

Mentoring Online Composition Instruction (ALP/Corequisite Writing) for Faculty and Student Success

Leslie Dolan, Heidi Henry, & Charles Kell

Community College of Rhode Island

This paper expands previous research discussing a former faculty-mentoring program for new and adjunct faculty teaching ALP (Accelerated Learning Program) / corequisite writing at the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI) which was a boon to student success during the pandemic and aims to provide mentoring tools to new and adjunct faculty teaching online. The sudden shift to online learning brought multiple challenges, still relevant today, including student engagement, student attendance, and successful completion of work; thus, we also emphasize best digital practices that enable a successful online learning environment. A continuous support system / mentoring program that helps with all facets of distance learning is important for the success and well-being of both faculty and students.

Keywords: faculty mentoring program, online learning, digital practices, distance learning

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic led to an immediate switch to online teaching. This abrupt change posed various obstacles for both instructors and students, including lack of preparation, workload management, and multiple anxieties. The difficulties involved in this move were pronounced in first-year composition courses at the community college. Based on recent data, a combination of training, programs, mentoring, and a variety of writing activities and practices have enabled both faculty and students to adjust and succeed in online writing instruction (OWI).

Mentoring Instructors in Online Composition

Many instructors making the switch to teaching online writing saw four professional and pedagogical themes emerge: an appeal for strategies to address the increased workload, a desire for pedagogical instruction (rather than simply technologically driven instruction), a way to manage well-being, and a need for practices for the logistical concerns in online teaching (Sheppard, 2021). The need for adopting multiple strategies from a traditional mentoring standpoint—face-to-face, a focus on in-person learning—and adjusted to fit faculty new to online instruction was necessary. Many faculty and students felt both underprepared and disconnected, with the absence of traditional community-building tactics usually associated with in-person learning (Lieske et al., 2022; Sheppard, 2021; Ucok-Sayrak & Brazelton, 2021). Therefore, many new practices were developed and incorporated that helped instructors connect with students, foster an interactive, social virtual classroom, mediate anxiety, while also challenging and meeting the needs of first-year composition

learning outcomes. These new strategies were specifically tailored for community college faculty and students, which is important in order to practice equity and offer access to students from different learning backgrounds (Madden, 2020).

Concerns with Student Success in Online Courses

Since COVID, there has been more of a demand for online courses nationwide. Because of this demand, the Community College of Rhode Island currently offers a ratio of 60% in-person to 40% online classes. However, throughout the years, there have been concerns about student success rates in online college courses. According to several studies before COVID, some of the major barriers to student success in online learning are lack of student discipline, lack of motivation, and lack of interaction with teacher and peers. These roadblocks can often lead to an increase in student failure and drop-out rates which could be seen as the ultimate gauge of student success (Bettinger et al., 2017). And although these roadblocks certainly still exist, there are several other emerging factors to consider. Since the onset of COVID, student rates of major mental health issues have been increasing. Some studies report 35% of undergraduate students screened positive for major depressive disorder and 39% screened positive for generalized anxiety disorder after the onset of COVID-19. Further studies show that 71% of student participants indicated they had increased levels of stress, depressive thoughts, and anxiety due to the pandemic (Babb et al., 2022). When combined, the traditional hurdles to success in online learning and the newly emerging mental health concerns can create even more of a chance for students to exit higher education.

The goal of our research was to see if our online

students in ALP paralleled the characteristics of the research accumulated nationally (Lederman, 2021). Once student concerns were pinpointed, plans to offer mentoring support to new and adjunct faculty teaching online sections of ALP could be tailored to address our students' most elevated areas of struggle, so we could increase student retention and success. For this research, six sections of our online ALP co-requisite writing course (5 fully online and 1 hybrid) were examined using student entrance and exit surveys, student reflections, and student pass rates. At the beginning of the semester, students were asked a series of questions about their confidence levels, college preparedness, and motivation to succeed.

The survey offered the following results. When students were asked how confident they felt about being college students, 15% felt neutral about their role as college students, 55% somewhat confident, and 30% felt confident/highly confident. When asked about how prepared they felt for college, 11% felt very concerned about their preparedness, 11% felt neutral, 61% felt somewhat prepared, and only 16% felt prepared/very prepared. The reasons why students did not feel prepared ranged from lack of writing skills to feeling an inability to complete writing assignments, to anxiety about taking online courses. Finally, when these same students were asked how motivated they felt about being in college the following results unfolded: 85% of all students surveyed said they were motivated/highly motivated to be in college. Here it seems what students lacked in confidence and preparation; they made up for in motivation. The entrance survey also revealed the reasons behind student motivation that included career goals like becoming a nurse, teacher, or social worker to more general desires like bettering their lives. Other results revealed some concerns about college success that included lack of motivation, poor writing skills, English language learning, time-management, and stress. What was missing from the student concerns was that most did not feel there would be any obstacles to completing the course or the work each week. Consequently, 70% of those surveyed did not foresee any obstacles to completion of the class. For those who foresaw some concerns, work, childcare, and travel topped the list. Results also showed that 63% of students enrolled in these courses already had some online learning experience.

By the end of the semester, students' outcomes and attitudes towards college tended to change for the better for those who were still enrolled in the online course. When the same questions were asked about confidence, preparedness, and motivation, the following outcomes emerged: 50% of the students who took the exit survey felt somewhat confident about being in college while the other 50% felt confident/highly confident in their role as college students. Some of the reasons students reported their improvement in confidence levels were the amount of writing they completed, positive feedback from instructor, feedback from

peers, feeling supported by instructor, and online learning tools used in the online class. Moreover, students' level of preparedness for college increased since the beginning of the semester. At the end of the semester, 46% of those surveyed felt somewhat prepared while almost 54% felt prepared/highly prepared. Students felt they were more prepared due to the writing practice throughout the semester, the reading required for the course, and the grammar lessons. Lastly, 90% felt motivated/highly motivated to continue pursuing their college degrees. They referred to career goals and improving family living conditions as motivations.

Overall students found the following components of the online class helpful: instructor access, individualized instruction, supplemental activities, multiple revisions with drafts, and faculty-created videos for online instruction. And although our online class design incorporates student engagement through use of tools like discussion board, journals, and instructor feedback, few students felt the online classes were community builders while some found the online writing lab stressful. Some also wanted more interaction with classmates and their instructor. Finally, even though they did not foresee any obstacles to course completion at the beginning of the semester, several mentioned work and childcare responsibilities, family illness, and mental health concerns as challenges to their final success.

Our survey results noted that our online ALP students reflected national statistics (Babb et al., 2022) when it came to barriers to success in online classes. The traditional roadblocks like lack of engagement, lack of motivation, and lack of self-discipline were apparent in our survey results as were some related to mental health concerns. Furthermore, those that were successful credited teacher feedback and engagement as part of their success, and although we were not able to capture feedback from students who had dropped the course, we felt we had secured an adequate amount of data.

Student Outcomes

Reviewing student pass rates for our Distance Learning sections of our co-requisite writing course (ALP), for the semester revealed that 76% of ALP students earned passing credit for the gateway course, ENGLISH1010A. This is a marked improvement from early post-COVID years. During the 2021 school year, for example, only 62% of ALP in-person and online students earned passing gateway credit. Undeniably, our pre-Covid pass rates for the ALP gateway course hovered at an 80-85% pass rate. However, those pass rates reflected only in-person sections of ALP, and we only offered a limited number of sections that were taught by highly trained faculty. We did not offer online sections before COVID, so we have no direct data to compare. Yet overall, based on current research in online college student

success, there is little definitive data regarding the advantages or disadvantages to the successful completion of online college courses (Lederman, 2021). In addition, the change in pass rates in our ALP gateway course has several factors to consider like student circumstances, the number of sections offered, the modality of instruction, and the degree of instructor training. In some part, the most recent pass rates analyzed can be attributed to teaching effectiveness. Students' reflections confessed such sentiments like "Great teacher with high energy and always brings it to class," "[The professor] always explained topics throughout. Helped us brainstorm for topics and ideas to write the papers," "The first and most helpful resource of this class was the support of [my professor's] insight and critiques. Even though this was a virtual class, I felt like I had the support of an in-person class," "[The professor] adeptly broke down the assignment into manageable steps, supplementing instructions with helpful videos," "My [p]rofessor... has been the biggest help in reinforcing what she wants to see from us for both classes in her videos and thoughtful feedback," and "The teacher...for those two classes has been nothing but helpful with her very informative videos and with her guidance and outlines."

We credit much of this upward trend seen in these studied sections of online ALP courses to the implementation of effective online teaching practices, focusing on increased student engagement and timely instructor feedback. We hope to see this trend continue by providing informal yet collaborative mentoring resources to support new and adjunct faculty teaching ALP.

Incorporating RSI in the DL ALP Classroom

On July 1, 2021, The U.S. Department of Education updated its policies requiring all distance and competency based educated online courses to incorporate Regular and Substantive Interaction (RSI) between course instructors and students. According to the Community College of Rhode Island's Online Learning and Technology webpage, "Regular" means that interactions occur on a predictable schedule. "Substantive" is about the nature of instructor-to-learner interactions. Such interactions should contribute to the learning experience" (CCRI Online Learning and Technology, n.d.). Consequently, colleges and universities not meeting the RSI regulations, otherwise known as correspondence courses, risk losing federal funding and accreditation status. The Empire State University Faculty Resources for Online Learning webpage states, "In short, regular and substantive interaction (RSI) is one of the key elements distinguishing distance education from correspondence education and thus one of the central determinates for students' ability to use Title IV funds" (Empire State University, n.d.).

Mentoring new and adjunct faculty teaching ALP asynchronously online for the first time involves ensuring that their instructional delivery meet

the RSI requirements as this is critical for student success in both corequisite online writing courses. In identifying the impact physical distance and time difference experienced in the asynchronous online course modality can have on student success, The CCRI Online Learning and Technology webpage further explains, "Incorporating RSI components into course design and course delivery can help online instructors close this gap. In this sense, RSI components focus on reducing distance in online education and creating more formative experiences for learners that are equivalent in quality and rigor to onsite programs" (CCRI Online Learning and Technology, n.d.).

To achieve these best practice objectives, there are various techniques ALP online instructors can implement into their course design. One approach to building a rich RSI learning environment is to create weekly overview videos explaining what it is being covered each week in ALP, why this is important in its relevance to the principles examined in ENGL 1010, and how it will support them as they complete their ENGL 1010 assignments. This information can also be posted at the top of each weekly module, along with due date information and submission instructions. Knowing clear and consistent communication is critical in providing high quality online instruction, ALP instructors can post weekly announcements with important course updates posted every Sunday evening while opening the next weekly module as well as every Friday afternoon to share important reminders before going into the weekend.

RSI might also be incorporated by using the discussion board regularly where the foundation of the lesson surrounds a principle studied in 1010. For example, if covering narrative writing in Composition I, ALP instructors can utilize anonymous samples from former 1010A student papers as the basis of the discussion. While the instructor facilitates the online discussion, ALP students can share their insights regarding where the sample writing meets the criteria of the rubric and where the writing would benefit from some additional development and revision. Other discussion board topics can include class community building ice breaker introductions, student success strategies and time management techniques, professional essays and published articles, and general metacognitive type questions reflecting on their learning. ALP students can, likewise, be encouraged to use the discussion board as a place to ask questions, raise concerns, or bring ideas, so it feels partially like an informal conversation and partially more structured and academic in nature.

Online ALP instructors can also assign homework practice activities where the students closely examine specific elements of strong writing, such as maintaining unity, transitioning, supporting with specific and adequate evidence, crafting the "just right in scope" thesis statement, and citing sources correctly into the paper. Again, anonymous former student papers might be used

to create these exercises and activities. This is also where instructors would provide ALP students with targeted feedback and individualized instruction, so students gain deeper understanding of these writing principles. Further, helping ALP students organize their ideas with their ENGL 1010 papers by providing them with scaffolding resources such as invention strategy packets, graphic organizer and outline templates, thesis statement submission forms, and self-reflection prompts, to then be submitted as required homework assignments ensures students receive personalized coaching throughout the writing process in crafting their ENGL 1010 essays. Instructors should also prioritize grading these student assignments in a timely manner and include the “How to Check Your Grades and Instructor Feedback” link from their institution’s website when initially assigning each activity, emphasizing the importance in reading the instructor’s feedback right away before beginning the actual draft.

Another way to help students strengthen their sentence skills while providing RSI is for the instructor to record brief weekly grammar support instructional videos and assign low-stakes quizzes to reinforce student understanding. ALP students might be given unlimited attempts for these grammar quizzes as they are intended to provide extra practice and simply deepen understanding.

One of the most valuable ways to provide high quality RSI in the online course modality is to explain to students early in the semester what student office hours are and why they are valuable to student success. In doing so, it is beneficial to regularly remind students that they are welcome and encouraged to visit their instructor during these posted virtual student office-hours. This can be done by sending weekly email and posting announcement reminders. Moreover, it is useful to communicate to the ALP students that this can be a time to ask questions, receive extra help, or to simply “drop-in” to say hello.

Similarly, while virtual student office hours need to be offered each week, ALP instructors can offer optional synchronous Collaborate (or Zoom) instructional sessions. These can be done anytime throughout the semester; however, it is useful to schedule these non-mandatory meetings during a time opposite the instructor’s student office hours, providing the opportunity to reach more students. These optional live class sessions can be a time to reinforce the course material, answer questions, offer support, as well as a time for students to collaborate with classmates. In doing so, ALP Instructors should communicate that these optional meetings will be recorded for students unable to attend.

Further, ALP instructors can create metacognitive type of questioning reflection assignments for ALP students throughout the semester. These questions can be used for discussion boards, journals, or brief reflective writing. This creates an opportunity for “Just in Time” teaching as the instructor can make adjustments as needed to meet the ALP students

where they are and provide them with whatever support necessary to help students reach the course outcomes. These include questions like:

- What was your biggest “take-away” from this week’s 1005 (ALP) sessions? Was there anything that stood out to be particularly helpful? If not, why do you think this was the case? Please thoroughly explain your responses and support your ideas with specific evidence.
- What was your “muddiest point” of this week’s English 1010/1005 (ALP) material? Where did you feel uncertain, confused, overwhelmed, or “stuck”? Did you eventually have a moment where the “knots” in your thinking became loose and untied? If not, why do you think this was the case? Please thoroughly explain your responses and support your ideas with specific evidence.
- Of all the sample narrative essays read in English 1010/1005 (ALP), which one did you enjoy reading the most? Why? Please thoroughly explain your responses and support your ideas with specific evidence.
- What was your best moment this week where you felt particularly capable or successful? Why was this such a memorable moment? Please thoroughly explain your responses and support your ideas with specific evidence.
- In what ways has this course helped you succeed in the ENGL 1010 Composition I course? How did the extra time provide you with additional support? What advice would you give to a student preparing to take this same course next semester? Why would this advice be helpful? Please thoroughly explain your responses and support your ideas with specific evidence

Conclusion

While student success is the fundamental component of the ALP corequisite model, ALP instructors are also encouraged to begin the semester with a clear overview of the various student support services available at their academic institution. When recording their syllabus review videos, instructors could emphasize that their students are not alone in their educational journey and that there are people throughout the college or university who care about their success. Services providing accommodations for students with documented disabilities, counseling for students experiencing mental health challenges, assistance for students facing food scarcity, guidance with academic advising, or support for military veterans are just a few of the many areas where students can find the help they need. While

describing the various support services, instructors can also include the link to each department, making these supports more accessible. As the demand for online learning continues so does the need for mentoring and the implementation of best practices, particularly for faculty teaching ALP online.

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About the Authors

Leslie Dolan, MA, Associate Professor of English at the Community College of Rhode Island, has been serving in her tenured position since the fall 2007 semester. Before that, Professor Dolan was an adjunct faculty member and a visiting lecturer from fall 2002 – spring 2007. Throughout her years at the college, Leslie Dolan has served on several committees within the department including the reading committee, the writing committee, and the ALP (Accelerated Learning Program) committee for the department's co-requisite composition course. Professor Dolan also served as the ALP committee's coordinator from the fall 2018-spring 2021. In addition to teaching writing, reading, and literature courses at CCRI, Dolan has completed several nationally recognized trainings and certifications including ACUE, Caring Campus, and OSCQR Level 1 for online teaching. Dolan has also presented at and published for several national organizations including CADE, The Lilly Conference, and UNM's Mentoring Institute.

Heidi Henry, MA, Associate Professor of English, began teaching at the Community College of Rhode Island in 2010 as an adjunct faculty member, and became a fulltime faculty member in 2013. While she has enjoyed teaching public speaking, developmental reading, and first year seminar courses, her primary focus is in teaching composition, developmental writing, and literature. In addition to participating in various English department literature, writing, and Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) committee initiatives, Henry has also presented several faculty professional development workshops. In Fall 2020, she was selected to train with the Institute of Evidence Based Change (IEBC) and serve as a CCRI Caring Campus workshop facilitator until Spring 2023. Her other nationally recognized trainings and certifications include Association of College and University Educators (ACUE), OSCQR Levels 1 and 2 Online Instruction Certification, and Student Veteran Green Zone Military Ally training.

Charles Kell, PhD, assistant professor Community College of Rhode Island, is the author of *Ishmael Mask* (Autumn House Press, 2023). His first collection, *Cage of Lit Glass* (Autumn House Press, 2019), was chosen by Kimiko Hahn for the 2018 Autumn House Press Poetry Prize. He is an assistant professor at the Community College of Rhode Island and editor of the *Ocean State Review*.