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Yes, Developmental Students Can
Thrive in Integrated Courses and
Compressed Terms: Leveraging
Institutional Data and National
Trends to Build the Best Reading/
Writing Program

YES, DEVELOPMENTAL

STUDENTS CAN THRIVE

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DEVELOPMENTAL

educators in higher education are caught in a crossfire.

On one side, researchers, organizations, companies, non-profits, practitioners, and to some extent, the public, are clamoring for massive reform in developmental coursework in higher education (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018; Edgecombe et al., 2014; Complete College America, 2012). One such reform is the push for integrated reading and writing (IRW) courses. According to Armstrong et al. (2019), this is the promise of IRW: "Integration is an approach that values literacy-based academic communication processes equally and that coordinates those processes purposefully for new-to-college learners." All of these groups present a compelling argument, but that argument is founded upon a small body of research and practices that work in some situations and with some populations when implemented with fidelity. In spite of that lack of research, some states have forced colleges to develop and implement IRW courses, but Maryland has not.

On the other side, researchers and organizations that have been the backbone of developmental education paint a different picture (Goudas, 2023; Goudas & Boylan, 2012; Saxon et al., 2016a & 2016b). They argue that change and evolution are needed, but not such dramatic, massive reforms,

which may sound like quick and easy fixes, but actually create new barriers and disservice to students, and moreover make a good deal of money for those researchers, speakers, and organizers.

The pressure for redesign of developmental reading and writing programs is intense, but other transformations in higher education are also shaping the future of developmental education. For example, as a result of joining Achieving the Dream's core program in 2019, the College of Southern Maryland (CSM) made a commitment to shift the majority of courses to a compressed 7-week format by fall term of 2021. Part of the Achieving the Dream (2023) mindset is that "Before we can help your institution transform, we have to understand where you've been," which begins with exploring, "your student demographics; your legislative environment; mission and theory of change; past initiatives and student success efforts; and more." Thus in 2020, the time was ripe to take a deep dive into CSM's past practices and data and to cull promising practices from the published literature. This dive was the beginning of an 18-month redesign process.



SUMMARIZING OUR HISTORY

—Leveraging institutional data—

As the Achieving the Dream coaches and the CSM team started to do this work at the institutional level, as Coordinator of Developmental Reading and Writing, I undertook a similar process. While the records were not complete, sufficient data was available to conclude that over the 20-year span from 2000–2020, CSM's developmental reading and writing faculty consistently reaffirmed a core vision and goals, and they piloted, implemented, and evaluated a wide range of success initiatives, placement testing tools, textbooks, software packages, and redesign strategies. Although CSM had always had separate developmental reading and writing tracks, the number of credits required, the levels offered, and the exit criteria fluctuated over the 20-year period.

CSM's data shows that there is no simple, dramatic solution for assisting students to grow into college-ready writers or readers. Regardless of the instructional methods, resources, faculty, and external factors (like Common Core, recessions, and changes in the demographics of Southern Maryland), success rates for developmental reading and writing courses at CSM have held fairly steady, and the subsequent performance of those passing students in the gateway composition course (ENG 1010) has also remained steady. Overall, students who pass their developmental

reading and writing courses perform about as well as their directly-placed peers in ENG 1010. Over the last 20 years, compressed-term courses existed at CSM in occasional "mini" courses or "late-start" courses that were offered irregularly—without any systematic reengineering or assessment. However, institutional data shows that 7-week evening courses in Fall 2019 had higher enrollment and pass rates than 15-week evening courses in Fall 2018. This illustrates that compressed terms held promise for CSM's students.

A close look at CSM's outcomes data showed that 3 of our past initiatives correlated with our best developmental course success and our best subsequent success rates in the gateway college composition course.

First CSM partnered with Charles MacArthur, Zoi Traga Philippakos, and a team from the University of Delaware to pilot an IRW course in Fall 2017 using their instructional approach Supporting Strategic Writers (supportingstrategicwriters.org). Data from that pilot course showed that students who passed the IRW course and took the gateway course in the subsequent semester ($n = 58$) passed the gateway course at a rate of 68%, which was the same as students who placed directly into the gateway course. Students who passed the traditional developmental writing





course and took the gateway course in the subsequent semester (n = 255) passed the gateway course at a rate of 69.6%. This suggests that taking the IRW course did not harm students even though the pace was frantic, and instructors felt that instruction and practice in reading skills was inadequate.

Second, for a short time between 2013–2017, CSM had a Center for Interdisciplinary Studies, and part of the center's charge was to develop a first-year experience, titled Interdisciplinary Studies 1010 (IDS). Although the credit-course version of IDS never came to fruition, a version of IDS was implemented for students who placed into developmental reading.

The course, IDS 1010T, focused on applying active, strategic, and analytic reading approaches to collect content for a public poster presentation. Data showed that IDS students out-performed

their directly-placed peers in ENG 1010, yet IDS 1010T was exhausting to teach. It was fast-paced, high-energy, and high-touch, and it required huge investments in technology and logistics to make the poster sessions and all the other moving parts align.

Third, CSM had worked closely with Rita Smilkstein (2009) and her Tools for Writing curriculum for many years. Students who passed the Tools course (CSM's lowest level) and enrolled in ENG 0900 (our regular developmental composition course) in the subsequent semester nearly always outperformed students who were directly placed into ENG 0900. Tools for Writing taught students to recognize the components of sentences by using sentences written by the students themselves. Students labeled all homework sentences, using a cumulative set of tools. During every class, students wrote sentences on the board, discussed their work, and revised their work.

SUMMARIZING THE LITERATURE

— Promising practices and tensions in the field —

Practitioners and researchers agree that IRW courses must be designed from scratch. IRW courses are not simply a mashup of existing composition and reading course content, assignments, and assessments. Based on experiences at the Community College of Baltimore County, Hayes and Williams (2016) advised others to avoid the urge to try to merge existing courses; instead, they advised others to create something totally new. The same is true for compressed-term courses. Simply collapsing 16 weeks of content and activities into a shorter span, perhaps with

longer class periods, is a recipe for frustration, stress, and disengagement. Achieving the Dream has published a guide for institutions that are adopting compressed terms and the following mindset is emphasized: "We urge faculty to avoid the path of simply stacking multiple class sessions from an existing design into longer sessions. Take the opportunity to approach your course with a fresh lens and ask what is most important for your students to know and to be able to do when they complete the course" (Fladd et al., 2021).



As far as recommendations regarding how to go about that redesign, promising practices abound, yet each practice described in the literature surrounding redesign is fraught with competing views and tensions.

Studying all available institutional data can provide the best lens for viewing and interpreting the scholarly discourse surrounding developmental redesign.

Some of the recurring themes that CSM addressed during our redesign were:

- addressing placement issues, including how much agency students should have (Edgecombe et al., 2014; Hayes & Williams, 2016; Pierce, 2017; Saxon et al., 2016a & 2016b) and the value of combined multiple measures for placement as opposed to alternative single measures (Brathwhite & Edgecombe, 2018; Goudas, 2019)
- determining the right amount of time for the in-person, online, and homework components, which affects decisions about the number of credit hours, the number of courses in the sequence, the course modalities, and the curriculum choices (Edgecombe et al., 2014; Hayes & Williams, 2016; Kalamkarian et al., 2015; Pierce, 2017)
- articulating the purpose for the time-compressed IRW course, e.g., to prepare students for the gateway composition course or to increase retention and graduation rates (Goudas, 2023)
- balancing composition, grammar, and reading instruction, e.g., in a study of available textbooks for IRW, Armstrong et al. (2019) reported that most have only surface integration of reading and writing components.
- discerning a theoretical and philosophical framework, i.e., whether to use a highly structured sequence of lessons (MacArthur & Traga Philippakos, 2017; MacArthur et al., 2022) or whether to guide students through the messy process of doing authentic college work (Hayes & Williams, 2016)
- right-sizing the number of assignments and depth of feedback from instructors, as all of the programs reviewed in CSM's process pointed toward fewer deliverables, with more self-assessment and informal peer and instructor feedback as the formative assessment
- aligning with any first-year seminar courses, e.g., some institutions use a learning community model (Chism Schmidt & Graziano, 2016)

STARTING A NEW CHAPTER:

IRW at CSM in 7-week terms

In January of 2021, after reviewing the extensive institutional historical data about developmental offerings and thorough exploration of promising practices and tensions within the field, a roadmap was developed for transitioning from a multi-course, multi-level program to a streamlined integrated reading/writing (IRW) program. The goal was to build a new IRW curriculum, native to compressed terms and both synchronous virtual and in-person formats, that would leverage practices that had shown the greatest success locally and situate them within the context of promising practices from other institutions and national trends. Key questions explored during course development included a) What is the bare minimum of content, practice, and feedback necessary for students to be able to succeed in credit courses and b) How could CSM capitalize on multiple models that had shown positive results with our student body?

CSM answered those questions by developing and offering 3 unique, interchangeable, native to 7-week and synchronous online, 3-credit courses, any one of which conveys writing and reading equivalency. Think of it like developmental electives; students with GPAs below 2.5 select one course to satisfy the requirement. (Note: Students with 2.5-2.9 GPAs take ENG 1010T, a version of our credit course with enhanced support.)

- IRW 0900A: The Academic Essay
- IRW 0900B: The Academic Presentation
- IRW 0900C: The Writing Portfolio

All 3 courses share the same core student learning objectives; however, the enabling objectives, assignments, and presentation modes vary to take advantage of the 3 approaches that had been shown in the institutional data to work best with CSM's student population. The core learning objectives are that at the completion of the course, the student will be able to:

- Apply the steps of the writing process in order to produce well-developed college-level texts that are clearly organized and in which errors do not interfere with fluent reading and understanding.
- Read sources critically and take notes in order to write summaries and responses.
- Integrate credible source material in their own texts to support claims.

In order to realize this substantial paradigm shift, CSM needed support from a multitude of internal and external partners. For IRW 0900A, the college partnered with Supporting Strategic Writers (SSW, <https://www.supportingstrategicwriters.org/>), led by Charles MacArthur and Zoi Traga Philippakos. The SSW team created a custom curriculum and textbook for the course based on their research and previous collaborations with CSM. For IRW 0900B, an in-house team including the course coordinator plus full-time and part-time faculty mapped out an instructional sequence and created an extensive course shell in CSM's learning management system.

IRW 0900C resulted from collaborations between the course coordinator and several gateway courses in other disciplines, including science, psychology, sociology, and first-year seminar. College partners, including the enrollment and advising teams, division chairs, and academic affairs team, were involved and supportive throughout the process.

Table 1. IRW Course Outlines

IRW 0900A The Academic Essay	IRW 0900B The Academic Presentation	IRW 0900C The Writing Portfolio
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to the course • Writing summary-response papers • Argumentative writing with sources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get started • Plan for reading • Execute the plan • Synthesize ideas from self and sources • Present and reflect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to learn grammar and understand written assignment requirements • Foundations of sentence structure (professor office hour visit paper from FYS 1010) • Major sentence structures (article summary from PSY/SOC 1010) • Giving, receiving, and applying feedback (site visit paper from SCE 1010) • Writing a reflective essay • Portfolio conferences and reflections

EARLY METRICS

Enrollments, pass rates, and gateway composition completion

Historically, CSM offered about 400 seats in the developmental reading and writing courses in the 15-week fall term. Placement into developmental courses was already trending down, and the shift to GPA placement during the pandemic accelerated that trend. In addition, transitioning to a 1-course requirement to fulfill both reading and writing prerequisites eliminated duplication (students taking both reading and writing). Furthermore, the transition to compressed terms changed enrollment patterns. Since IRW was implemented in fall 2021, our fall enrollment is steady at about 200 seats, with about 140–150 seats in fall term 1 and about 50–60 seats in fall term 2.

Overall student success in the gateway composition course (ENG 1010) typically ranges between 65–68% of enrolled students earning A, B, or C as the final grade. As shown in Table 2, students who completed IRW 0900A and took ENG 1010 immediately afterward succeeded at almost the same rate, which is impressive because historically, these students could not have completed both courses in a 15-week period ever before. As of this writing, students are finishing 2023 spring term 2, so data is incomplete; however, the general trends seem to be similar to the 2021 results. Historically, overall gateway course success of students who passed developmental writing averaged about 65%, with a range of about 58–69%. Passing IRW 0900A students in ENG 1010 performed about the same as students in the old paradigm; however, at least for the first year, IRW 0900B students had more

success in the developmental course but less success in the gateway course. All of these populations are small, and the results must be interpreted cautiously; however, CSM suspended the IRW 0900C course beginning in fall 2022 due to the dramatically lower pass rate.

In fall 2021, CSM was careful to offer an excessive number of seats to ensure that students could find a seat that matched their preference for IRW 0900A, B, or C. Interestingly, students showed a strong preference for the IRW 0900A, which is the most traditional option. In addition, a higher percentage of students who passed 0900A were retained into the gateway course in the subsequent term. Disaggregated data showed that male students had the highest pass rate in IRW 0900B. Students identifying as Black or African American had a 75% pass rate in 0900B, but a 60% pass rate in 0900A.

A few more students took ENG 1010 in spring terms 1 and 2; they pulled down the overall success rate for IRW 0900A and nudged up the success rates for 0900B and 0900C as shown in Table 3. Paulson and Van Overschelde (2019) studied a statewide mandate in Texas, finding that community college students who passed time-compressed IRW developmental courses were slightly less successful in gateway courses than those who took full-term and/or independent reading and writing courses, which is consistent with CSM's early results.

HOWEVER, THE TRANSITION TO IRW IS NOT THE ONLY VARIABLE AFFECTING THIS STUDENT POPULATION.

Some students in this population experienced a virtual senior year of high school due to the pandemic. Also due to the pandemic, students in IRW were placed by GPA. Finally, students in the IRW population took ENG 1010 in a 7-week format while CSM was still under pandemic protocols, including most sections in asynchronous online, synchronous online, or hybrid format. Any one of those variables could be responsible for the slight dip in IRW-completers' success in ENG 1010. Paulson et al. (2021) interviewed instructors of time-compressed IRW courses in Texas and found that instructors were most concerned that students were not getting sufficient time to practice and apply the strategies. A few CSM instructors have expressed that sentiment; however, most instructors balance that view with focus on the benefits gained by limiting developmental coursework to the minimum needed for students to function in credit coursework.

Qualitative data for IRW courses is available through our course evaluation system, the IDEA Student Ratings of Instruction: Diagnostic Feedback Instrument from Anthology. When comparing course evaluation results from developmental writing (fall 2019 and 2020) to IRW course evaluation results (fall 2021 and 2022),

scores are generally equivalent with most students rating the old and new courses between 3.8 – 4.8 on a 1 – 5 scale. Written comments that students submitted in an open-ended comment box on the IDEA Instrument were overwhelmingly positive about both developmental writing and IRW.

Outcomes assessment prior to IRW was spotty. Part of the curriculum development process for IRW was to develop shared grading rubrics that are used across all sections of each course. These shared rubrics allow for systematic and ongoing outcomes assessment. Fall 2021 term 1 rubrics for all 3 courses show that by the end of the courses, students were performing well on content, organization, and sentence structure, but struggling with using sources effectively. For example, scores for each criterion on the rubric for IRW 0900A were above 85% for all categories, except for use of sources where scores ranged from 66 – 77%. Prior to IRW, CSM's developmental reading and writing courses did not emphasize writing with sources, so this finding is not surprising. Students in IRW are experiencing a more challenging curriculum in a compressed timeframe. Although we have improvements to make in our curriculum, these scores show that most students are making progress in composing source-based work.

**Table 2. 15-Week Results of IRW in a Compressed Term
(Fall 2021 Term 1 Students)**

	IRW 0900A Essay	IRW 0900B Presentation	IRW 0900C Portfolio
Enrollment in developmental	84	40	20
Developmental pass rate	55 (66%)	29 (73%)	9 (45%)
Enrollment in ENG 1010 in fall term 2	32 (58%)	12 (41%)	4 (44%)
Success in ENG 1010 in fall term 2	20 (63%)	5 (42%)	3 (75%)

Abbreviations: ENG 1010 = gateway composition course; IRW = integrated reading/writing.

**Table 3. 30-Week Results of IRW in a Compressed Term
(Fall 2021 Term 1 Students)**

	IRW 0900A Essay	IRW 0900B Presentation	IRW 0900C Portfolio
Enrollment in ENG 1010 during first year	46 (84%)	18 (62%)	7 (78%)
Success in ENG 1010 during first year	24 (52%)	8 (44%)	6 (86%)

Abbreviations: ENG 1010 = gateway composition course; IRW = integrated reading/writing.

— THE BOTTOM LINE

Pass rates before and after implementing IRW are holding steady. Early data shows that some students were able to complete their developmental program in just 7 weeks and were able to complete the college-level composition course in the subsequent 7 weeks, thus completing their credit-level English requirement within their first 15 weeks at CSM. Course-level outcomes assessment shows that students are building the skills needed for success.

After 18 months of implementation, CSM's new IRW curriculum in compressed terms appears to serve students about as well as the former multi-course, multi-level program. Even though the former program was robust, vigorous, and thorough, IRW in compressed terms appears to be equally effective in preparing students for success in credit-level courses, while saving them 15 – 30 weeks of time and up to 9 credits of cost, depending on where they were placed in the old system.

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