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Changing Traditions: The Accelerated Learning Program

The history of the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) began during the Conference on Basic Writing in 1992, almost two decades before it was first piloted in 2007. Peter Adams, a professor at CCBC who taught basic writing for many years but is currently retired, was not thinking about starting a different program for basic writing when he decided take a second look at the statistics that showed the success rates of students who passed ENGL 052 (basic writing) and ENGL 101 (first-year composition). The statistics showed positive results with 57% of students passing ENGL 052 and 81% of students passing ENGL 101, but although it seemed promising, Adams discovered that many of the students who passed ENGL 052 were not even attempting ENGL 101. This disparity wasn't apparent at first glance because the statistics did not account for the "leakage" of the many students who did not continue to ENGL 101, it only showed the success rates of the class as a whole.

Adams saw the need to increase basic writers' success not only to continue to first-year composition but also to succeed in their other academic courses. He called for the "mainstreaming" of basic writing students into first-year composition and for changes to be made in basic writing programs to address the many issues that basic writers faced. In "The Accelerated Learning Program: Throwing Open the Gates", Adams et al. call attention to what traditional basic writing programs looked like and why there was a need for a program like ALP in the first place. Although it took a few years for ALP to be implemented, their concern in creating ALP was to make sure they incorporated features that would best benefit the students. Adams et al. were looking to address the structure of traditional basic writing courses not the

curriculum. The two key points ALP focused on was in decreasing the number of students dropping out and increasing their success throughout college.

ALP is a voluntary program that allows basic writing students to register for ENGL 101 and a companion course ENGL 052 during the same semester so that the students are simultaneously fulfilling their basic writing and first-year composition course requirements. This allows the students to receive the support they need in the companion course that will directly help them with the first-year composition. The class sizes are small so that instructors can provide more individualized attention; eight students are placed in the first-year composition course along with other twelve higher-level students and those eight students are in the companion class with the same teacher. A sense of community starts to build among the students that are together throughout the semester; they support each other in ways that extend outside the classroom. It is important in ALP for the teacher to remain the same for both courses; this helps the teacher become more aware of the issues that are affecting the students. ALP doesn't rush students through the program or try to push them through the academic system; ALP was established to increase long-term success.

To understand how ALP effectively works, it is important to evaluate its features. The first concept, and most important, is *mainstreaming*, which takes basic writing students and integrates them with students who placed into first-year composition. This feature aims to target the divide that exists between basic writing students and the rest of the college students. It also decreases the negative perceptions many others have towards basic writing students. By integrating them into the higher-level writing course, the students don't feel alienated from the rest of the college. At the same time, the companion course they attend, provides them with *cohort learning* to build a community with the other students as they share similar experiences. They look out for each other and have an additional support system to help them succeed in the

course. *Small class sizes* are ideal for the faculty to place close attention to difficulties the students are experiencing. Large class sizes are usually an issue in traditional basic writing courses, but with the companion course, the students are guaranteed more individualized attention. Through *contextual learning*, the companion course also allows them to immediately apply what they are learning to the first-year composition course.

A unique feature of ALP is *acceleration*, by allowing the students to take their first-year composition and remedial course simultaneously, they are shortening amount of time the students spend finishing their remedial course in order to enter first-year composition. This is especially important because it reduces the chances of students dropping out by shortening the “pipeline” through which students “leak” out. In “Accelerating the Academic Achievement of Students Referred to Developmental Education”, Nikki Edgecombe defines acceleration “as the reorganization of instruction and curricula in ways that facilitate the completion of educational requirements in an expedited manner” (4), which places greater emphasis on student success because it is directly targeting one of the main issues in basic writing programs. *Heterogeneous grouping* allows basic writing students to be in the same class as higher-level writers, who can serve as writing role models, and at the same, increase basic writers’ sense of inclusion as a student.

The program is also designed to give teachers the chance to increase communication with the basic writing students, which is why emphasis is placed on teachers to pay conscious and deliberate attention to *behavioral issues* exhibited by students. The teachers help them with time management and address any issues that might inhibit the student’s success, such as cell phone usage or overall attitudes towards learning. There are many factors in the students’ lives, financial, health, legal, or family, that prevents them from either getting to class or attending

class all together. Teachers pay close attention to the students' *life problems* in order to recommend the necessary resources available or have an advisor talk to them.

To get this program off the ground, Peter et al. needed to show the administration, that although it would cost more money to run, it would be cost effective in the long run. They note that "careful analysis reveals that ALP actually costs less per successful student than more traditional approaches" (63), which is important for them to show because the funding for the program is dependent on its cost effectiveness. After the first two years of piloting ALP, the results were very promising with the success rates of ALP students doubling compared to the traditional model. They requested the Community College Research Center to complete an analysis of the program to determine if ALP is as affective as the initial reports indicated. CCRC's research concluded in their first assessment of ALP that "in the sample used in this study, 82% of ALP students passed ENGL 101 within one year, compared with 69% of non-ALP ENGL 052 students. More than a third (34%) of ALP students passed ENGL 102, compared with only 12% of the non-ALP ENGL 052 students" (Jenkins et al. 16). Not only was there an increase in the amount of students that passed ENL 101 but there was also a higher number of students who succeeded in ENGL 102.

ALP aims to help students excel in other courses; CCBC continues to work on improving the program, as Peter et al. state "we want to attempt to understand exactly what it is about ALP that leads to its successes and which features contribute most to the improved performance of ALP students" (66). They wanted to secure the program's longevity, and as of 2011, they have received permanent status at CCBC. ALP has also been piloted at other colleges, and another important feature of ALP is that wherever the program is adopted it can be structured to fit the needs of the students. In their process of forming ALP, CCBC specified that the program isn't a

one size fits all model. Different colleges will be faced with different needs, and for the program to work successfully, it has to constantly be restructured to meet those needs.

ALP's priority is the students' success but they also take into account the teachers' time as they commit to an additional course during the semester. They have created a Faculty Handbook that breaks down how ALP works and why. In this handbook, they have samples of possible topics that should be covered in the companion course to supplement first-year composition. There are also sections in the handbook that provides possible writing assignments and examples of the types of lessons that other teachers have presented in class. The teachers, who were part of the ALP pilot, expressed that teaching the companion courses were more fulfilling than any other. There is also a sample syllabus that the teachers can use as a guide when they start planning for the companion course. ALP has these resources available on their website so that all educators of basic writing can have access to what they are working on. The importance of ALP, and programs like it, as Adams et al. concluded in their article, is of "life-changing" importance to all basic writing students across the country.

Works Cited

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