



The Importance of Relationships in Service-Learning Projects: A Case Study from Eastern Kentucky University

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Eastern Kentucky University

A graduate course at Eastern Kentucky University included a significant Service-Learning project that evaluated and made recommendations about the University's Writing Intensive program in collaboration with University administrators. The project's goals included making sure that students have quality writing courses, that faculty are supported in teaching Writing Intensive courses, and that students develop the writing skills necessary to be successful in their professional lives. Additionally, the goals of Service-Learning center both on learning outcomes and community engagement, making it an effective method for cultivating this collaboration.

Introduction

English 814: Writing Across the Curriculum, a graduate-level course at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU), contained a Service-Learning component focused on how to improve Writing Intensive (WI) courses at the institution. Students worked collaboratively with faculty members and administrators to study WI classes through primary and secondary research methods to recommend changes for the betterment of future students.

Context of the Project

WI Program and WAC Pedagogy

At the present time, the university has a baccalaureate degree requirement that all students take and pass a WI course at EKU or "fulfill it with a transfer course that is articulated as Writing Intensive" ("EKU Writing Intensive Requirement," 2017, para. 1). The Associate Provost for Academic Programs oversees the WI Course program, the enforcement of the graduation requirement, and faculty and staff development to meet the University's writing intensive course requirements. WI classes are required to give students more feedback on their writing. Methods of such feedback suggested by the office of the Associate Provost for Academic Programs include: giving students multiple small assignments that culminate in the submission of a final paper, providing feedback regarding common errors, and

offering opportunities for students to revise their work based on feedback before submitting their work a second time.

According to the WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum) Clearinghouse (n.d), faculty need to teach students to write effectively so that they can “communicate information,” “clarify their thinking” about assignments, readings, and discussions and “learn new concepts and information,” supporting the need for Writing Intensive courses (para. 1). ECU faculty and departments, when Writing Across the Curriculum became a popular movement in the 1990s, coordinated their efforts and connected these principles to courses. Indeed, WAC came to ECU gradually as faculty and departments adopted it to improve student writing outcomes, though a formal program would not exist for many years.

In 2009, ECU formally adopted WI courses university wide. Once adopted, there was not any documented study of either the program’s effectiveness or if changes were needed. Yet, a search of ECU’s online records do show some incremental changes and updates to university policies and practices. Additionally, there is evidence that individual departments and programs have made modifications to their WAC requirements and programming. However, since there hasn’t been a formal review process or standardization, one of our main research goals was to evaluate the effectiveness of ECU’s WI program as well as give recommendations for improvements.

Service-Learning Project

ENG 814 Writing Across the Curriculum was designed as a Service-Learning project that would involve and collaborate with various communities across the campus. According to the Service-Learning assignment sheet, the class project was intended to provide:

Hands-on experience with primary research; analysis of primary and relevant secondary research relevant to an authentic issues; collaboration with university administrators; understanding [of] higher-education curricular needs and choices; situating the importance of writing in higher education and the world of work; [and opportunities to make] authentic recommendations based on collaborative research and discussions” (Presley, 2022).

Indeed, through discussions in class with the instructor and Associate Provost—via Zoom—we did have opportunities to collaboratively work with and learn from both these individuals about how to conduct original research and prepare

it for inclusion in our class's final report. Our project therefore relied heavily on our campus collaborations and research, creating a detailed picture of ECU's WI program.

Furthermore, since Service-Learning fosters rich relationships (Felten & Clayton, 2011), great emphasis was placed on building connections and collaborating with our classmates, our professor, and the greater ECU community to create a more robust and meaningful project than our class could have alone. In addition to elements of collaboration, Service-Learning is considered a high-impact pedagogy that can foster deep relationships, increased engagement, exposure to different perspectives and ideas, and feelings of community while also achieving course learning outcomes, making it an excellent pedagogical choice for the classroom (Felten & Clayton, 2011; Flinders et al., 2016). The following paragraphs will detail how our Service-Learning collaboration was achieved and what we collectively accomplished.

Collaboration within the Class and with Institutional Employees

To create a project with diverse perspectives, we thought it was crucial to collaborate with personnel from different positions at the university, from students to upper-level administrators. Our class contained twelve students from various backgrounds, ranging from undergraduate to graduate students, traditional to non-traditional students, with different educational and professional experiences, which offered a wealth of ideas for our project. We also collaborated with our professor as well as the Associate Provost for Academic Programs at ECU. Additionally, consultants and directors at the Noel Studio for Academic Creativity, ECU's multimodal writing and communication center, were surveyed as well as administrators and directors across the university. Finally, Writing Intensive course faculty—ranging from STEM to humanities professors—were surveyed, interviewed, or observed. Due to this valuable and varied input, our class saw the benefits as well as potential areas for improvement in ECU's Writing Intensive program.

Methodology of Collaboration

Our class used several methods to facilitate our campus-wide collaboration. Within our class, we utilized synchronous Zoom meetings to plan and discuss our project, created a Discord server to keep in touch between meetings, as well as email and Blackboard Discussion Boards. Google Drive helped us store our primary and secondary research in a place that was accessible to everyone, including joint documents such as sign-up sheets for project roles and our

recommendations draft and presentation. To collaborate with members of the community outside of our class, we used Zoom, email, and in-person meetings. If we had to improve anything about our collaboration, our project could have benefited from more synchronous meetings to discuss results and plan our project as a group. While email, Discord, and Blackboard are excellent resources, they do not take the place of live, voice communication. Overall, technology helped us connect with class and community members from afar, allowing us to involve more people in the project than just those residing on campus.

Methodology of Research

Together, our class collectively conducted significant primary and secondary research about ECU's Writing Intensive program to help provide suggestions and improvements for future students. For primary research, we compiled Writing Intensive course data from ECU Direct (our class schedule system) and the Course Catalog; we completed thirteen interviews of ECU faculty, directors, and administrators; we evaluated eighteen Writing Intensive course syllabi from different departments and majors; we surveyed five graduate consultants at the Noel Studio; and, we conducted two observations of Writing Intensive classes. In terms of secondary research, our class also read numerous articles on Writing Across the Curriculum pedagogy, collaboration, and Service-Learning to prepare for and inform our project. Finally, our research and collaboration culminated in a fourteen-page evaluation of ECU's Writing Intensive program, complete with methods, results, and recommendations. Our class then formally presented our recommendations to the Associate Provost for Academic Programs at ECU, to help enact meaningful change to the program.

Conclusions and Recommendations

To assist with the program's improvement, our project's conclusions and recommendations are based on the three categories of primary research conducted: online documentation, instructors' and administrators' voices, and students' voices.

The Evaluation of the Available Online Documentation

Discovering the current state of the Writing Intensive program was the main directive of our project, and we learned from the Associate Provost that data analysis had not been conducted on WI courses in several years. This prompted our first primary research category, the evaluation of the available online

documentation on the Program. We found the current website to be focused primarily on the initial set-up and approval of WI courses. Through the data on WI course offerings over the last ten years and the current course catalog, we discovered that ECU's WI program currently operates under a discipline-centered model. Most departments offer WI sections in foundational/required courses for that area of study. Some examples from our report include BUS 301W, Fundamentals of Formal Communication, and EMS 300W, Curriculum and Instructional Design. These are examples of required courses for a multitude of majors within the disciplines of Business and Education; both indicate the general trend of discipline-centered WI courses with ECU's program.

Our findings and conclusions from this category of research support the view that ECU's Writing Intensive Program currently supports discipline-centered relationships. These relationships can be strengthened through a more active and collaboration-minded central administration of the program. As such, our recommendations rooted in this category of research reflect this position, and the fostering of collaboration through multiple modes of communication.

- Consistent opportunities for follow-up communication and dialogue between instructors of WI courses and the Program administrators
- Centralized, online location for communication and up-to-date information concerning the Program

Voices of Instructors and Administrators

The second major category of our project's primary research involved listening to the voices of our University's instructors' and administrators' in relation to the WI Program. We conducted in-person and virtual interviews with these professionals and observed within WI course classrooms. Of the insights this research provided, the most salient were shared expressions over a desire for accessible and transferable writing pedagogy. This portion of the research revealed the lack of overarching strategy and professional development designed to continuously support our instructors of WI courses as to how to create and execute relevant writing instruction within these classes.

It is crucial, we concluded, to support our instructors through resources and opportunities to develop their personal teaching strategies for writing, in general scholarship and within the discipline-context of their WI courses. Our recommendations based on this portion of the primary research center on offering robust support for our Writing Intensive faculty.

- Development of a centralized base writing pedagogy for use across disciplines
- Available recommended readings of Writing Across the Curriculum and Composition pedagogy
- Workshops and professional development sessions centered on the collective understanding and practice of the base writing pedagogy

Voices of Students and Student Employees

One of the most crucial categories of our primary research was the exploration of students' voices and perspectives. We made inquiries into the Noel Studio for Academic Creativity and its employees' perspectives on student writing and the Writing Intensive Program. For the student voice, we conducted a survey of student-employees, who work with student writing daily in the Studio. From this survey, we found a focused frustration in writing assignments which do not emphasize the students' writing process over the product produced. Students, and the consultants working with them, expressed frustration with pedagogies which excessively focus on surface style, while leaving concerns on the writing's purpose, research methodology, and holistic revision largely under-supported within assignments. The interviews with administrators of the Noel Studio confirm these concerns; they call for more consciousness of process and evidence-backed writing pedagogies for instructors. Additionally, our analysis of the volunteered syllabi of 18 WI courses, as documents guiding student expectations of academic writing, also showed the lack of language of students' writing processes.

Our findings from this category of research brought us to the conclusion that supporting pedagogies of students' writing *process* will best strengthen the learning relationships between students and instructors.

- Developing a centralized base writing pedagogy centered on the importance of students' writing processes
- Conscious use of Noel Studio resources and services by the WI courses, including consultations, workshops, and professional development resources for instructors
- Smaller class sizes in WI course sections, to facilitate collaboration and consistent, valuable feedback throughout the course

Conclusion of Findings

In the end, our collaboration across the university allowed our class to create a richer project by combining the joint knowledge, experiences, and perspectives of everyone involved, showing the profound value of collaboration and Service-Learning projects (The Writing Center of University of Wisconsin-Madison, n.d.). We gained a sense of community and respect for ECU by incorporating the opinions and suggestions of everyone interviewed and surveyed, honoring their input and experience (Haviland, 2003; Zemliansky & Berry, 2017). Our class gained experience with working with others, compromising, and practicing active listening and communication skills, which will be valuable to our future professional and educational endeavors (Lavee & Itzchakov, 2021). Ultimately, we tackled a large, semester-long project that would have been impossible alone, thanks to our collaboration, division of labor, and mutual efforts towards our greater goal of supporting ECU's Writing Intensive program.

Through this service-learning project, our class found the current state of ECU's WI Program to be strong in foundational and potential relationships. However, we also discovered opportunities to increase interdisciplinary collaboration and discussion as well as promote the transferability of academic writing knowledge and experiences for students. Ultimately, an active administration for the Writing Intensive Program could accomplish these possibilities for future generations of ECU students.

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