

Perceptions and Performance in Off-Track Writing Classes

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Background

At DU, most students complete the two-course required writing sequence in their first year. However, we offer a limited number of both classes every term for those who don't follow the usual track—a mix of advanced students who 'tested out' of the first course, transfer students, international students, students who failed a previous writing class, and those who chose not to take the class their first year. Until now, our assessment process has ignored these sections, basing assessment only on portfolios from the quarter when most students complete each course. Beyond anecdotes, we have had little sense of how these classes compare with on-track sections. Recently, some faculty have suggested moving the second course to sophomore year or reframing the requirement so the classes aren't seen as a sequence, but as stand-alone courses. This topic has come up on the WPA Listserv recently, so we believe our research can be useful not only to students and faculty within our current system, and to the program as we consider possible changes, but also to others in the field.

Research Questions

Several questions about course quality and student performance in off-track classes:

- How do transfer students, international students, and AP students experience the sequence?
- Why do some other students choose to take these classes off-track?
- How does *when* the student takes each class affect their experience of the course?
- Do off-track students perform as well as on-track students?
- Are these students as satisfied with the course as on-track students?
- Would students prefer more even offerings of both classes each term, with the freedom to take them whenever they wish within the first two years?
- Would such an approach be as pedagogically sound?

Methods

To answer these questions, we will:

- Score a representative sample of portfolios from off-track sections, comparing results to those from on-track classes.
- Analyze course evaluations from off-track sections, comparing program averages for on/off-track sections and evaluations for faculty who teach both. Look for trends in written comments.
- Conduct pre- and post-course student surveys in off-track sections and a sample of on-track sections.
- Conduct focus groups with students who have completed the sequence to see if/how when they took each course affected their experience and if they would have preferred greater flexibility in timing/section offerings.
- Conduct interviews of faculty who have taught on- and off-track sections.
- Compare DU's writing requirements and sequence to peer institutions.

Questions and Concerns

1. The Literature:

While some have studied the student groups who take off-track classes, we haven't found a single study of sequencing and how when a student completes the writing sequence affects performance and satisfaction. Any suggestions?

2. The Audience:

We know this research will serve our program and university, but we want to make it as useful as possible for those beyond DU. What aspects of this study should be emphasized? Are there questions and/or methods you think we should add to add relevance for broader audiences?

3. Mission Creep and Methodological Over-kill:

We have already added questions about sequencing and course flexibility based on program we need, and we find ourselves wanting to do fairly in-depth studies of each population, but how much is too much (and, again, what is most needed in the field)?

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Sample Focus Group Questions

Why did you enroll in 1133 during the winter quarter (off-track)?

Did you inquire about how the classes would transfer? What sort of advising were you given related to the writing sequence?

What are some problems transfer students are facing right now?

How many of you are working while going to school? How has that affected your college experience?

How would you evaluate your writing course/sequence experience?

Would you like to see any changes to the available courses? For example, should we offer sections tailored for transfer students?