influencing the students’ choice of enrollment, regardless of whether the course was required or not. In Tables 2 and 3, we show the options students were given in the survey along with response rates.

Contrary to concerns about excessive credits and the necessity of Basic Writing, prerequisite students were twice as likely to also respond

Table 2. Prerequisite Students “Why did you take this class?” Responses

2018 n=51	2019 n=51	Multiple Choice Responses (could select more than one)
27%	22%	I was encouraged by a SOAR representative to take this class.
18%	12%	I did not want to take both ENG 100 and ENG 110 at the same time.
29%	29%	I wanted to work on my writing skills before taking ENG 110.
6%	2%	I was encouraged by my parents to take this class.
51%	55%	The course was required.
18%	12%	It fit into my class schedule.
27%	37%	I was encouraged by my advisor and/or a faculty member to take this class.
6%	6%	Other

Table 3. Corequisite Students “Why did you take this class?” Responses

2018 n=38	2019 n=20	Multiple Choice Responses (Could select more than one)
18%	30%	I was encouraged by a SOAR representative to take this class.
13%	15%	I desired additional assistance when taking ENG 110.
55%	60%	I wanted to complete my general education Writing I requirement in one semester at Missouri State University.
0%	0%	I did not pass ENG 100 or ENG 110.
3%	5%	I was encouraged by my parents to take this class.
18%	10%	It fit into my class schedule.
42%	50%	I was encouraged by my advisor and/or faculty member to take this class.
16%	20%	Other (Low ACT score placement in course)

that they desired additional assistance with writing than their corequisite counterparts. As shown in Tables 2 and 3, both groups of students responded that input from an academic advisor or another faculty member influenced their decision to enroll in the course, but this factor was indicated by a larger percentage of corequisite students.

Assumption 4

Finally, our initial assumptions posited that a higher number of students enrolled in the prerequisite course would have a fixed mindset about writing ability. Our pilot survey data from 2017 did not yield information that could help us identify mindset, so we tailored questions in 2018 to address this. To understand students’ perceptions, we asked two different questions: Do you believe writing can improve with practice? Do you believe that some people are naturally better writers?

We assumed there would be a disparity in the responses given by students who chose to enroll in the corequisite and those enrolled in the prerequisite. However, students in both prerequisite and corequisite dis-

played assumptions reflective of a fixed mindset, assuming some people are “naturally better writers”; however, the percentage was significantly lower than we had anticipated (5-16% over the two-year span). The statement, “I believe writing can improve with practice,” prompted similar responses from both the prerequisite and corequisite students for both 2018 and 2019. At least 95% of the prerequisite and corequisite students indicated that they did believe writing can improve with practice. This response suggests that both prerequisite students and corequisite students displayed evidence of a growth mindset in that they believed they had the ability to eventually become a better writer. We had anticipated that corequisite students would display evidence of a growth mindset, but we had not anticipated the same result with the prerequisite students. This finding was particularly surprising given that over a quarter of our students elected to enroll in ENG 100 even though it was not required. Despite having a growth mindset, negative self-perceptions of their writing ability clearly persisted. As discussed earlier, institutional inequities can fuel students’ negative self-perceptions. Not receiving AP or dual credit due to test scores or inability to pay fees are institutional inequities that could reduce students’ confidence and lead them to assume that they *need* more writing assistance.

TOWARD NEW CONCEPTIONS OF BASIC WRITERS

This project is ongoing, and it has become a vital part of understanding the students in our Basic Writing program and making administrative decisions about the prerequisite and corequisite courses. It has demonstrated to us the necessity of analyzing the needs of local student populations rather than relying solely on the available literature and self-reported data of community colleges. Our work has allowed, even in some small part, for our students to have a voice in this conversation. Echoing Kailyn Shartel Hall’s assertion for expanding work on student perception, our work emphasizes that student choice and experience must inform our decisions as administrators and Basic Writing educators, and 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” (76). We agree with Becky L. Caouette’s concerns about corequisites: “I do not believe that corequisite models can make significant inroads in destigmatizing underprepared or alternately-prepared students unless these same students are encouraged to choose which course best meets their needs” (56). Offering students only the corequisite significantly limits their ability to choose the writing

support that will meet their educational needs. A lack of options is not the same as student choice.

We had little control over the information and advisement given to students during their decision-making process regarding enrollment. We also had no control over how many sections of the corequisite were offered. These issues led to a smaller surveyable population for data collection, and that, we do acknowledge, makes our data more difficult to apply outside of our local context. Programmatically, we had accepted assumptions about basic writers that were not reflective of the real students at our 4-year institution. Furthermore, we had allowed these assumptions to guide our programmatic decision-making. Articulating these assumptions in writing has served as a powerful reminder to us that research involving students is dependent on local context and needs. With this revised understanding of our own local context, we are able to better serve our students and create a program that is responsive to their educational needs.

Our initial impetus for this study was curiosity about the corequisite model. CCA contends that these required remedial courses students must take prior to enrolling in college-level classes are the biggest contributor to the increasing amount of college debt, high dropout rates, and the time it takes college students to graduate. CCA reports that 12% of students at 4-year institutions nationwide enroll in “English Remediation” (“Data Dashboard”). We knew from before implementing the corequisite that our data did not reflect CCA’s data regarding the high percentage of students enrolled in “English Remediation” at 4-year institutions. Only 5% of students at our institution enroll in ENG 100. The more we delved into institutional research, the more we realized just how little our student population reflected the literature and CCA’s data. Three of our four tacit assumptions were not accurate for the students at our 4-year institution. Only one tacit assumption was accurate: a higher percentage of first-generation students enrolled in ENG 100 as compared to the percentage of first-generation students at our institution.

One of the most important discoveries we made was that a quarter of our students *chose* to take Basic Writing, prerequisite and corequisite, even when not required. The initial enrollment in our pilot corequisite was not an anomaly. Students chose to take Basic Writing for a variety of reasons, including a desire to strengthen writing skills. Prerequisite and corequisite students were equally likely to have a growth mindset with regard to writing ability; however, this growth mindset did not counter the negative self-perceptions that many of the students had regarding their writing ability.

Another important discovery was that at least one quarter of all students in our prerequisite and corequisite classes reported that they took advanced writing classes in high school. As Hall explains, “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” (75). Our program has not collected information from students who are enrolled in ENG 110, so we do not have any comparison data to know if this large number is reflective of how many in our entire student population have taken advanced writing classes in high school. We can share, though, that this study has prompted us to take a closer look at all incoming students at our 4-year institution and the roadblocks that may exist, including the requirement of an ACT score and payment of course fees to receive dual credit. Significant changes have been made in the past year. The university has eliminated the ACT requirement to receive dual credit and replaced it with a high school GPA requirement of 3.25. In addition, the university now offers scholarships for high school students who receive free and reduced lunches. These students may take up to six hours of dual credit per semester at no charge.

CONCLUSION: A CAUTION?

Undergirding developmental education is an issue of social justice and “students’ right to make an informed choice about their education” (Toth 147). Many community colleges have implemented DSP as a way to honor students’ right to choose whether to take a Basic Writing course or a “gateway” course. Of particular concern is how the “Corequisite Reform Movement” has begun to shift the discussion surrounding “choice” to complete elimination of all Basic Writing courses. One-hundred percent scaling of the corequisite model is appealing to administrators because it provides justification to get rid of developmental education at 4-year institutions, and writing program administrators at 4-year institutions are being pushed by state mandates to move students more quickly through the first-year sequence. Our research suggests that students at 4-year institutions may not desire to move this quickly. We tend to agree with Goudas that this is an “apples-to-oranges” comparison (Goudas). Four-year institutions need solutions that meet the needs of their student populations.

On a more pragmatic note, COVID-19 has also necessitated the implementation of DSP at more 4-year institutions because many students have been unable to take the ACT. Since the inception of this study, our 4-year

institution implemented DSP in Fall 2020 for students, but only for students without ACT scores. Though university administrators see the DSP as a stopgap measure dispensable when things “return to normal,” COVID-19 has provided us with a fortuitous situation to collect data comparing the accuracy and efficacy of using DSP versus ACT. This type of localized data speaks to administrators who are concerned about retention.

The future of developmental education is at risk; the most obvious example is the legislation in Florida (Senate Bill 1720) that bans any remediation. With such sweeping changes, strategies/models of Basic Writing that have proven effective are being abandoned. Rather than acknowledging the need for multiple pathways, as our colleagues in mathematics have done (“Missouri Math Pathways Initiative”), a one-size-fits-all model may not fit who our particular students are or what they desire. As Basic Writing educators continue to work with and against these challenges in our institutions, we must continue to keep the needs of our students at the forefront and provide them with information and choices about the writing education they receive in our classrooms, and we must continue to demystify who these students are to the administrators and stakeholders making changes at our institutions.

Note

1. IRB Protocol Number IRB-FY2018-121 at Missouri State University.

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APPENDIX A: 2018-2019 STUDENT SURVEY

Student Name: _____

ENG 100 Section/Instructor: _____

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

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: _____

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

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 Missouri State University (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)

Margaret E. Weaver, Kailyn Shartel Hall, and Tracey A. Glaessgen

- a. Yes, I am a first-generation college student.
 - b. No, I am not a first-generation college student.
 - c. 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?
- a. Yes, I have taken ENG 100 before this semester.
 - b. 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?
- a. Yes, I feel like a part of the MSU Academic Community.
 - b. No, I do not feel like a part of the MSU Academic Community.
 - c. 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?
- a. Freshman
 - b. Sophomore

Challenging Assumptions about Basic Writers and Corequisites

- c. Junior
- d. Senior
- e. Nontraditional
- f. 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?