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PRELIMINARY REPORT

“GATEWAY ACADEMIC PROGRAM”[©]

Reading and English

SUMMER 2008

By

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Introduction

This report describes the activities and results of the Summer 2008 “Gateway Academic Program” in reading and English fundamentals, a pilot program that was carried out by a team of faculty members of the University of the District of Columbia (UDC), Washington, D.C. The Title III Office of the University of the District of Columbia provided partial funding for the program. The program served 11 recent high school graduates of the D.C. Public Schools. These students had been admitted to the university as freshmen for the Fall Semester 2008. All 11 students were slated to take the university’s remedial courses in reading and English based on the national placement test of the College Board, the *Accuplacer*. After completing the program, eight of these students enrolled at the university during the Fall Semester 2008.

The report is organized to present the most important information first. The program results for the 11 students are presented first. These results are followed by the description of the program’s main features, the selection and characteristics of the participating students, and the conclusions we have drawn from these results. An addendum also is provided.

Statement of the Problem

The problem for this pilot study was to ascertain if a short, intensive eight-week intervention project in the basic comprehension skills of reading, English grammar, and paragraph writing would produce a recognizable improvement in the performance of entering UDC freshmen students as measured by the *Accuplacer* placement test and the program tests and examinations in the two below-college level remedial courses: Reading Improvement 014 and English Fundamentals 015.

Program Results for Summer 2008

The results of the “Gateway Academic Program” (GAP) in reading and English for the summer 2008 session are presented under four headings: general results in terms of students’ placement; the *Accuplacer* results; program tests and exams, and some final observations. Multiple measurement instruments were used in determining the placement of students at the

course levels recommended. These various measurement instruments were considered more accurate in the placement of students than a single instrument would have been.

General Results in Terms of Placement

Based on the placement test used by UDC, the *Accuplacer*, and the program tests and exams, the general results are:

- Four of the 11 (36%) students tested out of both remedial courses, Reading Improvement 014 and English Fundamentals 015, required by UDC, thereby saving a full year of remedial courses that do not count toward graduation.
- Two others (18%) were able to test out of the reading improvement course, thereby saving a semester of remedial instruction.
- The remaining five students showed increased readiness for the remedial courses and were advised to enroll in them.

The Accuplacer Results

The post-test with the *Accuplacer* took place on August 8, 2008. The results for the *Accuplacer* are, as follows:

- On the pre-test for 014, Reading Improvement, the mean raw score for the group (N=11) was 39.58, with the passing score for exemption set by the university's English department on the *Accuplacer*, being 78 (50th percentile). The standard deviation was 14.24 suggesting a fairly non-homogeneous group to start with.
- On the post-test, the raw score mean on the *Accuplacer* increased to 58.38 showing an improvement of 47.50 percent, meaning that the entire group had gained. The s.d. was 16.32 suggesting that the instruction may have profited some of the students a little more than others.
- Turning to the results for 015, English Fundamentals, the raw score pre-test mean for the group on the *Accuplacer* (N=11) was 56.5 with an s.d. of 14.60. The passing score established for English Fundamentals by the university's English department was a raw score 86 (50th percentile).
- On the post-test, the raw score mean increased to 64.16 on *the Accuplacer*, showing a general improvement of 13.64% for the entire group. The s.d. was 13.73 suggesting that the instruction had profited the students about equally.
- Improvement in reading ranged from a low of 28% to a high of 105%, whereas the improvement in English Fundamentals ranged from a low of 2% to a high of 60%.

Results for Program Tests and Exams

The GAP program in reading and English used various tests and specially developed examinations at various points in the program to measure students' progress for placement purposes and to establish benchmarks for the students' progress. During the program, students took a total of seven in-class tests (at least one every Friday), two final exams, and other reading and English assignments. In addition, the students independently completed a total of at least 63 classroom assignments involving English grammar, writing and reading comprehension, reading assignments of 21 newspaper articles (ranging from 1-3 pages in length). Vocabulary, spelling review, and syllabification of words were carried out every day.

The weekly examinations showed a fluctuating pattern: the averages on the simulated tests ranged from a low of 56% correct to a high of 69.4%. Both reading and English scores were combined for an overall percent of items correct, and the lengths of the tests varied.

Some Additional Results

In addition to the reading and English results mentioned earlier, there were several others worth mentioning.

- The number of students enrolled in the program on the first day of the program was 11; the number who completed the program was also 11. Thus the retention rate was 100%.
- Ten of the 11 students are enrolled as freshmen; eight are at UDC, and the other two are at another local university.
- For students from low-income backgrounds, the payment of a stipend to offset the financial losses they would experience from not working fulltime during the summer was a very important incentive to enroll and continue in the program.
- Most of the students entered the program with the attitude of wanting to be “entertained.” They simply weren’t used to any type of problem solving, such as obtaining the meaning of unknown words without a dictionary, responding to questions about the intent or meaning of a passage as a whole, determining the implied meanings embedded in a passage. Their favorite statement was a quick and defensive, “I don’t know.” However, by the end of program, some of the students really had become “college ready” in problem solving and in their self-confidence to succeed in college-level reading and English tasks.
- They also demonstrated increased attention spans, improved writing and spelling abilities and note-taking skills.

Participating Students

Applications for the UDC summer 2008 program, named the “Gateway Academic Program,” in reading and English were mailed to approximately 460 students who had been admitted to the university as freshmen students for the Fall Semester 2008. The initial student sample (N = 460) to receive applications was selected from a list of approximately 1100 students provided by the admissions office. The selection approach used was systematic random sampling, in which the first case of the 1100 was randomly selected. At this point, every student had an equal chance of being selected. After the initial selection was made, every fourth student from the list was sent the letter in the first mail-out. In the second mail-out, every other student from the remainder of the list was sent the application, again with the first student being selected at random.

Thirty-one students applied for the program either through email or by fax. The numbers here seem low, but this program was competing against the students’ need to work fulltime to earn money and/or the belief they didn’t need a program of this nature because of their high school grades. Of this group, 21 students took the university’s placement test, administered by the university’s Office of Student Affairs. All of them were interviewed. The 17 students finally selected were the “most academically challenged,” meaning that all them would have to enroll in the remedial courses, Reading Improvement 014 and English Fundamentals 015. (Also, all of these students were slated for both of UDC’s remedial math courses: Basic Math 005 and Introductory Algebra 015.) Any student who performed well on the placement test in the areas of reading and English was not considered.

Almost all of the interviewees had received very good high school grades in their various subjects. So when the results from the pre-test *Accuplacer* Reading and English tests were shared with the students, they constituted a real blow. These interviews with the students not only revealed that they had high expectations for themselves, but they also showed that they were far removed from the realities of college coursework. Subsequent work with the students revealed that they did very little reading outside of that assigned; self-initiated reading for them was not a leisure-time activity.

Only 11 students showed up on the first day of the program, and all of them completed the program.

Program Description

The program carried a stipend of \$1,200 for each student as an offset for not being able to work full-time during the summer. Students were also provided money or metro fare cards for travel. In addition, students received awards for regular attendance.

The program session was scheduled from 10:00 AM to 2:00 PM for four hours per day, five days a week for eight weeks (June 16 – August 8, 2008). The last hour of each section was devoted to “homework,” and no lunch was provided.

Since the reading process spreads across and is required in all disciplines, materials used included paragraphs and passages from college textbooks in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities, newspaper columns and editorials, and excerpts from general-interest fiction and non-fiction. In like fashion, most of the basic reading comprehension tasks also cut across all the disciplines. Hence, the main emphasis was on the tasks of determining for a given paragraph or passage: the stated or implied main idea versus its supporting details, fact versus opinion, author intent or purpose, organizational pattern (e.g., cause and effect, comparison-contrast, definition, chronological order, process, summary), and connotative versus denotative meanings. In addition to the comprehension tasks, considerable emphasis was also placed on vocabulary development and review of word recognition skills.

Vocabulary development particularly focused on obtaining the meaning of a word from its parts, the word’s surrounding context, sentence and paragraph practice, and the use of synonyms and antonyms to anchor the meanings of new words. New vocabulary was reviewed and practiced in these various ways not less than four times per week since the acquisition of vocabulary requires much practice. The dictionary was turned to when none of these techniques worked or when the exact meaning of a given word was still unclear.

A review of word recognition skills was also incorporated into the program, including phonetic analysis and the spelling rules under the guise of syllabification as well as structural analysis, i.e., prefixes, roots, and suffixes of words. Oral reading provided an informal check on areas for review of these skills.

The main emphasis in the English portion of the program was on grammar although some paragraphs and short writing passages were included. The assumption here was that the sentence unit is the major building block of English literature and the most critical element of English writing and composition. Among the grammatical topics covered were: parts of speech, subject-verb agreement, types of sentences (including recognition of run-ons and fragments), parallel construction, dangling and misplaced modifiers, coordinating and subordinating

conjunctions, capitalization and punctuation. All writing assignments were typed on the computer in Microsoft Word to receive computer feedback for basic grammar and spelling, followed by professorial feedback, which included explanation of corrections made, opportunities to rewrite, and comparison of originals with corrected versions. The writing assignments all made use of students' experiences. The basic message here was: the first draft is never the last draft. Weekly tests focused on topics covered during the week, including a review of previous topics.

The classroom management rules, which were handed out to students and discussed on the first day of class of the program, were strictly enforced throughout the duration of the program. Forbidden were the use of cell phones, "spontaneous" trips to the restroom, eating, calling out before being recognized, putting head down on the desk or table, grooming, talking with one another while the instructor or another student is presenting. Other tactics used by the teachers were: learning every student's name in the class on the first day so as to engage each student directly, starting from day one of the program; one-time-and-one-time-only statement of directions for a given task; watching the students for non-verbal signals of not understanding or not paying attention and immediately taking action.

Among the teaching principles were: using students' common experiences to anchor new concepts and skills, determining and using students' differential knowledge bases in classroom discussions and problem-solving with various comprehension tasks, calling on every student during a class session, always standing when making a presentation, varying voice pitch and style when presenting, keeping presentations and explanations short, use of the inductive rather than deductive approach in presentations, and involving students in applications of new ideas, having individual or pairs of students conduct reviews, and practice, practice, practice,

Conclusions

1. At the beginning of the program, none of the 11 students was adequately prepared for the reading demands and English competencies required for college academic success
2. Based on this first small pilot program, we speculate that approximately half of the entering Freshmen targeted for the remedial reading and English courses that do not count towards graduation can be prepared for freshman level college courses if provided an opportunity for an intensive summer "gateway" program, thereby saving at least a semester of remedial reading and English, if taken concurrently.
3. The remaining students can benefit from the intensive program by improving their general preparation in reading and English, which will apply to all of their other college courses. In this way, they can presumably avoid failing the remedial courses.
4. We estimate that the potential for reducing the need for and the costs of remedial education in non-selective institutions of higher education through programs, such as the one being reported on here with its specially designed management tactics, teaching principles, specifically sequenced tasks and reality-based measurements, has real promise.
5. The gaps in their skills between where they began and where they needed to be for college level work were generally large if uneven in spots.

Final Observations

1. Although all of the students in the pilot program this summer had the aptitude to do college level work, we soon found out they had only used reading when they absolutely had to for school assignments. In effect, their growth in reading was “stunted.” Much the same could be said of their English skills as well. Their writing was very basic, generally confined to verb usage in the present tense and a mix of simple sentences interspersed with occasional run-ons and fragments.
2. Of the eight students who enrolled at UDC, the faculty mentors report that that they are all very seriously pursuing their course schedules. They appear to have given up the idea of being entertained.

Participating Faculty

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ADDENDUM

1. Of the two components included in this program, reading and English, reading is the more difficult one in which to make rapid progress. Let us explain. By the end of the elementary grades, specific instruction in reading techniques is no longer given; the students are assumed to have learned all its basics: sight vocabulary, word recognition skills, and basic comprehension. That is, they have the basic tools for whatever reading tasks they need or choose to do. Thus, reading becomes the chief mechanism for learning in the recognized disciplines, such as English or Biology.

Students' reading abilities generally improve by the kinds of tasks teachers set for their students and by these students successfully accomplishing those tasks. As teachers make increasing demands on students' reading abilities and students succeed in meeting these demands, the students steadily improve in their reading competencies, including the development of a wide range of vocabulary. Also, as students become increasingly more competent in reading, they are likely to use it outside of school assignments for particular interests of their own or as a pleasurable leisure-time activity. Like any skill, reading improves with practice. Somehow much of this process failed to take place as the students progressed through the secondary grades.

2. Unlike reading, instruction in English as a discipline continues throughout the secondary grades and on into the college years. That is, its writing (with grammar embedded) and literature components become increasingly more important as students progress through the grades. In contrast to some of the other aspects of English, its writing component, like reading, spreads across all disciplines. Like any skill, writing improves with practice.