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# Introduction

## A SEA CHANGE

David Starkey

### A SEA CHANGE

Ten years ago, accelerated, or corequisite, composition was something of a fringe movement in college composition studies. Granted, its core principle was straightforward. Students enrolled in developmental English courses were leaving college at a far higher rate than they were completing their first-year composition (FYC) courses. Two-year college students were especially hard hit. In California, “70% of incoming students [were] required to enroll in one or more remedial courses” (Henson and Hern 2014, 1). Yet a study done at Butte College (a community college in rural northern California) found that “only 50% of students who began one level below college in writing in Fall 2010 completed college English within two years. For students who began two levels below college in writing, that number dropped to 27%. Among students starting three to four levels below college, just 18% completed college English within four years” (7). Not surprisingly, attrition rates like these meant only a small percentage of entering community college students were reaching transfer level, and even fewer of those went on to graduate from four-year institutions (Molloy 2018). However, when all students, no matter what their “assessment level,” were given the opportunity to enroll in college-level English courses, pass rates for FYC classes increased significantly. At Chabot College, for instance, pass rates increased from a low of 28 percent among nonaccelerating students to a high of 57 percent among accelerating students, while at Las Positas College, the numbers rose from a low of 35 percent among nonaccelerating students to a high of 68 percent among accelerating students (Eagan and Hern n.d.).

Surprisingly perhaps, when one considers the evidence in support of acceleration, there was no sudden mass migration to this new approach to teaching. Indeed, skeptics were legion. Many instructors wondered whether they were doing students any favors by moving them deeper

into their college careers with underdeveloped writing skills. And if “standards” were being lowered in order to accommodate students who would otherwise have accessed one or more levels below college, wasn’t that essentially another form of grade inflation? Moreover, even granting the numbers like those reported from Chabot and Las Positas Colleges, didn’t that mean 32 percent to 43 percent of accelerating students were still failing? What about that population? Who could they turn to if there was no remediation? Finally, faculty teaching in stand-alone developmental education programs—there were twelve in the California Community College system in 2012—felt their very existence as professionals was being threatened, and with good reason, as time has shown. (As we’ll see at the end of the introduction, even now, not everyone is convinced acceleration is the *only* way to go.)

Nevertheless, by the autumn of 2021, when the essays for this collection were being completed, the situation had altered dramatically. According to Michelle Clark (2021), a senior executive at Macmillan Learning, fully 50 percent of instructors in the publisher’s market were “teaching in some kind of corequisite model.” That sea change in the prevalence of acceleration, which was often mandated by legislation, meant that—sometimes literally overnight—faculty who had been teaching one way for decades had to rethink their entire pedagogy. While both the Community College of Baltimore County’s accelerated learning program and the California Acceleration Project continue to generate and collate important teaching resources, to date there is no print collection of articles focusing on classroom pedagogy in accelerated composition classrooms. It’s not that ALP and CAP don’t guide instructors in productive directions—the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Teachers College of Columbia University and the California Community College’s Research and Planning Group (RP) also deserve mention—but the relative paucity of scholarship on acceleration outside these few go-to sites and a scattering of very recent journal publications mean every new resource is a valuable one. Indeed, this book’s original title—*Just in Time*—was borrowed from a widespread practice in corequisite composition of waiting to teach a skill until just before it is necessary for a learner to complete an assignment. We have arrived at that moment, and the emphasis throughout is on classroom practice and pedagogy.

This pragmatism can be partly explained by the fact that nearly all the contributors are current or former community college English instructors. Two-year college teacher-scholars are, as Patrick Sullivan (2020) notes in *16 Teachers Teaching: Two-Year College Perspectives*, “very rare in our profession” (3). One of the reasons for this rarity is that scholarship

among community college faculty is not often valued or rewarded by administrators, including department chairs. Sadly, some colleges openly discourage scholarship, believing it distracts faculty from their teaching. Fortunately, one of the other main challenges *Teaching Accelerated and Corequisite Composition* contributors faced—writing their chapters while teaching up to five sections of composition—is also a source of their expertise. The work here is the result of hard-won hours, days, weeks, and years in classrooms both face to face and virtual. Readers who have come looking for high-flown theories with no application to real-world composition have come to the wrong place. However, if they are seeking cogently argued, experienced-based essays on real-world teaching, they will not be disappointed.

#### A BRIEF HISTORY OF ACCELERATED COMPOSITION

By most accounts, the story of accelerated composition starts in the early 1990s with Peter Adams, coordinator of the writing program at what is now the Community College of Baltimore County. Adams realized that while success rates for students enrolled in developmental composition classes might initially look acceptable, on closer examination it became clear only a small percentage of these students were moving through the entire composition sequence, and even fewer students were actually transferring to four-year colleges. After analyzing the data, Adams came to believe having to complete a remedial writing course was simply too much of a burden for the majority of CCBC students. Rather than preparing them for the college-level composition course in their future, remediation ultimately waylaid students. Indeed, many students who assessed into developmental composition courses didn't enroll in those classes at all.

In 2009, Adams—along with Sarah Gearhart, Robert Miller and Anne Roberts—published “The Accelerated Learning Program: Throwing Open the Gates” in the *Journal of Basic Writing*. That pivotal article outlined the history of basic writing in the United States and the “very low success rates for developmental programs nationwide” (55). Adams and his coauthors lauded the value of “mainstreaming” developmental writers, arguing that when “students placed into basic writing are allowed to go immediately into first-year composition, their sense that they are excluded from the real college, that they are stigmatized as weak writers, and that they may not be ‘college material’ is greatly reduced” (60).

The article ends with a number of recommendations about how best to design an accelerated learning program, most of which have become

staples of accelerated learning communities across the country. Among those recommendations are cohort learning (small groups of students taking multiple courses together with the same instructor); small class size and heterogeneous grouping (eight basic writers mainstreamed into a college-level class of twenty); attention to behavioral issues and life problems; and contextual learning (students aren't *preparing* to write for college; they *are* writing for college).

The same year "The Accelerated Learning Program" was published, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation—a longtime advocate of K–12 developmental education—formed Complete College America. The mission statement of CCA (2009) echoes the concerns of the Baltimore professors: "We've made progress in giving students from all backgrounds access to college—but we haven't finished the all-important job of helping them achieve a degree." Among Complete College America's recommendations are "guided pathways to success." Features of the pathways model include clear, complete, and coherent programs of study; guiding students very early toward "meta-majors," that is, broad areas of study from which they can choose their specific major; a series of milestone courses that track the student's progress; and "intrusive, just-in-time advising" focusing on "students most in need of services."

The growing belief in the efficacy of acceleration was in part based on research conducted at the City University of New York's Graduate Center and at the Community College Research Center at Teachers College of Columbia University. The CCRC's Thomas Bailey and two colleagues—Shanna Smith Jaggars and Davis Jenkins—summed up much of the research arguing for guided pathways and accelerated learning in their 2015 book *Redesigning America's Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success*. They point out that many students "are confused by a plethora of poorly explained program, transfer, and career options; moreover, on closer scrutiny many programs do not clearly lead to the further education and employment outcomes they are advertised to help students achieve" (2). To improve outcomes, the authors suggest "creating more clearly structured, educationally coherent program pathways that lead to students' end goals" (3). In short, it is no longer enough simply to "open the gate" to all students; we must find a way to guide them to the end of the path: graduation and a career.

Not surprisingly, considering its origins in the Community College of Baltimore County and among early adopting colleagues at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, accelerated learning has taken particular hold in community colleges, where it is, unfortunately, sometimes easy for students to get lost in the shuffle. In California, home to more

community colleges than any other state, Katie Hern, cofounder (with Myra Snell) of the California Acceleration Project (2015), has been instrumental in transforming approaches to college remediation. Citing several studies, Hern notes that “placement tests are weak predictors of students’ performance in college.” She argues that “placement is destiny. When students are assessed ‘not college ready,’ the treatment prescribed—layers of remedial coursework—leaves them less likely to reach their goals.”

Because underrepresented students heavily populate developmental composition courses, accelerated learning has attracted the interest of advocates for student equity. In *America’s Unmet Promise: The Imperative for Equity in Higher Education*, Witham et al. (2015) call for a creation of “equity by design,” in which “equitable practice and policies . . . accommodate differences in the contexts of students’ learning.” An equity-based approach does not treat all students the same. Instead, it recognizes “differences in students’ aspirations, life circumstances, ways of engaging in learning and participating in college, and identities as learners and students” and makes appropriate adaptations for those differences (8).

Advocates of accelerated learning have also found inspiration in the work of neuroscientists who have demonstrated—as Stephanie Liou at Stanford’s Huntington’s Outreach Project (2010) explains—that “the brain continues to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections throughout life. This phenomenon, called neuroplasticity, allows the neurons in the brain to . . . adjust their activity in response to new situations or changes in their environment.”

Carol Dweck, a psychology professor at Stanford, has done much to popularize these ideas through her work on fixed versus growth mindsets, and her ideas are frequently referenced in this collection. In “Brainology: Transforming Students’ Motivation to Learn” (2008), she points out, “Stereotypes are typically fixed-mindset labels. They imply that the trait or ability in question is fixed and that some groups have it and others don’t. Much of the harm that stereotypes do comes from the fixed-mindset message they send.” In contrast, Dweck looks to the potential of growth mindset, which, “while not denying that performance differences might exist, portrays abilities as acquirable and sends a particularly encouraging message to students who have been negatively stereotyped—one that they respond to with renewed motivation and engagement.”

In part because accelerated learning has strong research foundations, it continues to become more widespread. Tennessee was an early

adopter, eliminating not only college remediation but, in 2018, all tuition and fees required to earn an associate's degree. Florida allows students to skip developmental classes if they choose, and Texas has been steadily increasing the percentage of developmental composition students required to enroll in corequisites in all public colleges and universities.

Other states have made similar moves, with perhaps the biggest change coming in California, where Assembly Bill 705 went into full effect in the fall of 2019. AB705 prohibits “a community college district or college from requiring students to enroll in remedial English or mathematics coursework that lengthens their time to complete a degree unless placement research that includes consideration of high school grade point average and coursework shows that those students are highly unlikely to succeed in transfer-level coursework” (Seymour-Campbell 2017). A lively debate has ensued about how we can know whether a student is “highly unlikely” to succeed in a college-level class (more about this below), but in the meantime, California community college faculty—like their colleagues throughout the country—have been energetically revising their curricula, applying their considerable knowledge, energy, and experience in an effort to make acceleration work. *Teaching Accelerated and Corequisite Composition* aims to be part of that vigorous exchange of ideas and information about reformed classroom practice.

#### *Teaching Accelerated and Corequisite Composition*

*Teaching Accelerated and Corequisite Composition* is divided into five parts, with the first and longest section of the book taking a deep dive into one of the central questions of teaching corequisite composition: To what extent do we need to alter our curricular design? My own chapter, “Developing a Successful Accelerated Composition Program,” takes a big-picture look at issues likely to arise when building a new curriculum and how those challenges might be faced. Meridith Leo’s “Establishing a Corequisite Writing Model in a Postremedial Two-Year College” examines some of the same challenges through the lens of her own experience helping to create such a program at Suffolk County Community College. In “Inching toward Equity: Graduated Choice in the Composition Classroom,” Lesley Broder focuses on ways to engage accelerating students, specifically those enrolled in online asynchronous courses. Carrie Aldrich and Sarah Prielipp continue the conversation about teaching ALP online—specifically, during the pandemic—with



a detailed study of the experiences of several of their colleagues at the University of Alaska Anchorage. The final chapter of the first section, Melissa Favara and Jill Varley-Danis's "Reflective Practices in Teaching for Transfer," investigates the complex and creative challenges of teaching accelerating students transferable concepts and transferable skills.

The book's second section focuses on assessment, another crucial issue for instructors and their students transitioning to accelerated learning. With so many students who might once have been deemed underprepared enrolled in college-level writing courses, how can we fairly evaluate their progress and build on the strengths they bring to the class? Mark Blaauw-Hara's solution is to recast the instructor-student relationship through labor-based grading, in which students agree on a contract with their instructor stipulating how much work they will do that semester and "receive credit for doing that hard work." In "Finding the 'Right' Amount of Rigor," Melissa Long argues we should not burden our students with undue expectations. Instead, instructors of research-based writing should "assess the student's ability to demonstrate research, critical thinking, and competent writing," keeping "our focus on [those] threshold concepts" and not "letting other factors seep into our assessments."

Section 3 looks at the pivotal, yet often overlooked, role reading plays in the writing process. In his chapter, Peter Adams, arguably the most important ALP theorist, turns his attention to IRW. "Integrating Reading and Writing: A Four Step Process" provides "a brief history of integrated reading and writing, explain[s] the sources of its difficulty of implementation, and suggest[s] solutions to those difficulties." Jami Blaauw-Hara's "Tea with a Friend: Teaching Challenging Reading in the Corequisite Classroom" focuses on teaching metacognition as the basis for "mindfully incorporating challenging reading with supportive classroom strategies." And Gregory Ramírez's "More Than Busywork: Journals as a Method of Success in First-Year Composition and Corequisite Courses" discusses the benefits of various types of reading journals, including their documented connection to increased student pass rates.

The fourth section covers noncognitive learning, an area of study that has been associated with accelerated learning from its very beginnings. Margaret Nelson Rodriguez's comprehensive "Accelerating Success: Noncognitive Learning in Composition Courses" argues for the importance of contextualization as a key to accelerated teaching "because it provides the framework for the developmental course to be purposeful and meaningful to students" and "also bridges content learned in a semester to future courses and to life." In "Revisiting Dweck's Mindset

Theory in the First-Year Corequisite Classroom,” Charlee Sterling investigates Carol Dweck’s work on fixed and growth mindset. Sterling acknowledges that while “racial bias, poverty, or learning differences” might be obstacles “no amount of effort can overcome,” the work of the Stanford psychologist remains critical to helping students bolster their noncognitive skills.

The book concludes with a chapter by the current codirectors of the Community College of Baltimore County’s accelerated learning program, Haleh Azimi and Elsbeth Mantler. “Corequisite Composition Courses: A Need for Institutionalizing Professional Development for Programmatic Success,” which draws on their backgrounds in two different but related disciplines, academic literacy and English, and emphasizes the need for ongoing training for ALP faculty.

Together, these thirteen chapters provide the fullest discussion to date of accelerated and corequisite composition. While there is some inevitable overlap and disagreement in the conversation, the authors’ varying perspectives on how to foster student success only enrich the overall exchange.

#### AGAINST EITHER/OR

Attentive readers of *Teaching Accelerated and Corequisite Composition* will notice a subthread running through the collection: not all college English instructors exposed to accelerated learning have embraced the movement. Some professors have likened acceleration to an unstoppable tidal wave generated at least as much by college administrators hoping to cut costs as it is by professors wanting their students to thrive. Despite statistics showing underrepresented students succeeding at higher rates than those who are tracked through developmental courses, these doubters worry that students are being rushed through their college education, that they don’t have time to change their minds (and majors) and make life’s inevitable mistakes.

Many advocates of accelerated composition would bristle at this skepticism. Hern (2020) of the California Acceleration Project, states flatly, “If we can’t identify a group of students that does better starting in a remedial course, remedial courses should not be on the table” (4). Kathy Molloy, the founder of the acceleration program at Santa Barbara City College, agrees: “The data is clear—a significantly higher number of students complete the college-level class when they go directly into that course than if they attempt the basic writing sequence. And those marginalized students who placed into basic writing classes at

disproportionately higher levels are experiencing the biggest gains in terms of completion rates” (Molloy and Starkey 2021, 7).

And yet dismissing the concerns of those with questions about acceleration short-circuits a potentially productive conversation about student learning. Despite all the data supporting acceleration, do we as educators truly want to create a situation in which no student has recourse to remediation, even if they actively seek it out? However persuasive the argument for corequisite composition, there is some evidence to suggest not *all* remediation thwarts student progress. Florence Xiaotao Ran and Yuxin Lin (2019), for instance, found that corequisite remediation in thirteen community colleges affiliated with the Tennessee Board of Regents was, indeed, generally quite successful, but they were concerned about the fate of students entering the course from more than one level below college readiness:

It is unclear how corequisite remediation affects students who score further below cutoff and presumably have greater academic needs. Some evidence suggests that students with lower levels of academic preparation benefit from an intensive focus on building basic academic skills, either in prerequisite remedial sequences or in programs delaying college matriculation, such as CUNY Start. It is thus important for future research to examine how corequisite reforms affect the students who are the most academically vulnerable.

Perhaps the most eloquent defense of retaining remedial education was written by Suh et al. (2021), members of the National Organization for Student Success’s Equity, Access, and Inclusion Network. In “Clarifying Terms and Reestablishing Ourselves within Justice: A Response to Critiques of Developmental Education as Anti-Equity,” the authors note, “While equality references equal treatment, equity requires the acknowledgment of unequal starting points and the provision of varied resources or opportunities in order to produce fair outcomes” (4). They conclude,

Institutional change is not as simple as eliminating standalone developmental classes to place students directly into college-level courses. Rather, this work requires (1) acknowledging how educational institutions often reproduce oppression, (2) striving to dismantle systemic oppression, and (3) engaging in constant self-reflection on our own socialization and assumptions. (6)

However, the distinction between acceleration and developmental education may not be as hard and fast as it sometimes seems. In her chapter in this collection, Broder recalls reading a passage in the Community College Resource Center’s analysis of acceleration noting

that “ALP’s primary innovation is structural rather than instructional.” Broder remarks, “This brief descriptor stayed with me as I established faculty development sessions or brainstormed ways to set up my class. It is the *structure* that is different, but the *instruction* is the same.” She concludes, “When we talk about best practices for ALP, we’re really considering best practices for teaching; no matter what their level, our corequisite students *are* our composition students.”

Indeed, while the contributors to *Teaching Accelerated and Corequisite Composition* specifically address their insights to instructors of accelerated composition, much of what they have written will be useful to anyone teaching college composition, including our colleagues devoting their talents to pre-college-level courses. After all, the movement toward acceleration literally began in the *Journal of Basic Writing* when Adams and his fellow instructors at CCBC drew on their passion for helping developing writers. As Adams (2020) eloquently states in another article,

Developmental education is the focal point for the American Dream. It is the most democratic segment of higher education. It is filled with students who are the first generation in their families to go to college; students who are not sure that they belong in college; students who lead very stressful lives; and, students full of hope that they will be able to improve their situation in life. (19)

Despite all the obstacles facing our students, and ourselves, it is our job, our *mission*, to help them towards their goals. Corequisite composition is a powerful tool for equity and inclusion, but it is even more powerful when it reaches out to and makes use of the wisdom of *everyone* who cares about student success.

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