

Strategies for Promoting Student Success in English 1100 and 1500

We all know that the most important thing (by far) for effectively promoting student success in college writing course caps to 15 or 20 students. In May of 2022, English Faculty reported this fact to the Provost:

First year writing courses like our ENG1100 are fundamentally different from every other course in college. Most courses focus in large part on delivering content and assessing the effectiveness of that delivery. Competent writing courses are ongoing conversations between teachers and students, as well as among students. A competent writing course assigns weekly writing which is read and responded to by the instructor.

To assign 30 students to a first-semester college writing course (as we plan to do in Fall 2022) at any college will be pedagogical malpractice. “No more than 20 students should be permitted in any writing class. Ideally, classes should be limited to 15. Remedial or developmental sections should be limited to a maximum of 15 students. No English faculty members should teach more than 60 writing students a term.” (CCCC 2015). These 2015 Guidelines have also been endorsed by the MLA Association of Departments of English (Sep. 2020). The ADA also advises that: “Writing-intensive literature courses should be limited to twenty students, in accordance with CCCC guidelines for writing courses (see above) but no larger than twenty-five.” (Sep. 2020).

With our student population, it will cause irreparable harm to our students who need the most support. No new, reformed, or expanded writing program support systems or can be effective without partnering with writing teachers to support students, improve their pedagogies, spend extra time with students who need help, and connect students with additional support services. Writing teachers who are exhausted and overwhelmed with impossible student loads cannot be effective partners.

Even when we are asked to teach larger classes, we can still make teaching choices that help our students to succeed. Here are twelve ideas.

- 1. Give short assignments early in the semester and contact students who miss any of these assignments, particularly the first one.** Students are sometimes lost or confused early in the semester. Students transitioning from high school may not realize how important it is to complete assignments. They may be used to being graded only on tests or major papers,

particularly in classes where there isn't regular writing. Reaching out to them early can help them understand the importance of these things before they fall too far behind.

2. Contact students in the first week who have missed class. As with item #1 above, students are often confused about their classes early in the semester or face other hurdles and struggles. While tracking attendance online is important, these records are not automatically entered into Navigate, and even when you issue an alert, it may take some time for the student to be contacted. Reaching out directly to students may be the difference between them returning to class or accumulating additional absences.

3. Contact students who miss multiple classes later in the semester. You often will be able to sense your students are struggling. Some students can also be reached by texting through Navigate— if Navigate has their cell phone information.

4. Schedule conferences with students in the first month of classes. We encourage professors to replace a week of classes with individual conferences. Meetings in weeks 2 or 3 can be just short meet-and-greets. So you can schedule them for 20 minutes/three an hour with very little prep time. This is a great time to check in on how students are doing and make personal connections with them. It gives them a chance to ask questions that they may not feel comfortable asking in class.

5. Provide time in class to begin reading or writing assignments that students are required to complete for homework. Many students struggle with time management and have extensive demands on their time outside of class. Many others are reluctant to ask for help when they encounter difficulties with an assignment. Beginning reading and writing assignments in class makes it more likely that students will complete the assignments outside of class. It also means that professors will be available for consultation at the beginning of the assignment if students have questions or concerns.

6. Give (and grade) many low-stakes assignments. This gives students chances to succeed in many small ways before they have to attempt larger, more complex assignments. Longer papers can be scaffolded by requiring proposals, drafts, chances to provide and receive peer feedback, and create revision plans. The grading for the smaller assignments does not need to be extensive. Professors might use rough grading such as $\checkmark+$, \checkmark , $\checkmark-$. Or they might simply give full credit if the assignment is completed or none if it is not completed. Labor based grading (including full grading contracts) can also allow you to review low stakes assignments quickly. One trick is to scan submissions as soon as the deadline passes and check on late students first.

7. Consider some form of contract grading or other labor-based grading system. A labor-based grading system extends the low-stakes approach to the entire course. We firmly believe that all students are capable of success if they are given concrete actions that they can complete. Grading students on these actions rather than on the correctness of their final product makes this success possible and shifts the focus from lower order (sentence formalism) to higher order concerns (process, revision, rhetoric, audience). Such a system can and should still be academically rigorous by requiring students to complete all stages of the writing process including extensive revision. If you want to offer an openly anti-racist pedagogy, you can pair a labor contract with a reading on the harmful effects of "white English" pedagogies that force students who speak/write different forms of English to code-switch (Inoue, Danielewicz and Elbow, Shor, Young).

Note: PWR is working to put together a workshop on labor-based grading. Please look out for additional material to be posted to the PWR web site.

8. Make grades visible. Even if the grading system is explained in the syllabus, students often overlook or ignore this information. They may be surprised to learn that they are doing poorly in a course, and often they realize this too late. Using Gradebook in Blackboard is a good way to do this, but make sure to demonstrate to students how to access "My Grades." There is a [Blackboard video](#) that explains this, so it may be a good idea to post that video in the course menu and play it once in class.

9. Assign due dates in Blackboard. Students will see them there in a "To Do" list. You can also list due dates with prompts and instructions.

10. Issue alerts in Navigate for students who seem to be struggling, but also make contact yourself. It's important to keep academic advisors and other support staff in the loop. However, it often takes a significant amount of time for the support staff to make contact with students, so it's important to reach out personally in addition to issuing alerts. You can also write flags/alerts as notes directly to the student. All alerts (especially failure warnings) can encourage AWOL students to contact you, return to class, and begin to turn in more work. Even when it is obvious from the math that a student is failing, they may not realize it.

11. Promote Support Centers. A single referral is already required for 1100/1500. But some students will benefit from multiple sessions. (You can offer to replace missed assignments or absences, or give a little extra credit.) Here's a new syllabus blurb from the Writing Center.

[The WPU Writing Center](#) (124 Grant)(Support by Text only (201) 285 7751) provides

one-on-one peer writing consultations for any WPU student, teacher or alum about any kind of writing in any stage of development on any device. This is a safe space to share your writing and also a brave space committed to promoting social justice through collaborative action. Writing sessions are 45 minutes. Book them through Navigate. Learn more with their [3-minute welcome video](#) and [website](#). Writing consultants can help you get started, review assignments, brainstorm, outline, work on focus and thesis, organize, add power/style, and use, cite and list sources. They can also help you edit and proofread your writing. Their aim is not just to produce a better piece of writing, but to help you become a more confident, comfortable, and powerful writer.

12. Make Compassion Part of Every Course. This value can be built into a grading contract. It applies to students and the teacher. Or here's a sample syllabus blurb:

Our Commitment In This Class to Compassionate Communication

The principle of compassion calls us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, and to honor the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity, and respect. It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain.

To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity.

We in this class acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately to some degree. We therefore pledge to do all that we can (knowing we'll fail on occasion) to restore compassion to the center of our lives (at least in this course and during this course together) and attempt to engage with our colleagues with compassion.

This means we will work to think first of others, their benefit, their well-being, and their learning, knowing that others are compassionately working for our benefit. We will always communicate (by email, text, phone, Zoom, or in person) using a respectful and civil tone. We will strive to see our interdependence and interconnectedness, and labor for one another.

References

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