

ENGH 0890 and 0990: Classes in the New Liberal Arts Building

If the classrooms in the new school building have 30 desks for students in a traditional setting (desks in rows), that may be perfect for most classes in the School of General Academics (now the LEC): classes taught by the Mathematics Department and by the College Success and Academic Literacy Department. Also, 30 desks is perfect for how the Basic Composition Department (formerly the English/ESL Department), plans to teach ENGH 0990 and add to UVSC's progressive history.

Why 21 students in ENGH 0990? To improve instruction and learning.

Our Department, by improving placement, plans to increase our ENGH 0990 classes and decrease our ENGH 0890 classes so that this ratio may exist in the fall of 2003: over 70% of ENGH 0990 classes and less than 30% of ENGH 0890 classes. (The ratio is now about 60% ENGH 0990, 40% ENGH 0890.) Also, we plan to change our mode of instruction from a lecture style to collaborative learning style, next fall. A collaborative style is the most effective pedagogy for teaching writing.

After examining approximately 2,000 empirical research reports (p. xviii), George Hillock concludes that the *least* effective pedagogy for student writers is defined by a lecture style and a traditional classroom setting, i.e., desks in rows (1986, pp. 246-247). The most effective pedagogy is defined by high levels of student interaction and student writers working in groups. This collaborative pedagogy was over four times more effective than [the] traditional presentational mode, that he defines as a lecture style, regarding pre-to-post measures (Hillock, 1986, p. 247). As if by coincidence, collaboration is also alluded to in the Strategic Plan 2001 (p. 6):

We will encourage learning environments that support frequent student-faculty educational interaction as well as collaboration among students.

If 30 student writers sit in rows, they may not have room to maneuver their desks into circular groups. But, if 9 seats are vacant, the remaining 21 students may arrange their desks into groups.

Having 21 basic or remedial writers in a class, in any case, is contrary to the result of an intensive four-year project involving thousands of educators, researchers, parents, policymakers, and others across the country (IRA/NCTE (International Reading Association and National Council of English) Joint Task Force on Assessment, 1994). To be precise, according to Standards for Assessment in Reading and Writing (IRA/NCTE Joint Task Force on Assessment, 1994) and according to More than a Number: Why Class Size Matters, the following statement is true: Remedial or developmental sections should be limited to a maximum of 15 students (NCTE, 2002, p. 7).

Why 21 students in ENGH 0990? To improve retention.

In the fall of 2003, not only will our Department focus on collaborative learning in ENGH 0890 and 0990, but also on helping our students to adjust to college by studying educational issues in those courses. The students' studies will further the new school's mission of having a first-year experience program. Over 75 empirical studies into such programs affirm that the following events improve retention:

- \$ Positive peer support.
- \$ Positive teacher-student relations.
- \$ Improved writing skills.

Having 21 students in ENGH 0990 facilitates these events occurring within that course. Empirical studies that directly relate these events with retention are available from the Department's Dr. Richard Matzen. The studies range from involving 2,685 students (Terenzini et al., 1996) to 132 students (Terenzini et al., 1994), range from community college settings (e.g., Billson and Terry, 1982) to university settings (e.g., Pratt and Skaggs, 1989), and range from the earliest to the latest landmark research by Vincent Tinto (1975, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1990, 1993, 1994, 1999). Furthermore, regarding the importance of ENGH 0990, written assignments unlike math assignments will be required in most UVSC courses and are integral to student success as well as retention: *We will ensure that writing and research are integral components within the curriculum.* (UVSC Strategic Plan 2001, p. 6)

In other words, our teaching students how to write and how to adjust to college is supported by UVSC Strategic Plan 2001: *We will provide comprehensive curriculum that prepares students to succeed in collegiate level academic courses and programs.... We will provide support programs for at-risk student populations* (p. 7). Moreover, Matzen (2001) has completed and published field research into two first-year-experience programs, both similar to ours, that have **retained**

49% of their freshman cohort into their junior year. We are trying to chart this direction for the remedial students in the School of General Academics. Currently, UVSC only **retains 48% a freshmen class when their sophomore year begins** (Hoyt, 2002).

According to figures from UVSC's Institutional Research, for three years, only 12% of our students have matriculated from ENGH 0890 into ENGH 0990 and ENGL 1010 during consecutive semesters. In contrast, about 44% of our students matriculate from ENGH 0990 into ENGL 1010 in consecutive semesters. Although the ENGH 0990--ENGL 1010 link may be identified as **Astrong** in our program, that link should be strengthened. (Also, according to figures from Institutional Research, for three years as the average number of students in ENGH 0990 classes has increased, the number of the same students returning to campus the next semester has decreased!?) So, another reason to improve the ENGH 0990 experience, via having 21 students in a class, is to keep more students on campus and paying to attending other courses.

Why 17 students in ENGH 0890? To teach them to write and to increase their staying on campus.

Our Department has decided that, through an improved placement system, we may place the weakest remedial students into fewer sections of ENGH 0890 beginning in the fall of 2003. As explained previously, by establishing a positive peer support system in the classroom but that extends outside of the classroom, and by establishing positive teacher-student relations that affect a student's willingness to stay on campus, we plan to further the mission that is described in the Strategic Plan 2001:

\$ *AWe will continue to improve orientation, advising and course placement...@*(p. 6)

\$ *AWe will respond to the needs of learners....@*(p. 6)

\$ *AWe will maintain the commitment to small class sizes for most classes.@*(p. 6)

Spring of 2003: Why and why not a pilot study.

For the spring of 2003, Chair Williams has set the enrollment limits for ENGH 0990 to 17 and for ENGH 0890 to 21. Why? They have taken to heart the following statement in the Strategic Plan 2001: *AWe will encourage research and scholarship@* (p. 7). Furthermore, Chair Williams understands the nature of a pilot study. A pilot study should *not* create meaningless research or be designed to research issues that have been settled within a field of study: (1) in the field of composition, it is known that peer editing, collaborative learning, one-on-one relations, etc. benefit students in composition courses and (2) in the field of education, it is known that first-year experience programs create retention for at-risk and remedial students.

Rather, a pilot study may explore how to implement policy, for instance. In particular, during the spring of 2003, the Basic Composition Department is using a pilot study for two purposes:

\$ To study changes in the placement system.

\$ To study changes in its curriculum.

Regarding the placement system, this spring, we plan to supplement the current placement system (i.e., the DRP and Writing Compass tests) with the holistic scoring of a timed-essay, completed by a scientifically representative sampling of our entire ENGH 0890 and 0990 populace. Hence, on the second day of classes, we will ask four ENGH 0890 students to enroll in the ENGH 0990 course offered at the same time. This will be done for all ENGH 0890 sections. The result will be that 17 students will be in all ENGH 0890 and 21 students will be in some ENGH 0990.

Regarding the curriculum, many ENGH 0990 sections will be supporting the following statement in the Strategic Plan 2001: *AWe will support courses which combine on-line and in-class instruction@*(p. 7). That is, instead of meeting 5 hours in the classroom each week, many sections of ENGH 0990 will only meet for three hours in the classroom. The remaining two credit hours will be completed by online instruction and/or teacher-student conferences. In turn, we are creating more classroom space for more sections of ENGH 0990 in the fall of 2003.

We think that these changes are appropriate to pilot in the spring semester when traditionally we have fewer ENGH 0890 and 0990 classes and when traditionally, fewer students are enrolled in each ENGH 0890 and 0990 class according to figures from Institutional Research.