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# Instructor Continuity: A Tool for Increasing Student Success in First-Year Composition Sequences

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*Incorporating instructor continuity into the first-year composition (FYC) sequence represents an opportunity for community colleges to make an informed scheduling and advising decision in order to assist in the goal to increase student success rates in FYC. Utilizing course completion data from a community college in northern Alabama, this study examined the differences in composition class sequences taught by the same instructor and composition class sequences taught by different instructors. Findings indicated that students who had the same instructor for both composition courses in their FYC sequence were more likely to pass the second composition course than students who had different instructors for the courses.*

*Keywords: First-Year Composition, instructor continuity, student success, community college, same instructor*

First-year composition (FYC) courses are typically high-enrollment college courses. Because most college students take one or more composition-based classes as part of their degree plans (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2022), it is vital for colleges to strategize about how to promote and maintain student success in these classes. Moreover, considering that state performance-based funding measures may award funds based on success rates or graduation rates (Zerquera & Ziskin, 2020), it is even more crucial to find ways to decrease student failure and attrition rates as much as possible.

According to Cohen et al. (2014), student success in gateway classes like English composition can increase overall student retention and completion rates. Similarly, research by Garrett et al. (2017) confirms these

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findings and further indicates that success in freshman composition courses is an important predictor of success, persistence, and retention, even more so than freshman mathematics courses. Therefore, ensuring student success in FYC courses is paramount for both the institution and the students themselves.

A number of recent wide-ranging student success initiatives like corequisite models, guided pathways, and increasing credit hour production, have gained popularity across the United States and have been adopted in the state of Alabama (Brown & Lahr, 2019; Complete College America, n.d.; Enoch, 2021; Fairfax, 2019). However, there is less documented information available about smaller scale, easily implemented initiatives, particularly those that focus on scheduling and instructor continuity, in order to inform practice on the local level. In many colleges, faculty and administrators make course schedules and offerings based on the previous year's schedule or out of convenience and not necessarily on what is best for students (Shaver, 2020). For community college administrators and faculty leaders who seek to simplify course scheduling and maximize its effectiveness while simultaneously balancing the need to increase student success in FYC courses, simple and easily implemented practices may help. The idea of "the aggregation of marginal gains," a concept Dave Brailsford, a British Olympic cycling coach, popularized, is "the philosophy of searching for a tiny margin of improvement in everything you do" (Clear, 2018, p. 13). This philosophy lends itself to higher education and student success, where small improvements using best practices can make a positive difference in the success and retention of students (Elder, n.d.).

In Alabama community colleges, students take FYC in a sequence if their degree program requires two composition courses. The first course is ENG 101 (English Composition I), and the second course in the sequence is ENG 102 (English Composition II). Because the courses are sequenced, students must take and successfully pass ENG 101 with a final grade of A, B, or C before enrolling in ENG 102. At the research site of this study, which is a rural, northern Alabama community college, both of these courses are offered each semester and taught by a variety of instructors. Students will frequently have one instructor for the ENG 101 course and a different instructor for the ENG 102 course, all based on course scheduling and instructor availability.

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of instructor continuity in FYC courses. The following research question was addressed: Is there a difference in subsequent English composition course pass rates (C or better) for students who took the course with the same instructor

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versus students who took the course with a different instructor? The effects of instructor continuity (or lack of instructor continuity) have not been widely discussed in the literature. This study was an attempt to address this gap in the literature and provide another potential best practice for administrators and faculty members to consider when helping students succeed.

## **Review of Literature**

The demand to identify and implement strategies to boost student success and learning outcomes is perhaps more critical than ever before. However, extant research focused specifically on student success when students are paired with the same instructor across a series of courses is currently limited. As a result, this review was broadened to highlight the expanding need to strengthen retention strategies and also to discuss additional contributing factors that demonstrate the significant impact of various instructor attributes and biases on student outcomes.

### **The Growing Demand for Postsecondary Education**

Strategies to ensure student success in postsecondary education are becoming increasingly vital, especially among at-risk students. The connection between level of education and income continues to become more pronounced (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Furthermore, job loss as a result of COVID-19 disproportionately impacted already economically vulnerable workers in the service industry (Carnevale & Smith, 2021). This segment of the workforce was statistically likely to be female and to have attained, at most, a high school diploma (Brundage, 2017). In addition to the loss of jobs populated by workers who have achieved lower levels of education, employer expectations of potential workers have grown to be more demanding in recent years. The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021) anticipates that jobs requiring the completion of a postsecondary degree will strongly outpace the growth of jobs that require, at minimum, the completion of a high school diploma, continuing the trend of ever-increasing postsecondary requirements. This trend has been evident since 2012. Prior to 2012, the majority of workers in the U.S. had completed a high school diploma, but had no postsecondary education (Brundage, 2017). In 2012, the number of workers in the U.S. with at least some postsecondary education overtook those without any postsecondary education as the dominant demographic (Brundage, 2017).

Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting upsets in the labor market, dips in college enrollment were already troublesome; 2019 saw a 1.3% drop in enrollment, a blow that decreased the

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number of Americans pursuing post-secondary education to the lowest number in the previous decade (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022). These decreasing enrollment numbers were exacerbated throughout the pandemic and appear to have disproportionately impacted already at-risk students. Transfer enrollment decreased 9.2% in fall of 2020 and a further 0.9% in fall of 2021 (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022). Nontransfer enrollment dropped 2.3% in fall of 2020 and a further 4.2% in 2021 (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022).

### **Student Success and Instructor Attributes**

The combination of the erosion of careers that require no postsecondary credentials, the growing demand in careers that require workers have postsecondary credentials, and shrinking postsecondary enrollment emphasizes the urgent need to find avenues to boost student success. Current literature indicates that exploring the factors impacting relationships between instructors and students could yield positive results. Findings from Alsharif and Qi (2014) and from Herman et al. (2017) indicate that one potential avenue to improve student success lies in the relationship between student outcomes and various aspects of student-instructor relationships. Notably, instructor teaching style, enthusiasm, and attitude have all been observed to impact student outcomes (Alsharif & Qi, 2014). In a study among students enrolled in either the distance or the traditional format of a chemistry course, Alsharif and Qi (2014) examined student perceptions of instructor attitude, enthusiasm, and teaching style via a student survey. It was reported that student perceptions of instructor attributes coincided strongly with positive student outcomes in the course, with the correlation between instructor enthusiasm and student motivation being the strongest. The correlation between positive student perception of instructor attitude and positive course outcomes was demonstrable in both distance and traditional courses.

As a corollary further demonstrating the role of instructor attitude, Herman et al. (2017) found that instructors exhibiting symptoms of burnout were associated with “the poorest student outcomes” (p. 90). This study was focused on grades K–4 and included 121 teachers and 1,817 students across nine elementary schools. The study divided levels of stress, coping, and burnout amongst the teachers into four separate groups. Three of the groups included varying degrees of burnout, and one of the four groupings included teachers showing no symptoms of burnout; only 7% of participating teachers fell into this final group. Students assigned to instructors who fell into one of the three remaining groups earned lower

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Woodcock-Johnson scores in reading and mathematics when compared to the students assigned to instructors who showed no signs of burnout.

Unfortunately, these trends could disproportionately harm students who are most at risk. Students with access to teachers of a lower quality have been shown struggle more than their peers with higher quality teachers; subsequently this issue exacerbates challenges for already at-risk students (Goldhaber et al., 2017). Data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (2021) from 2010–2019 show that students from marginalized communities have higher attrition rates than their white counterparts. Similarly, first-generation college students also suffer higher attrition rates than non-first-generation college students (Ishitani, 2003).

In addition to instructor quality, the impact of potential instructor bias against students from marginalized communities and first-generation college students reveals a critical area for potentially improving success in at-risk students (Robinson et al., 2019). However, at-risk students are shown to experience improved cognitive behaviors associated with academic success and higher GPA when they feel as though they have a close student-instructor relationship (Parnes et al., 2020). Furthermore, Roorda et al. (2011) noted that the relationship between instructor and student, whether positive, neutral, or negative, has a demonstrable effect on student success. Given the link between student-instructor relationship and student outcomes, these relationships cannot be ignored in the pursuit of greater student success.

Variables such as gender, differences in grading style, and personal bias on the part of the instructor often play a role in student success. Hoffman and Oreopoulos (2009) found that students paired with same-sex instructors had increased success rates of up to 5% above the standard deviation. In addition, some recent research showed that the effect may be more pronounced when observing motivation-related factors (Solanki & Xu, 2018). Specifically, Solanki and Xu (2018) observed that metrics such as course attendance and self-reported interest in the material shifted in a statistically significant manner for female students in STEM courses when the students were matched with a same-sex instructor; the design of their study also revealed that male students displayed decreases in these areas when paired with a female instructor.

### **Continuity in Student-Instructor Pairings**

Studies focusing on instructor continuity—taking the same instructor for sequential courses—in higher education are currently relatively rare. However, a 2018 study by Hill and Jones supported the assumption that stu-

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dents who continue to study under a single instructor enjoy higher success rates than those that do not. Although focused on elementary-aged students rather than college-aged students, Hill and Jones (2018) presented evidence that elementary-aged students who were assigned the same instructor as they progressed through various grade levels performed better than their peers who did not continue to study with the same instructor as they progressed through elementary school, a technique that the authors describe as “looping” (p. 2). While the study from Hill and Jones focused specifically on younger students, the results indicate that “looping” is relevant to the present research study on FYC courses.

Continuity has been explored in other areas of higher education, like advising. In a 2018 study of the Tennessee community college system, Jenkins et al. found that building four-part “guided pathways” as a process in which an advisor actively works with a student throughout their college experience increased student success in first-year English and math courses and helped to close equality gaps in race/ethnicity and age. Similar advising techniques, such as intrusive advising, have been shown to boost student completion rates (Poole, 2015) while reducing student attrition rates among some student demographics (Finnie et al., 2017). In general, existing research shows that intensive, guided advising produces promising results. The focus of advisors on their advisees is thus essential to student success and completion. Additional attention from advisors could potentially play a role in helping students develop course schedules that make it more likely the students will succeed.

## **Summary**

The review of literature indicates that there is a lack of research on the relationship between instructor continuity and student performance in higher education. However, what limited research in the field that is available suggests that instructor continuity makes an impact on student success (Hill & Jones, 2018). Consequently, researching the benefits of instructor continuity is an area worth investigating further. This study focused on whether or not instructor continuity impacted the success rates of students in the FYC sequence. It attempted to fill the gap in the literature and promote more research in the field.

## **Method**

The purpose of this descriptive, non-experimental quantitative study (Johnson & Christenson, 2012) was to examine the success rates for students in a subsequent English 102 course based on the type of instructor they had. The success rate was defined as a passing grade of C or better.

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The type of instructor was defined as “same” or “different” based on whether students had the same instructor for both ENG 101 and ENG 102 (“same”) or one instructor for ENG 101 and a different instructor for ENG 102 (“different”). The following research question was addressed in this study: Is there a difference in subsequent English composition course success rates (C or better) for students who took the course with the same instructor versus students who took the course with a different instructor?

This study used data from a community college located in rural, northern Alabama. The fall 2019 enrollment for the college was 3,598 (Northwest-Shoals Community College, 2020). The traditional credit-bearing FYC sequence at this college is ENG 101 (English Composition I) and ENG 102 (English Composition II). ENG 101 is a prerequisite to ENG 102, and students must pass ENG 101 with a final grade of A, B, or C in order to move on to ENG 102.

After receiving approval from the research site, student grade data for ENG 101 and ENG 102 were obtained from the director of institutional research. Although multiple modes of instructional deliveries (e.g., online, hybrid) were emerging for both courses at the research site at the time of the study, the researchers decided to focus only on face-to-face, on-campus course grade data because the face-to-face instructional modality was still the primary mode of instruction. Raw institutional data received were sorted out based on course sections and instructors who taught those sections.

The final data set used included grades from fall 2014 to spring 2020 for 626 students who took the ENG 102 course on campus after taking the ENG 101 in the previous semester. Of those, 371 students took the ENG 102 course from a different instructor than the instructor they had for their ENG 101 course, while 255 students took the course with the same instructor they had for their ENG 101 course. Instructors who taught students in this data set had a wide range of teaching experience, from 1 to 30 years. ENG 101 and 102 instructors at the research site structure their courses with a common set of state-approved and department-approved requirements, such as the minimum number of essays required and certain topics that must be covered in each class, like research writing. Instructors are also able to choose from a list of two department-approved textbooks for ENG 102 classes, but all ENG 101 classes use the same department-approved textbook. However, beyond these specific requirements, the ENG 101 and 102 instructors have the freedom to

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structure their class and incorporate whatever material or additional assignments they prefer, and there is no common syllabus.

The final grades of all on-campus ENG 102 students included A, B, C, D, F, and W. Descriptive statistics were computed to get the total number of students who passed the course (earning an A, B, or C) and the total number of students who failed the course (earning a D, F, or W). The totals were then transferred to SPSS (2017) version 25 to run a weighted chi-square test with a 2 x 2 contingency table (Field, 2013) to determine whether there was a statistically significant relationship between the type of instructor and the subsequent course pass rate. The level of significance for the Chi-square test was set at  $p < 0.05$ , and Cramér's V statistic was used to determine effect size.

## Findings

Table 1 displays the results of pass rates for both groups of students included in this study. Out of 371 students who took the subsequent English course with a different instructor, 299 passed the course with an A ( $n = 81$ ), B ( $n = 127$ ), or C ( $n = 91$ ), resulting in an 80.6% success rate. Of 255 students who took the subsequent English course with the same instructor, 227 passed the course with an A ( $n = 83$ ), B ( $n = 95$ ), or C ( $n = 49$ ), resulting in an 89% success rate. In both cases, the proportion of students who passed the course was significantly more than those who did not pass. Overall, 84% ( $n = 526$ ) of all students passed the subsequent English course.

The results of the weighted chi-square test showed that there was a statistically significant relationship between the type of instructor and course pass rate ( $\chi^2(1) = 7.995$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ). Cramér's V statistic, which was used to calculate the effect size, was 0.113, indicating a low association between the type of instructor and course pass rate. Although Cramér's V is an appropriate statistic for determining effect size, Field (2013) recommends the calculation of odd ratios as a more "useful measure of effect size" and "most interpretable in 2 x 2 contingency tables" (p. 744). Therefore, odds ratios were calculated to interpret data further. Results showed that a student was 1.95 times more likely to pass the subsequent English course when having the same instructor for the course compared to those who had a different instructor.



**Table I.** Pass Rate Comparison Based on the Type of Instructor

		pass		Total
		no	yes	
ENG 102 Course	Different Instructor	72 <sub>a</sub> (19.4%)	299 <sub>b</sub> (80.6%)	371
	Same Instructor	28 <sub>a</sub> (11%)	227 <sub>b</sub> (89%)	255
	Total	100 (16%)	526 (84%)	626

Note. The different subscripts indicate that the proportions are significantly different.

## Discussion and Implications for Practice

The research question for this study asked whether there was a difference in subsequent English composition course pass rates (C or better) for students who took the course with the same instructor versus students who took the course with a different instructor. The findings indicated that there was a statistically significant difference, with students taking the course with the same instructor 1.95 times more likely to pass the subsequent course than students taking different instructors for their course sequence. These findings are consistent with Hill and Jones's (2018) study, demonstrating better student performance when student/instructor pairings are "looped," or continuous, and maintained throughout the transition from one class to another.

Based on the results of this study, it could be concluded that students are more likely to successfully pass their FYC course sequence if they take both courses with the same instructor, rather than with different instructors. A number of reasonable assumptions might explain this result. If students take a professor for their ENG 101 class and enjoy that professor's class, they will probably take that same professor's ENG 102 offering, if scheduled. The opposite is also probably true, which is that students who dislike their instructor for ENG 101 may try to find a different instructor for their ENG 102 class. The reasons that students took the same or a different instructor could also be due to factors unrelated to whether or not the students actually liked their instructor, but related more to scheduling conflicts, course offerings, and other logistical considerations (Carrington, 2010; Zhai & Monzon, 2001).

For those students who do take the same instructor though, there seem to be several advantages for both the students and the instructor. For students, having the same professor for both FYC classes means that they are able to learn the individual instructor's personality, teaching style,

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and grading methods, factors that can impact student outcomes (Alsharif & Qi, 2014). Since they do not have to learn a different instructor's grading system or classroom methods and expectations for ENG 102, these students may have an advantage. For instructors, having students take both ENG 101 and 102 with them means that the instructor can get to know the students better personally and academically and give more individualized support and anticipate student needs better since they likely are already aware of the students' weaknesses and strengths. Research from Roorda et al. (2011) demonstrated that the perceived relationship between student and instructor impacted student outcomes. The perceptions of instructor/student relationships, whether positive or negative, correlated to a student's overall course performance. Thus, familiarity between instructors and students, and the behavior that might be expected of each party by the other, could certainly influence the impression of the relationship between instructor/student and, subsequently, drive the connection between performance and perception.

Conversely, students who take ENG 102 with a different professor now must navigate potentially new teaching styles and grading expectations, which may be confusing if they are markedly different from the ENG 101 instructor's methods. Instructors, too, may be a little more limited in what personalized support they can give, at least at first, until they better learn what their individual student's needs specifically are. Although the correlation between student performance and instructor/student relationship reported by Roorda et al. (2011) could, perhaps, imply that a student who had a negative perception of their ENG 101 instructor might benefit from switching instructors, the inverse could also be true. If a student completes ENG 101 with either a neutral or positive perception of their course instructor, it appears that taking ENG 102 with that same instructor could lead to higher rates of course success.

For community college administrators and faculty members, this information could help boost student success in an easy, yet effective way. Rather than making course schedules based on the previous year's schedule, for example, administrators might consider strategically placing professors who taught ENG 101 the previous semester in ENG 102 slots for the upcoming semester (Shaver, 2020). This simple course scheduling technique could help maximize effective scheduling while also offering the opportunity for students to have a higher chance for success. Advisors and student success coaches might also be trained to explain to students the advantages of taking the same instructor for both FYC courses, including the greater likelihood of successfully passing the courses. In addition, faculty members apprised of the advantages of teaching the FYC

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sequence may be willing to volunteer to teach both courses instead of just one or the other, and they may be more invested in making a point of encouraging students to sign up for the next course based on these study results.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

This study contained a number of limitations. First, it was limited to a descriptive, non-experimental research design. Non-experimental studies lack random assignments or control groups (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). The findings were based on what has already happened in the past and were intended to provide information that could be helpful when planning future practices. There was only one independent variable (i.e., type of instructor). Other variables such as instructor bias, student self-efficacy, and motivation were not considered. Moreover, data on overall pass rates in ENG 101 were not examined. It is therefore recommended for future studies to examine other relevant variables, as well as consider using an experimental research approach.

Second, the data were limited to English composition students at only one higher education institution, a community college located in rural, northern Alabama. It is recommended to expand the study to include a larger sample size, including students enrolled at other community colleges and even universities. Exploring whether the effect persists at the four-year institution level or outside of the state of Alabama would provide additional insight and context.

Third, the current study focused only on students who took the FYC sequence in back-to-back fall to spring semesters in an on-campus format. Future studies might explore if the results change based on whether or not students took the FYC courses online or in non-subsequent semesters. Similarly, researchers could also examine if the effect continues when applied to different academic areas that typically have sequenced courses, like math, science, and history.

Finally, including demographic information in a future study might indicate whether or not certain groups of students benefit from this effect more than others. In addition, looking at instructor grading style, years of experience, or even gender bias as factors would be beneficial. Exploring any potential student selection bias of their instructor based on perceived ease or difficulty of the instructor's assignments or grading methods would also be an interesting avenue of inquiry.

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