

Adding an Intermediate English Course to the DeVry University Curriculum:

A Sample Rhetorical Strategies Persuasive Essay

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The 2019-2020 DeVry University undergraduate catalog (2019) describes a three- to four-session sequence of writing courses, beginning optionally with a course equivalent to high school before offering two sessions of freshman-level writing instruction and one at the sophomore-level (pp. 131-132). Given the scheduling practices in place at DeVry, students can expect to take a total of 24 to 32 weeks of writing instruction during their undergraduate studies. This represents as little as 53 % of what students at traditional undergraduate schools can expect to take in their first year of study alone. A traditional semester schedule will have students sit for two fifteen- or sixteen-week semesters of first-year composition classes, usually consecutively, with many asked to take a later technical or professional writing class in their second, third, or fourth years. No few writing instructors will attest that the time traditional students take to “learn” writing is not enough, and those at DeVry usually do not get as much time. It’s clearly a disservice done to the students. As a first step to addressing it, DeVry University should add another writing class to its first-year writing curriculum at a stage between the current first-semester (Composition) and second-semester (Advanced Composition) course equivalents, something that might be called Intermediate Composition.

One reason to add such a course is less about the students than about those who teach them. More courses in a curriculum demand more instructors hired to teach those courses, increasing the number of faculty. While increasing the labor force, and therefore labor costs, may not seem initially to appeal to a for-profit institution like DeVry, it is the case that offering more opportunities for work to faculty will likely increase faculty loyalty to the institution and longevity with it. This would reduce company-side problems of turnover and training costs

identified by Proper (2017, pp. 105-106) and others. It would also allow for greater engagement between the part-time faculty who teach most courses and the students they teach; as attested by several scholars throughout the 2010s (Ochoa (2012); Dolinsky Graham (2013); Goldstene (2015)), contingent faculty tend not to be able to engage at single institutions as a result of their own obligations to teach at multiple institutions. Increasing required courses would increase the time individual instructors remain at DeVry University, session to session, allowing for greater engagement and concomitant student success. Consequently, it would seem to be a sound decision for the institution to make to require another course, such as an intermediate-level writing class.

Any additional required class would have such an effect, however. One thing that makes an intermediate composition course specifically attractive is the conceptual gap between classes that compress what is traditionally fifteen or sixteen weeks of instruction into eight. In traditional models, students have time to learn more fully the genres of writing to which such classes, particularly the second-semester classes, introduce them. Assignment sequences typical in such classes include genres largely unknown outside academe; the annotated bibliography is a prime example. The genre is a collection of citations and summaries intended to be used as a research aid, and it is typically taught as such (though no few scholars produce annotated bibliographies as their own products; the *Online Chaucer Bibliography* (Allen, 2019) is one of the more prominent examples). The genre tends to pose problems for students, as it demands a degree of detailed reading not amenable to the compressed schedule on which DeVry University offers its second-semester-equivalent Advanced Composition. Dividing the assignment sequence out across an additional eight-week session would allow more time to be spent on the individual assignments, the annotated bibliography and others, resulting in greater student success and

concomitant retention—both increases that make adding a required composition class an attractive option for DeVry.

Another point in favor of an intermediate composition class at DeVry has to do with broader curricular scheduling. As noted above, traditional first-year composition sequences tend to have the two first-year writing courses taken in consecutive terms, most commonly fall and spring. As such, students at traditional universities have a full academic year engaged with developing their academic writing skills. Generally, the sequence is successful at improving students' writing performance, while gaps in time between writing classes show stasis or loss of writing skills (Johnson & Krase, 2012, p. 42). DeVry's usual scheduling does not have students take their required writing courses in consecutive sessions; there are almost always gaps of a session or more between students' enrollment in writing classes. As such, there is time for degradation of their writing skills to occur, sometimes quite a bit of time; while many classes have Composition as a prerequisite, few have Advanced Composition or sophomore-level writing as one (DeVry, 2019), so that students can go years between writing courses. Inserting an additional required writing class would minimize gaps, as well as promoting longer periods of continuous writing instruction, both likely to be of benefit to the students and therefore to the institution teaching them.

One other reason, among many that could be found, that DeVry University would do well to add another required writing course to its first-year writing curriculum has to do with the needs of businesses. The University is and has been devoted to helping its students develop the knowledge and skills needed to successfully enter technically demanding professions and administration. Despite common student complaints to the contrary—the traditional “I’m not going to have to write”—many of the professions students train for through coursework at

DeVry explicitly involve writing. For example, engineering, despite popular impressions that it works with numbers, data, and materials more or less exclusively, demands quite a bit of writing from its workers, and in increasing amounts with higher-level positions (Leydens, 2008; Bly, 2017). More broadly, nearly three-quarters of businesses surveyed report strong writing skills as eminently desirable in job candidates (Moore, 2016). Additionally, strong writing skills can promote job security, in terms of both current workplace structures and resistance to job-loss through automation (Solomon, 2018). And there is always the specter of legal involvement to consider—meaning lots of written materials that go into court records and thus demand the utmost care and attention.

The businesses that hire DeVry graduates expect those graduates to be trained in their major fields, as is right and proper. They expect that of any graduates they hire, however. It is clear from what businesses report, though, that they are not getting as many job candidates as they would like who have strong writing skills in addition to strong skills in their chosen professions; they can find accountants who can crunch numbers and engineers who can design and troubleshoot systems, but they have trouble finding people who can do those things and cut a clear set of instructions or send off a letter or email that the recipient will be able to read easily. Adding another writing class to the set of classes all students are asked to take, putting it in the University's equivalent to the traditional core curriculum, will help DeVry's students to achieve the level of writing skill employers seek. It will help the students secure their lives after graduation, and that will help the University foster a reputation as the exception to the rule that for-profit schools are risky ventures that often leave students impoverished and ill-equipped to handle the challenges with which life presents them.

It is true that simply adding an intermediate composition class to the required curriculum will not solve all the ills that need to be addressed. It is also true that there are some potential problems in making such an addition. Students and those who fund them will have to pay for another course on top of what they already purchase. Scheduling will be more complicated, as well, with the addition of another requirement. Even so, such a change will be of more benefit than drawback to the school and to the students it serves; on the whole, it will be a good thing to do, and DeVry University therefore ought to do it.

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