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Building Momentum Toward Degree Attainment through Contextualized English Courses

INTRODUCTION

English composition courses are critical to community college students' progression toward degree attainment. Required for many associate degrees, these courses build students' foundation in reading and articulating ideas that carry into their disciplinary studies. Additionally, early success in gateway courses like English builds momentum and leads to a higher likelihood of degree attainment.¹ However, courses such as English 111 in North Carolina's community colleges, can be a difficult hurdle for some students, particularly if they do not find the subject material relevant to their course of study.

Fortunately, colleges have options to improve student success related to foundation courses in reading and composition. Research suggests that when students are presented course readings and assignments in English composition classes pertinent to their field of study, they understand concepts more readily.² Thus, efforts to increase the relevance of English 111 to students supports success in both the course as well as degree completion.

Community college leaders are making changes to gateway courses in English to improve student success in these courses and promote credential completion. This effort may be particularly important in rural contexts, where students enroll and complete college at lower rates despite graduating from high school at higher rates than their urban and suburban peers.³ To improve student success, Stanly Community College – a rural-serving institution within the North Carolina's Community College System – contextualized the gateway English course so that assignments were relevant to the program of study. The college began strategically redesigning the course in programs where students were otherwise successful but struggling to pass English. This brief outlines how [Stanly Community College](#) leaders are raising the success rate for students in English 111 courses and offers guiding questions for college leaders who are considering a similar approach on their campuses.

KEY POINTS

- Stanly Community College leaders, seeing a disparity in English 111 success rates, initiated a phased roll-out of contextualized English 111 courses, starting with the Early Childhood Education program.
- Key to the college’s success with contextualized English, Stanly partnered English faculty with program faculty to incorporate relevant industry content and resources.
- In tandem with course contextualization, the college supported student success by coordinating with academic advisors to actively encourage students to take gateway courses like English 111 in the first year.

DATA SOURCES

Stanly Community College participated in the [Rural College Leaders Program \(RCLP\)](#), a three year, cohort-based model that provides college presidents and executive leaders with tools to support their efforts to improve student outcomes at their institutions. This includes collaborative development of rural-focused solutions for improved student outcomes and data coaching. [The Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research](#) (Belk Center) conducted a site visit in the Spring of 2024 at Stanly Community College as part of research for the RCLP and supported by [Ascendium’s Educational Philanthropy](#). The Belk Center research team coordinated four one-hour focus groups with senior administrative leaders, faculty, and student services staff to gain a better understanding of how the college implemented broad changes in the way they are teaching English composition courses. It is important for executive leadership to provide the space – through programs like the RCLP – for faculty and staff to experiment with institution-improving ideas in order to promote an innovative and successful institution. This brief shares key findings from Stanly Community College’s strategy for contextualized English courses and is part of a broader series of case study briefs designed to lift up ideas that may be useful to rural community college leaders considering similar approaches.



IDENTIFYING ENGLISH 111 THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL DATA

The Stanly Community College (Stanly) team initially analyzed its course retention and completion rates to understand where students were losing momentum. Furthermore, institutional research staff and leaders helped to identify differences in students' success by program area and discovered that students from specific programs were less successful in standardized English courses. After identifying program-specific disparities in English success, English faculty members partnered with program faculty to identify a solution that would better engage students enrolled in different types of programs. The faculty began planning contextualized English 111 courses that leveraged the standardized English structure, and embedded readings and assignments that align with the students' field of study. The contextualized English 111 courses retain the same level of rigor and standards requiring the same number of papers and level of reading; however, the content of readings or assignments became contextualized to the students' area of study. For example, a student enrolled in early childhood education would have reading and composition assignments focused on topics such as the stages of language development or nutrition for toddlers.

QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS TO IDENTIFY COURSES FOR CONTEXTUALIZATION:

- What does your institutional data say about your students' English course success?
- What is the current structure of your gateway English courses (i.e., does your college have a common course template/syllabus or does this differ by section)? How does this structure support contextualization?
- Are there particular programs where English course pass rates are lower than others?
- Are there other "gateway" general education courses where pass rates differ by program?
- How will you know if contextualizing courses has impacted student success?

PLANNING AND FACULTY ENGAGEMENT

The Stanly team began the contextualization process as part of the President's Leadership Academy (PLA), a year-long professional development program at Stanly Community College. Two English faculty selected this as a PLA project to support student success based on data showing that early childhood education students lagged the general population in successfully completing English 111. According to Stanly's program head for university transfer, the early childhood education program was selected because the English 111 success rate for students in the program from 2018-2021 was 65% – compared to the college's average English 111 pass rate of 72.3%.

These English faculty met with faculty and leaders from the Early Childhood Education Program to gather topics of relevance and resources that would be of interest among the students to incorporate into English 111 courses. These department leaders and faculty met throughout the Spring of 2022 to plan the rollout of contextualized English and develop the curriculum materials for students in the Early Childhood Education Program. Following the development stage, the first pilot of contextualized English occurred in the Summer of 2022 and Fall of 2023.

The Stanly team continued the contextualization of English 111 based on the success of the pilot. Coupled with the insights gained through data coaching offered through the RCLP, leaders developed plans to leverage contextualization to continue to support their early childhood education students who struggled with English 111 and expand contextualization to other program areas. The Stanly team maintained the same process used in the pilot of gathering feedback from faculty and incorporating texts from industry trade publications as they contextualized the advanced manufacturing and health science programs.

The implementation team planned a phased roll-out of contextualized English each semester, a decision by the faculty in the English department in early conversations. Shifting English 111 for multiple programs at the same time was not feasible because of time and faculty constraints. Rolling out contextualized English in just one program – Early Childhood Education – allowed the college to learn from that experience and quickly apply those lessons when they expanded to other programs in the following terms. The Stanly leadership team carefully tracked student success in the course, both before and after the change, and by the end of the pilot semester, was able to share promising results with the rest of the college faculty. Seeing successes in the Early Childhood Education data established momentum and additional buy-in from faculty in other programs.

After its initial phase, the college expanded contextualized English to the Advanced Manufacturing and Industrial Technology and Trades programs in the Fall of 2023, and incorporated programs in health industries in Fall of 2024. The college plans to expand the contextualized English model across the college, moving on to programs in the business and technology industry cluster by the Fall of 2025. The Stanly team will then use examples from existing contextualizations to expose transfer-bound students in Associate of Science (AS) and Associate of Arts (AA) programs to a variety of industry clusters.

QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS WHEN PLANNING FOR COURSE CONTEXTUALIZATION AND ENGAGING FACULTY:

- In what capacity are English faculty members engaging with faculty in other program areas around this topic?
- What are ways that you can strategically build space for faculty in different departments to address common student issues together?
- What are effective processes faculty in different programs may use to easily share industry-specific articles and resources for contextualized English?
- What timing considerations should be taken into account to enroll students in contextualized courses by your target term?

COURSE SEQUENCE AND STAFF CONSIDERATIONS

When analyzing course-taking patterns by program area, administrators noticed that many students within the programs were taking the English course in their last semester or two. This is due in part to institutional practices that offer insufficient structure and guidance, which leads to students delaying foundational courses such as English 111 until the end of their program. This delay is problematic for two reasons. First, delaying enrollment in English 111 does not allow the student to benefit from reading and writing concepts that could be helpfully applied to their later coursework. Second, students who view English 111 as a major hurdle and delay the class are at greater risk of having invested the time and tuition into most of their program, leading to them either not finishing the program or not successfully completing the course and therefore delaying graduation.

With this challenge in mind, the implementation team engaged staff (i.e., academic advisors and success coaches) to design and implement structures to encourage students' earlier enrollment in English 111. These structures include the use of guided pathways, which map out the entire program to help students plan and maximize their success toward degree attainment. Stanly also posts [pathway requirements](#) online that list English 111 in the first semester of the enrollment plan for Early Childhood Education Diploma program.

The Stanly team also learned that coordination with staff through these changes is key. Their leaders prioritized faculty and staff buy-in during the process, expressing that it was critical to the implementation of this change. As one administrator noted:

“[Contextualized English is] not just something that one of us designed and then imposed on everyone else, it’s something we jointly designed.”

Staff are often the primary points of contact with students during course planning and registration, and therefore must be regularly informed through every phase of these changes, so that they are equipped to confidently advise students. To accomplish this, Stanly releases monthly newsletters to keep their campus staff and faculty informed of updates, success tracking, and requests for feedback. In addition to regular written updates, the president also holds bi-annual talks with faculty and staff to maintain open channels of communication throughout their institution. These employee-focused efforts translate and inform their student-facing communications and allow a special focus on the [program of study guides](#), emphasizing the importance of course sequencing.

QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS ABOUT COURSE SEQUENCING AND ENGAGING STAFF:

- Are there any student services procedures that can be designed to set students up for greater success in key courses like English composition? Can new students be automatically enrolled in foundational courses such as English 111 early in their program to support successful progression toward degree completion?
- How are you communicating programs of study to your students to help them know when to take gateway courses like English 111? As a leader, how can you ensure that these are systematically updated?
- What are the implications of contextualized courses for advisors? How might these be different for advisors of students within different programs?
- What training and communication should be incorporated for the registrar/admissions staff?
- How will new sections of contextualized English be added? How will sections be demarcated in your student data system so that all staff know which section to put students in?

CONCLUSION

Stanly Community College’s strategy for identifying and enacting institutional change to increase student success by contextualizing their English courses is a promising practice among rural college leaders. By disaggregating data to identify differences in success rates by program, convening key faculty and staff early, and supporting them through intentional professional development sessions, the Stanly team is driving momentum toward credential completion. As part of the effort to contextualize English courses, the Stanly team made academic support services more accessible and visible, including virtual academic support conveniently on students’ online course management system. This commitment allows scaffolding support for both students and employees through the change. This brief serves as a representation of the comprehensive and strategic process for implementing impactful change by focusing on a key “gateway” to student success.

RESOURCES FOR CONTEXTUALIZATION

- The digital Teaching & Learning Guidebook offers regional resources available for faculty professional development. [DIGITAL Teaching & Learning Guidebook.pdf](#)
- The Promising Evidence on Professional Learning brief offers a summary of faculty participating in teaching and learning hubs, which may inform college leaders considering changes such as contextualizing English classes. [Promising Evidence on Professional Learning in North Carolina FINAL - October 2023.pdf](#)
- The North Carolina Community College System Office reports data on English course success rates on their Data Dashboard. This dashboard shows all English success metrics by college. <https://www.ncccommunitycolleges.edu/about-us/data-reporting/data-dashboards-page/success-rate-in-college-level-english-pm2-peer-comparisons/>
 - This is the dashboard showing all English success metrics compared against the NCCCS institutions.

ABOUT THE BELK CENTER

The Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research serves North Carolina’s community colleges by convening leaders, creating tools, and catalyzing social and economic mobility for learners – building stronger, more resilient communities. We equip community college leaders with actionable insights and create opportunities for collaboration as we tackle the most pressing issues facing students and campuses to build stronger, more resilient communities. The Belk Center is housed in the College of Education at North Carolina State University, a land-grant university that shares our commitment to community colleges and the critical role these institutions play in creating and expanding opportunities for all North Carolinians.

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ENDNOTES

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