Increasing Student Retention: An Ethnographic Study of English 1010

Overview

This study seeks to increase student retention in English 1010 through an assessment of the 1010 student population. We believe a focus on English 1010, one of the largest front door courses at SLCC, is merited. As Vincent Tinto establishes in "Stages of Departure: Reflections on the longitudinal character of student leaving" "the forces that shape departure during the first year of college, especially during the first six weeks of the first semester, are qualitatively different from those that mold departure in the latter years of college" (439).[1] Our study investigates these unique forces which both contribute to potential student success in English 1010 as well as early departure. We are concerned with how our pedagogical practices intersect with students' lives. Ultimately, the study aims to provide information and resources to both faculty and students that will enhance the learning environment and facilitate greater student success.

Community Colleges

There is a groundswell of activity around student retention and engagement concerning community colleges. Several organizations including the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) have attempted to create an assessment model unique to the demands and context of a community college. From this work CCSSE has created five "benchmarks of educational practice" which are: active and collaborative learning, student effort, academic challenge, student-faculty interaction, and support for learners. From the CCSSE research efforts into these five benchmarks, they have issues a report on what they have learned. SLCC participated in the CCSSE in 2006 and 2008.

The "2007 CCSSE Executive Summary: Five Lessons Learned" indicates "Engagement doesn't happen by accident; it happens by design" (2).[2] The CCSSE finds, not surprisingly, that large percentages of community college students are balancing school, work, and family responsibilities. Because of their demanding lives in and out of school, many community college students tend to be less engaged in the academic culture; therefore, this is one of the lessons learned: "Community colleges . . . must be deliberate and aggressively create opportunities to involve students so that engagement becomes central to every student's experience"(2). As a front door course, English 1010 plays a significant role in establishing institutional connectivity for students.

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[1] Tinto, Vincent. "Stages of Student Departure: Reflections on Longitudinal Character of Student Leaving" *The Journal of Higher Education* Vol. 59, No. 4. (Jul.-Aug., 1988), pp 438-455.

[2] "Committing to Student Engagement: Reflections on CCSSE's First Five Years, 2007 Findings" (2007)

Front Door Courses

Continuing to explore these issues, CCSSEE has created SENSE[3], an initiative "sharply focused on entering students, firmly committed to systematically eliciting student voices in regard to their earliest collegiate experiences." SENSE attempts to use quantitative and qualitative data, including focus groups, to help understand how new students interact with colleges, professors, and their classes. Our study also uses a variety of qualitative and quantitative data. In addition our research takes up the challenges issued by SENSE. In the last section, "Key Challenges and Next Steps," the SENSE report specifically points to the importance of obtaining more data, specifically working to "know who leaves, when they leave, and why they leave" and to engage "faculty and staff in a discussion of those data." We do this through phone interviews with students who did not pass English 1010 and focus groups and surveys with instructors about retention. A key difference is that our study seeks to specifically understand retention within *one* front door course, English 1010, exploring how the nature of a writing course impacts student engagement and retention.

The Unique Case of Writing Courses

Richard Light's study, "Writing and Students' Engagement,"[4] surveyed 365 undergraduates about their time commitment, intellectual challenge, and personal engagement in all of their courses. While this study does not focus on community colleges, it does offer insight into student engagement. The results, somewhat surprisingly, found that the amount of writing correlated with higher student engagement; in fact, the correlation was stronger than any other characteristic in the course. One might assume, then, that a writing course would be an ideal place to engage students; of course this is often not the case. Why is this? And how might writing classes structure their work to take advantage of this correlation? These are key questions which will address in our results and conclusion section.

Project Description

The ultimate goal of this project is to increase the retention of students in our front door course, English 1010, but the path to such a goal is often complicated and seemingly circuitous. Still, by creating a better understanding of 1010 students, our findings can inform curricular design. The pedagogical practices of our course, which include the well-established practices of process writing—peer review, formative and summative feedback, and invention—and our outcome goals (see attachment A) are not under scrutiny; rather, we want to better shape the implementation of these practices in order to accommodate the realities of student needs. In the spring of 2007, the English 1010 committee undertook an ambitious assessment of the course which examined student writing from fifteen sections. Out of this assessment project emerged many curricular and pedagogical issues, including that of attrition and audience assessment. This project is an extension of the 2007 English 1010 assessment, with a specific focus on the audience assessment stage of instructional design. While these past assessments evaluated student

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[3] "Beginnings: A New Focus on Starting Right" (2007)

work at the end of the course, this assessment will examine the everyday lives and student practices at the beginning and middle the course.

Methodology

First, we created a survey with IR in order to collect numerical data about our English 1010 students. This data shaped the design of our qualitative assessment and our conclusions. Second, we used several ethnographic practices (e.g. surveys, interviews, focus groups) with students and instructors to collect qualitative data which attempted to emphasize the intersection between teacher practices and student needs.

An integral step of the instructional design process is audience assessment. Through this project, we seek a research based understanding of students working within the context of English 1010. The audience assessment will function as one of two bookends in the overall scheme of our assessment efforts in English 1010. Before we complete additional outcomes assessment, it is vital to have a full assessment of our audience. In this way we hope to place the same type of value on audience assessment that we have traditionally given to outcome assessment.

Results

Overview of the Data

General
- 1893 students were enrolled in English 1010 in spring 2008
- 39.1% of students received A's
- 22.1% of students received B's
- 10.8% of students received C's
- 3.5% of students received D's
- 16.1% of students received E's
- .3% of students received I's
- 7.8% of students withdrew
- 59% of withdraws took place in weeks 4-8 of the semester
- In other words 27.7% of students (approximately 525) did not successfully complete English 1010—and this doesn't include C- students since there is now way to separate those from the C category in the data

Student Survey[5] (271 respondents, 10 sections)
- 52% of students were first year students
- 17% of students have been at SLCC 5 or more semesters
- 60% of students graduated from high school in 2004 or earlier
- 18% of students graduated from high school in 2007
- 55% of students work 31 or more hours per week
- 29% of students work between 11 and 30 hours per week

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[5] See Appendix B

- 58.7% of students are part-time students
- 41.3% of students are full-time students
- 35% of students spent 3 or fewer hours per week doing homework for English 1010
- 52% of students spent between 4 and 6 hours per week doing homework
- 93% of students did NOT visit the Student Writing Center
- 83% of students felt they were prepared for English 1010, rating themselves a 6 or higher (1-10 scale)

Instructor Focus Group[6] and Email Survey[7] (4 in focus group, 16 email surveys)

- On average, instructors rated student preparedness a 5.6 (1-10 scale)
- Instructors report that their students generally come in expecting English 1010 to be about grammar rather than about rhetorical strategies, critical thinking, and composing processes.
- Instructors report that there is a significant difference in what constitutes success in high school English vs. what constitutes success in college English
- Instructors report that many students seem unprepared for the demands of college, particularly in terms time management
- Instructors report that students seem surprised by the amount of work required in English 1010
- Instructors report that students seem to drop primarily because of time management issues or because of falling behind in the workload and being unable to catch up
- Instructors report that there is a difference between the pedagogy of a writing class and that of other classes; this seems difficult for students to deal with in many cases

Student Focus Group[8] and Phone Interviews[9] (21 students total in 2 different focus groups, 5 phone interviews)

- Students report that time management is essential for success in college and in English 1010
- Students report that English 1010 is a time consuming class—more so than they originally expected it to be
- Students report that attending class every day is essential for success in English 1010
- Students report primary reasons for dropping English 1010 include overloaded schedules and falling behind in the course work
- Students report that it's important to feel connected to the class—to the teacher, the other students, and the topics they are writing about

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[6] See Appendix C
[7] See Appendix D
[8] See Appendix E
[9] See Appendix F

Coding and analyzing our data lead to three themes related to retention and engagement. Students and instructors alike viewed *expectations*, *time management*, and *making connections* as critical factors influencing a students' success or lack of success in English 1010.

Expectations

Our data demonstrate a clear disparity both between what students expect from the course and what instructors expect new students to know. The disjuncture in expectations seems to reside in three broad areas: the content of the course, the amount of time and effort required for the course, and the pedagogy of the course.

Course Content

When asked how their expectations differed from what they perceived students' expectations of the course to be, over 1/3 of instructors surveyed pointed first to students' assumptions about the content—that English 1010 will be a course about grammar. One instructor writes,

Some students expect that they are going to be learning grammar where many instructors believe that students should arrive at the English 1010 level with a certain level of grammar competence.

Similarly, a student in a focus group commented,

One thing I noticed is that you're expected to be at a certain level of ability as far as your grammar and your word usage and your vocabulary, and I think that a lot of people aren't. I mean I know that you take the CPT and everything but I think that a lot of people aren't as skilled at grammar as the professors expect you to be, myself included. I mean we didn't cover grammar at all.

Not only do many students seem surprised that the course is not about grammar, many also feel underprepared in this area.

While students come in to English 1010 thinking it is a course about grammar (or a course that will utilize the familiar five paragraph essay), instructors have a much broader vision for the course:

> *I expect students to learn about how to make an argument, how to appeal to an audience, etc…*

> *To think critically and move beyond agreeing or disagreeing with an issue and become informed and thoughtful questioners.*

> *To value their own voices and the work required to think, speak and be heard clearly.*

1010 teaches core foundational principles of writing, ones that are eventually needed for 2010 and all key aspects of professional and/or writing in general.

I see the course fitting into our overall college, GE, and English department objectives. They see this quite often as a requirement rather than a set of critical reading, thinking, and writing skill sets, and how these can equip them for our multimedia-rich society and the sophisticated moves to persuade us about the validity of certain messages.

I expect them to engage in dialogic manners with text, to think and write critically.

From the instructor point of view, English 1010 is a complex course dealing with rhetorical strategies, critical thinking, and composing processes. Students seem to be initially surprised by both the focus and the complexity of the course. The disjuncture between the ways in which students and instructors think about the course creates anxiety for both parties, ultimately leading to disappointment, miscommunication, and cognitive dissonance for students.

Time and Effort

One student, who withdrew from the class, attributed it to underestimating the course and the work load for that particular semester. Underestimating the amount and level of work expected in English 1010 was a common experience for students. During one of the student focus groups, participants were asked how they would describe English 1010 to incoming students. They responded:

They [instructors] expect you to work hard and turn in papers.

I would say how long has it been since you've been in school? Are you used to paying attention and doing homework and stuff? Because if you're not, if you're not planning on doing homework, don't plan on getting a good grade in this class.

If you don't do the homework, you're gonna die.

You need to come to this class.

Go to class, every single class. Don't miss.

You've got to be ready to write a lot of papers.

Be prepared for a lot of research, studying, a lot of reading, and as long as you do those things and ask questions when you actually need the help, then you'll be fine.

Interestingly, though the question asks students to describe the course itself, students answered the question primarily by giving advice to incoming students about how to succeed in the class by meeting instructors' expectations with a high level of effort and a strong commitment of time. For students, it would seem, part of defining a course is measuring the level and amount of work that is expected.

Instructors also emphasized students' misperceptions regarding the amount of time and effort required in English 1010. One instructor writes, "I think the term 'Intro' in the title of the course is interpreted by some students as 'easy' or as 'survey' (student perception). And yet we know that the concepts are not easy to newcomers of writing." Another instructor writes, "Some students expect the class to be easy and are not ready for the change from high school to college." Numerous instructors commented that they believe many students have not yet adjusted to the academic rigors and demands of college and that they seem surprised by the amount of reading and writing as well as by the amount of personal responsibility required to succeed in a college level course. While some of this "culture shock" is certainly a part of students' general experience as they transition into college, some of it can also be attributed to the unique pedagogy of the writing classroom.

Pedagogy

Many students commented on the differences they see between English 1010 and other college courses. One student states:

> *I would say something that I see a lot is you come to college and even if its not your first semester, a lot of your classes are lecture classes so there's not a ton of homework, then you get to this English 1010 class and all of a sudden you have a paper due and the students just get behind and it'll get to the point that they're so far behind where they're just like "all right, I'm out of here. There's no way I can pass the class."*

In English 1010, student texts (writing assignments at various stages of development) become the central texts of the course. Student preparation at each level of the writing process is a necessity for successful participation in the course. Students who fall behind in early stages of the writing activities, often find it difficult to catch up and begin feeling lost and overwhelmed.

One student who withdrew from the course spoke about how she had failed one of the major sequences of assignments, and subsequently dropped the class. An examination of this student's attendance record reveals that she missed class frequently and did not participate in the process assignments and in class activities used as steps in this writing assignment. The experience of this student is not isolated. Instructors report that many students exhibit the same pattern of being unprepared with process assignments, missing classes, falling behind in the work, and then disappearing. Anecdotally, instructors report that students seem to drop out of the course around the time the first major paper is due (around week 7). Statistically, during spring 2008, 59% of students who withdrew from the course withdrew in week 8--immediately following the due date of the first major assignment. Students, who, for whatever reason, did not buy in to the participatory nature of the course early on, seemed to discover with the first major paper that they were not going to be successful in the course without thorough participation.

Though the emphasis on process and participation in English 1010 may be unfamiliar, and may initially be a stumbling block for some students, students in the focus groups reported almost unanimously that the activities of invention writing, research, peer review, multiple drafts, instructor conferences, and revisions helped them to engage with the course, write "good" papers, and have a meaningful learning experience in English 1010. The key, then, is helping students to see the advantages of process work early in the semester before they become overwhelmed.

Time Management

Demanding Schedules
Community college students often face unique challenges in terms of the demands on their time. The *CCSSE 2007 SENSE Survey* reports the following statistics:
- 36% of students are part time
- 23% of students are of a non-traditional age
- 47% of students work more than 20 hours per week
- 25% of students have children living with them (4)

The survey goes on to state, "some students acknowledge that if they were to drop out, it would be because of lack of finances or having too many demands on their time….As one faculty member notes, 'Students have unrealistic expectations about what they can and can't do." Results from our surveys and focus groups report similar findings: 55% of our students work 31 or more hours per week and 29% of our students work between 11 and 30 hours per week. And of the twenty-one students who participated in our focus groups, all but one was working in addition to taking classes. Unfortunately some students don't accurately anticipate these tensions between work and school as one student who failed the course noted, "I was working 60 hours a week, that's what went wrong." Even students who passed English 1010, often mentioned their difficulties in negotiating work and school.

All students discussed the necessity of planning their time carefully and reported time management as a necessary skill for success in college. As one student stated, "I think it's [time management] the number one thing." Students reported on their various strategies for managing their time. Some students chose to work evenings and weekends so that they could take classes during the day. Other students chose to work during the day and take evening classes. Some students had schedules that involved two or three days of attending classes and focusing their time on school, and three or four days a week of working. Students noted the need of scheduling specific homework time. Students mentioned sacrificing family time, social activities, and sleep in their attempt to balance their work, school, and homework schedules. Certainly 1010 students could benefit from advising and classroom activities which would encourage them to strategize their time management early on or, ideally, before starting college.

Midstream Adjustments
Many students reported having made significant adjustments to their schedules *after* spending one or more semesters feeling too busy and overcommitted. One student said:
> *I started out working 5 day work weeks, my very first semester, and I was able to do a little homework, but I wasn't able to sit down and do concentrated*

homework, especially in writing. Writing needs well developed thoughts. No noise. No distractions. No anything....I decided, well, I have to keep my full time job because that's how I live—food, and tuition and everything else. So I actually had to cut back my class hours. I went from full time last semester to part time this semester. Cause I almost drove myself insane last semester.

Another student reports:
During my first semester I worked Monday – Friday 8-5 and that just wasn't working. I actually changed my schedule at work to work the 10-7 shift at night so I can go to school in the morning then reserve time for my family from when they get home to when they go to bed. Then I do homework after that.

Numerous students also pointed out that having flexible jobs and work schedules was helpful for them in negotiating the balance between work and school. Other strategies for time management included: carrying a laptop with them so they could do homework anywhere, blocking out planned homework time in their schedules, looking ahead in the syllabus in order to do readings and assignments ahead of time, and remembering to take some time for fun and relaxation. Trying to avoid drastic midstream adjustments, several instructors and students mentioned the need to plan carefully which classes to take concurrently with English 1010.

Student Schedules
Students and instructors alike made the point that planning your classes carefully can be a key ingredient to success in college and in English 1010. One instructor writes:

About two thirds of 1010 students in my classes have been first semester/first year. They are not only enrolled in Intro to Writing, but are experiencing the "Intro to College" scenario. I found that those who drop the course are most often the first semester/first year students not yet accustomed to the personal responsibility required of college courses. Some first semester students who dropped told me they had signed on for too many classes (some difficult) and all at once, just as they did in high school. Since English 1010 is more available each semester (their words), some dropped the first semester only to return for the second (spring semester) and with more bearings on college life.

The "college culture shock" experience seems common among students. Many first year or first semester students feel uncertain about how to plan their course schedules, how many courses to take, which courses to take at the same time—or more importantly which courses to avoid taking at the same time. Many also struggle with the balance between school, work, and other responsibilities and have a hard time finding a feasible schedule. Nearly every student in our focus groups reported making significant changes to their schedules after their initial college experience: changes in how many classes they took at once, changes in how many hours they worked each week, changes in when they worked, changes in when they took classes, and changes in what classes they took in combination with each other.

When asked to give advice to incoming English 1010 students about how to be successful in the course, several students spoke about planning course work schedules carefully when taking English 1010. One student said:

> *I thought for me my first semester it was really important not to take a bunch of like hard classes. Like put a fun class in . . . I'm taking a film class, and an English class, and a math class. So I thought it was pretty even.*

Another student responded:

> *If it's your first semester going in a brand new student I would pad your schedule as much as possible with courses that are less consequential so that you have more time to focus on the [English] 1010. Because I know if I didn't have two philosophy courses-despite the fact that they're my major their work loads are very light—if I didn't have those filling out my full time schedule, I'd be toast. So like if I was trying to take [English] 1010 concurrently with an entry level math class or a physics class I'd probably be treading air watching the ground coming up at me.*

These students who passed English 1010 had a clear sense of the difficulty of the course.

As we have mentioned a significant and reoccurring theme is that students tend to have unrealistic expectations regarding their time. As many instructors pointed out in our survey and focus groups, incoming students often don't realize how much commitment being a college student requires and how much time and effort English 1010, in particular, demands. Often, it seems that students go through a period in their first semester or first year where they over-schedule themselves, necessitating adjustments in either their work or school schedules or both.

Making Connections

In *Student Input Helps Community Colleges Improve Overall Experience*[10] author Arleen Arnsparger reports on focus groups and interviews conducted with students at the University of Texas in Austin through the Metlife Foundation Initiative on Student Success (a partner of CCSSEE). She writes,

> Data tell us a compelling story about community college student success. Studies of student attrition show that significant numbers of students leave college before completing their first term. In focus groups, we ask students whether they have ever considered dropping out. Not surprisingly, almost all tell us they have. 'So,' we ask, 'why are you still here?' More often than not, they answer the question with the name of an individual at the college—a member of the faculty, an advisor, another student, a staff member. We are learning about the power of relationships that cut across ages, gender, ethnicities, cultures and life experiences. (4)

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[10] Arnsparger, Arleen. "Student Input Helps Community Colleges Improve Overall Experience". Diverse: Issues in Higher Education. Vol. 25 Issue 4, p. 41.

While our research did not directly ask students about their relationships and connections to Salt Lake Community College, issues of connectivity (or lack thereof) emerged throughout the data

Connecting to the Instructor

One instructor in our focus group noted his continual surprise that students do not take advantage of the additional support available to them: "Students don't show up to office hours. Students who are struggling, had they met with the instructor once, the problem could have been handled and resolved. The better students are the ones who take advantage of office hours, the Writing Center, etc." Another instructor writes, responding to our email survey regarding student attrition, "I think many of them need a basic college skills class, which would include study skills, but also time management, *how to interact with professors*, how to read the syllabus, how to read a text book, etc." (italics mine). As instructors, it can be easy to presume that students will automatically know they can and should seek contact with their instructors outside of class time. Perhaps we as instructors should instead presume the opposite: that students don't come with this facet of academic literacy and need explicit invitations for engagement beyond the classroom.

In our own experience with students, we find similar trends. Students rarely come to office hours or even email us with questions or with drafts to seek feedback despite encouragement to do so in the syllabus. In a discussion with an in-class peer review group in the middle of the semester, a student shared with one of the researchers and her classmates that it would have never occurred to her to come to the instructor's office or to the Writing Center for help on her paper had the instructor not specifically invited her. She reported that the 20 minute writing conference was the most useful thing she had done in her writing process. Similarly, students who encounter personal problems during the semester (family, health, or work issues) that interfere with schoolwork will disappear from the classroom and not contact the instructor until it is too late to do anything about passing the course.

On the other hand, students who do stay connected, emailing, calling, or coming to office hours as they encounter personal problems are more likely to find success in the course. In response to an email survey question regarding reasons for student attrition, one instructor writes, "I can tell you that I have some anecdotal experiences with students that really struggle but that I am able to actually retain them. If I can find a way to bond the students to the class on an emotional level, they will stay. When students identify with the class as a place that offers them an academic skill, but also offers some other more kinesthetic response (e.g. their "feelings" get involved) they stay engaged despite great obstacles." In response to the same question, another instructor writes, "It makes a BIG difference if you get to know your students and if they feel that you care about them." Whether students are in a crisis situation or simply seeking help on the coursework, they benefit from conversations with the instructor. Unfortunately, not many students take advantage of this opportunity. As one instructor in the focus group laments, "I wish I could figure out a way to motivate students to take advantage of all the tools that are available to them for help."

Using Writing to Connect
A writing course offers students unique opportunities to connect with one another, with their instructor, with others at the college, and with the curriculum. Writing is not a solitary act; it is a social act. The writing classroom offers students multiple opportunities to connect with others in the class through peer review and other shared aspects of the writing process, such as discussing research and invention work. Ironically, the very pedagogical practices that surprise students and create cognitive dissonance for them (their papers becoming central texts of the course, requiring regular process participation) can become the very practices that help them connect and engage more fully with the course.

For example, students in the focus groups spoke of the success they found in both peer reviews and individual writing conferences with instructors. One student reported, "I thought the peer review thing was probably the most helpful thing in the class as far as tools to get your assignment done." Another student took peer review even further than in class activities and spoke of the success of that experience, "Me and another student in class had a lot of that going on. We got each others' email address early on and were exchanging back and forth just saying what can I improve on and that helped a lot. That was probably the best thing for me." Speaking of instructor writing conferences, another student said, "Our teacher did the whole revision where she would meet with us where we would have a paper written and she would look it over and give us her feedback and let us revise it before we turned it in for a final, and that really helped a lot." Though students may initially feel nervous or resistant about the idea of sharing and talking about their writing with peers and the instructor, in the end, many find it to be extremely helpful. Not only do these pedagogical practices assist students in their writing processes, they also provide opportunities for meaningful connections with others.

A specific example from our student focus groups illustrates the potential for the writing process to create meaningful connections with other students:

> *Something that I found really challenging was having to be assertive with my opinion with a group of people I don't know. Having to have an opinion and go with it and not be afraid to offend somebody or disagree with somebody or argue with somebody you just have to keep in mind that the argument is constructive and keep your mind open to their argument because you might learn something too. . . That was a big thing for me to have to confront people I don't know.*

In this case writing pedagogy encouraged this student to confront issues beyond the basic skills of writing. The writing process has encouraged him to more fully express his own subjectivity by forcing him to articulate a point of view in a social arena of ideas and viewpoints. Still other students may, as this one did, not see the benefit of such a process: "I don't know if it'll make me sound mean or whatever but I didn't want to hear what other people thought about it. Ok that sounds way more mean than I meant it to be. Like I really only cared about just writing a good paper." While these kinds of negative feelings may contribute to negative feelings about the course, we would assert they are a necessary part of the irony addressed earlier—the only way to create cognitive dissonance is to allow for some students some of the time to feel frustrated and even angry.

Of course as instructors we can't completely control how students respond but we can better prepare students for this dissonance. And this preparation may make the difference between attrition and success for many students.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As we have discussed, one of the most striking contrasts was between instructors' unmet expectations concerning student preparation and student overconfidence in their abilities. We need to work to complicate and dispel these inaccurate assumptions on both fronts in order to decrease the gap between the conflicting views of students and instructors. As instructors we can't keep flipping the same broken switch expecting a different result—"certainly this batch of students will be much more prepared than the last." Instead we must better understand our students and the expectations they bring to the table.

The profoundness of this discrepancy is explicitly illustrated in the following chart. When asked "On a scale of 1-10, how prepared did you feel you (or your students) were for English 1010?" The responses were as follows:
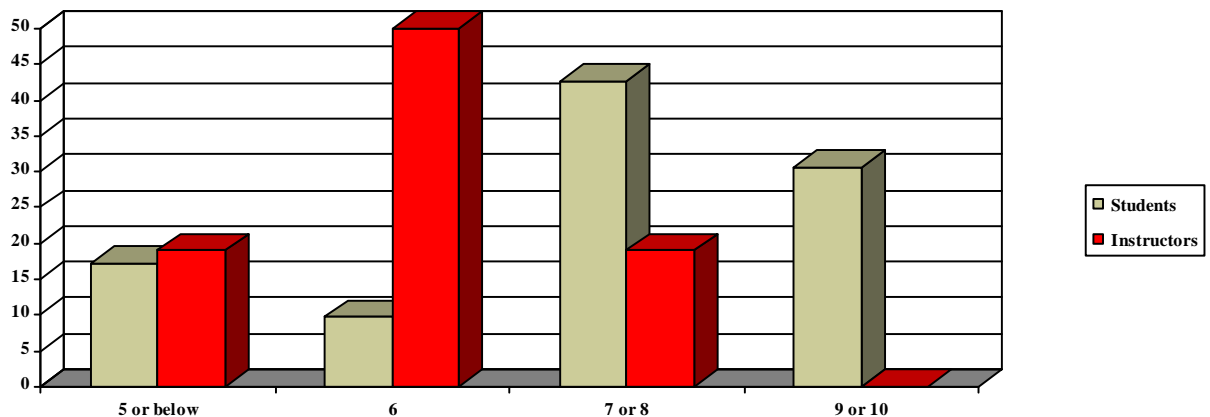
Viewing this chart we can see the inevitable collision which will occur in the first few weeks of English 1010 where many students drop the course or get so far behind they will never catch up. From our data we conclude that many first year composition students struggle with preparedness on two fronts: understanding what it takes to be a successful college student and specific preparation regarding the content and pedagogy of English 1010. As we have discussed above under each specific theme, these issues can be addressed in explicit ways with students, which in turn, may foster a smoother acclamation to college life and to English 1010.

We might also, painting more broadly, address this discrepancy by imagining a broader context—assessing students is not just about demonstrating whether a student meets an objective. Nancy Sommers, in her groundbreaking longitudinal work with undergraduate writers, insists that "to reduce four years of college to a series of outcomes…is to find ourselves, in the current culture of assessment, to be asked to measure something that we do not know how to interpret. We might be able to count the grammatical and stylistic errors students make when they arrange their alphabets, but we

have not determined how to measure the unpredictable and uneven path of writing development" (155)[11]. Our study has been an attempt to more fully explain the "unpredictable and uneven path of writing development" by looking at the intersection between English 1010 practices and student lives. By facing the complexity of student retention and development, we can begin to recognize, and hopefully engage, a more realistic assessment of our audience. We can hopefully move from the "I," the teacher, to the "you," the reader, the students who read our syllabi, listen to our lectures, and read our comments on their papers.

And in turn we might then complicate our very notion of preparedness as our colleague, Jennifer Ritter, explained in an email after we did a presentation on our study:

> *I believe that we should replicate this advice and work towards teaching our students that "common sense" academic literacy - not assume that they should have it when they arrive in the classroom - this complicates the assumption of "being prepared." That is, are they "prepared" because they come from homes and academic situations that supported academic literacy - OR - are they underprepared because this is not second nature to them. In light of this, I see my students as prepared because many have experience with personal and expository writing - and they are ready for the next step which is academic writing. This, in essence, puts attention to the Introduction in the course title.*

By taking Ritter's advice, we might more effectively take advantage of what students bring to class, while facing head on the academic literacy knowledge they still need. Instead of bemoaning the lack of preparedness, we might develop a more in-depth scaffolding to support the skills we wish students to master.

Without interrogating these assumptions it is and will be increasingly difficult for us, to use a phrase from Sommers and Saltz, to invite students into their education through writing (qtd in Klausmen 245)[12]. By doing so, as Klausmen asserts, we can construct a course which is a "gate-opener rather than a gate-keeper" (245). And this is at the heart of what community colleges should be.

Dissemination

Action Items
1. Promote the Writing Center as a place where students can receive additional writing support.
2. Address the difference in writing pedagogy explicitly with students at the beginning of the class. Help them understand what to expect.
3. Make the [Mythbusters](#) student advisory document widely available to students, instructors, and advisors.
4. Create a dialog among English department faculty regarding our student "audience" in English 1010 and best practices for the writing classroom.
    a. Be more explicit about what is required

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[11] Sommers, Nancy. "The Call of Research: A Longitudinal View of Writing Development." College Composition and Communication 60 (2008): 155.
[12] Klausman, Jeffrey. "Mapping the Terrain: The Two-Year College Writing Program Administrator" TETYC 35 (2008): 245

    b. Listen and give credence to student voices as they reflect on their writing and the course

    c. Grant more class time to the actual writing process (brainstorming, topic selection, scaffolding of rhetorical analysis)

    d. Admit to the potential dissonance that students might experience in English 1010

    e. Create time in the schedule to conference with students one on one about their writing

What have we done with this study?

On the national level, we have presented this study to other English teachers at the TYCA West Regional Conference in Arizona on October 10, 2008 and at the NCTE National Conference in San Antonio, Texas on November 21, 2008. At the state level, we presented our research at the BOR 2009 State Retention Conference on March 6, 2009. At the school level, we presented our findings to the Student Success and Access Committee on October 21, 2008. At that time we also made our Mythbusters student advisory document available to academic advisors. On a departmental level, we presented our study to the full time faculty and in English department meeting on October 17, 2008 and to the part time faculty at a training forum on January 10, 2009. In addition we created a podcast for students discussing English 1010 and have made our Mythbusters student advisory document available to all instructors, to the Student Writing Center, and at the Career and Majors Fair.

Appendix A

<u>English Department Outcome Goals for 1010—By the end of the semester students should be able to put into practice the following:</u>

#1 **Rhetorical Strategies**, including adapting to differences in purpose, audience and genre

#2 **Critical Thinking Processes**, including summary, analysis, synthesis, and argumentation

#3 **Composing Processes** such as invention, drafting, revision, editing, peer feedback, and self-assessment of your own writing

#4 **Conventions of writing,** including correctly citing multiple texts and incorporating them into writing, crafting effective sentences, and attending carefully to overall structure.

Appendix B

English 1010 Success Study

This study will examine the factors that lead to success in ENG 1010. This will help the department to strengthen student advising and supplemental services to enhance student success. Please know that no personally identifiable information from this study will be shared with your instructor or the English Department.

1. **This is my _____ semester at SLCC.**
   - 1st ☐
   - 2nd ☐
   - 3rd ☐
   - 4th ☐
   - 5 or more ☐

2. **What year did you graduate from high school?**
   - 2007 ☐
   - 2006 ☐
   - 2005 ☐
   - 2004 ☐
   - 2003 or before ☐

3. **How many credit hours are you taking this semester?**
   - 3-7 ☐
   - 8-11 ☐
   - 12-15 ☐
   - 16-18 ☐
   - 19 or more ☐

4. **How many hours a week do you work outside of school?**
   - NONE ☐
   - 1-10 ☐
   - 11-20 ☐
   - 21-30 ☐
   - 31-40 ☐
   - More than 40 ☐

5. **On average, how many hours a week did you spend doing homework for English 1010?**
   - Less than 3 ☐
   - 4-6 ☐
   - 7-9 ☐
   - 10-12 ☐
   - More than 12 ☐

6. **On average, how many hours a week did you spend doing homework for all classes?**
   - 1-5 ☐
   - 6-10 ☐
   - 11-15 ☐
   - 16-20 ☐
   - More than 20 ☐

7. **On a scale of 1-10 (1 = Not Prepared and 10 = Prepared) how prepared did you feel you were for English 1010? Check One**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

8. **Have you taken English 1010 before and not passed?**
   - Yes .... ☐   No ...... ☐

9. **Have you taken Writing 990 before?**
   - Yes .... ☐   No ...... ☐

10. **Did you visit the Student Writing Center to get help with an English 1010 assignment?**
    - Yes .... ☐   No ...... ☐

The SLCC Institutional Research office would like to conduct further research after the semester is over. To do this we would like to match your student information to this survey. Please be assured that your information will be considered confidential and will only be reported as an aggregate without any identifiable information. To do this we ask you to please supply your S# from SLCC.

S# _____

Appendix C
English 1010 Retention Study
Instructor Focus Group Questions

1. Including Spring 08, how many semesters have you taught for SLCC?
2. At which campus(es) are you teaching English 1010 Spring 08?
3. At which campus(es) have you taught English 1010 previously?
4. On average, how many students do you have in a section of English 1010 in the beginning of the semester (including adds)?
5. On average, how many students do you have in a section of English 1010 at the end of the semester? (Students who are attending class, turning in work, and will likely pass the class)
6. At what point(s) in the semester do students seem to stop attending? (In other words, when does attrition tend to occur.
7. From your perspective, what do you think are the primary reasons for student attrition?

8a. How prepared do you feel your students are for English 1010?
8b. In what areas do your students seem to be least prepared for English 1010?

9. In what areas do your students seem to struggle most with English 1010?
10. In what areas do your students seem to do well in English 1010?
11. How do your expectations as an instructor differ from what you perceive your students expect of the course?
12. How do you support students in their writing process. (Peer review, invention, revision, drafting, formative feedback)
13. Do you explicitly address the difference in writing pedagogy compared to what students are used to experiencing in other classes?
14. What do you do to foster peer review in your class? What works well for you? What do you struggle with? What do your students struggle with?
15. What strategies (best practices) do you employ in your classroom to help students achieve success in the course?
16. How could the course leaders and the department better support your work with students in the classroom?

Appendix D

Instructor Email Survey

1. On a scale of 1-10, how prepared to you feel your students are for English 1010?
 (1 being not prepared, 10 being fully prepared)

2. How do your expectations as an instructor differ from what you perceive your students expect of the course?

3. From your perspective, what do you think are the primary reasons for student attrition in English 1010?

Appendix E

English 1010
Student Focus Group Questions

1. State your major, how many semesters you've been at SLCC, and how many credit hours you are taking this semester.
2. Describe your initial experience with attending college. What was your first semester like? What was difficult? What helped you deal with the difficulties? What additional supports (classroom or institution level) would you have found helpful?
3. Describe your overall schedule this semester. When are you in class? When do you do homework? How much time each week do you give to homework? When do you work? When do you have social time with friends/family? Do you have other responsibilities besides work and school? How do you balance your time?
4. Was there ever a point at which you adjusted your time management to work less, or take fewer credit hours, or spend less time with friends/family? When did that occur? Describe your decision making process.
5. What advice would you offer to incoming freshman about how to be successful in college?
6. If you were asked by an incoming English 1010 student to describe English 1010, what would you say?
7. Describe how your English 1010 course supported your writing process. (Peer review, invention, revision, drafting, formative feedback)
8. If you were asked by an incoming English 1010 student to offer advice for how to be successful in English 1010, what would you say?
9. What did you find most challenging (what did you struggle with) in English 1010? What strategies did you use to deal with these challenges?
10. What recommendations would you make to instructors of English 1010 about how to help students succeed in the course? (What can teachers do to increase student success in this course?)

Appendix F

English 1010 Retention Study
Phone Interview Questions

- I'm _____ a professor in the English dept
- We are doing a study on student success in English 1010
- My records indicate that you were in English 1010 during the spring but did not pass
- Do you have time to answer a few questions which will help us understand your experience better and hopefully improve our program?
- Your answers will be kept confidential and will not be connected to your name.

Name:
Age:
Race:
Gender:
First language:

1. Was Spring 2008 your first semester at SLCC? (If not, how many other semesters have you attended?)
2. Describe your experience this semester. (Both generally and in English 1010)
3. How many credit hours did you take Spring 2008?
4. How many hours did you work outside of school?
5. What other commitments do you have besides work and school?
6. What difficulties did you encounter during the semester that led to your not being able to complete English 1010?
7. Do you plan on returning to SLCC in a future semester? Why or why not?
8. If you are planning on returning, how could the college better support your success?
9. If you were to take English 1010 again, what would help you to finish the course?
10. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about that might help our study?
11. What is your major?

Thanks. If you have any questions about the study or our use of your answers, I'm _____ and I'm in the English dept, feel free to contact me anytime.