

Corequisite Learning in College Level Composition Courses

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Abstract: This study examined student learning outcomes in corequisite-supported and standalone entry-level English composition courses at an urban private college. Over two semesters, student achievement was assessed through analysis of pre- and post-test writing samples from 11 sections of the standalone course (N = 153) and 5 sections of the corequisite-supported course (N = 49) using a rubric aligned with program learning outcomes representing core writing competencies. Descriptive analyses revealed that students in the corequisite course entered with lower baseline proficiency yet demonstrated substantial progress across all rubric criteria by the end of the semester, achieving learning outcomes comparable to those in the standalone course. Course pass rates were high for both groups, and progression to subsequent English courses exceeded 80% across semesters. Findings highlight the effectiveness of a well-aligned corequisite model taught by the same instructor and underscore the importance of faculty continuity and assessment-driven course design.

Keywords: *assessment, corequisite, learning, course design*

Introduction

Efforts to reform traditional remedial education have led many colleges and universities to replace standalone, non-credit-bearing prerequisite courses with corequisite models. In a corequisite structure, students receive targeted academic support while simultaneously enrolled in a credit-bearing course (City University of New York Office of Academic Affairs, 2019; Complete College America, 2016; Denley, 2021). This shift was driven by evidence that students in traditional prerequisite remediation often failed to make academic progress and complete a credit-bearing gateway course within an academic year (Denley, 2015a; Denley, 2015b).

Various models have been implemented to address the learning needs of students who enter college underprepared for the college curriculum. These models include non-course support services such as tutoring, compressed developmental courses, prerequisite courses, and semester-long developmental sequences that precede entry into credit-bearing instruction (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019; Park-Gaghan et al., 2022). However, both prerequisite models and non-course support structures have shown limited success in promoting student achievement and timely progression into college-level coursework. In contrast, corequisite models have demonstrated improved outcomes, including

COREQUISITE LEARNING IN COLLEGE LEVEL COMPOSITION COURSES

higher pass rates and a greater number of credit hours earned over the first year of college (Complete College America, 2016; Denley, 2015a; Denley, 2015b).

This report presents findings from a study conducted at a private, medium-sized, four-year college in the Northeast. Studies assessing the effectiveness of remedial models to foster student success have relied largely on broad metrics such as course completion and credit accumulation. This investigation in contrast focused specifically on the academic performance of students who were deemed in need of academic support and enrolled in a corequisite. Specifically, the analysis compared the academic performance of students enrolled in the standalone entry-level English composition course to that of students whose composition course was paired with the corequisite, previously a prerequisite. Both courses comprising the corequisite were taught by the same instructor and delivered concurrently during the same semester. All courses were credit bearing, but only the entry-level composition course fulfilled general education requirements. The analysis extended beyond examining pass rates and measured skill development in key areas of academic writing.

Curricular Redesign and Study Context

The study draws on data collected over two semesters during a period of curriculum redesign within the college's English program in 2016. Part of the redesign initiative focused on two courses originally designed as placement options for students identified as underprepared for the first English composition course. Placement into either of these courses was determined through a review of the student's high school or college transcript or by performance on a placement exam. Although both courses were credit bearing, neither fulfilled the general education English requirements.

The first of these two remedial placement options that focused on short analytic essays about folktales, fairy tales, myths, and legends was eliminated. The second remedial course focused on the organization, writing, and editing of expository essays as well as the introduction to the use of library reference works; it was revised to focus on expository writing in response to contemporary texts. This course was subsequently designated as the corequisite to the entry-level composition course, the first English course for which students receive general education credit. The entry-level composition course itself was revised from an emphasis on writing expository prose based on drama (accompanied by introductory critical essays and research methods skills) to a focus on expository writing supported by research methods in response to a broad range of nonfictional texts. The newly revised corequisite was then paired with the redesigned entry-level composition course.

These revisions were intended to reduce the amount of time underprepared students spend in courses that do not fulfill degree requirements and to better support their academic success. By aligning both the corequisite and entry-level composition courses around nonfiction informational texts and foundational writing skills, the redesign aimed to reflect national trends in first-year composition pedagogy while more fully integrating developmental support within the general education curriculum.

Method

Sample

Incoming first-year students were automatically enrolled in the entry-level composition course, the first in a two-course general education writing sequence. Students identified as needing additional support based on high-school English GPA or ACCUPLACER WritePlacer and Reading Comprehension scores were concurrently placed in a credit-bearing corequisite that ran alongside the entry-level composition course (College Board, 2022). Students who met all placement benchmarks were exempt from the corequisite. Assignment to the corequisite course reflected a relative need for additional preparation in academic writing.

Over the Fall and Spring semesters, student achievement was evaluated through analysis of writing samples from the entry-level composition course, including the 11 sections of the standalone course (N = 153) and 5 sections of the corequisite-supported course (N = 49). Both online and face-to-face modalities were represented. The sample was non-random and convenience based. Because this study was conducted during the pilot phase of the corequisite, the number of sections available for inclusion was limited resulting in unequal sample sizes between the groups. There was no attempt to statistically match students in the corequisite to those in the standalone entry-level course.

Materials

Student work was collected from sections of both the corequisite and the standalone entry-level composition courses at two points during the semester. The initial writing assignment (pre-test) was developed independently by faculty and designed to align with two English Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs) representing core writing competencies. The final assignment (post-test), designed by the English Department and common across all sections of the corequisite and standalone entry-level composition courses, was also aligned with the same English Program PLOs.

Student work samples were evaluated using a rubric that measured eight criteria essential to academic writing: Punctuation & Spelling; Conjugation & Grammar; Sentence Structure; Use of Rhetorical Mode Structure; Thesis & Development; Organization; Textual Support for Thesis; and Analysis & Explication. Four levels of achievement were specified for each of the criteria: Novice, Emerging, Developing, or Proficient. The expectation set by the program was that students would reach at least the Developing level by the end of the semester. See the rubric in the Appendix.

Procedure

This descriptive study was conducted during the implementation of the corequisite as part of the redesign of the English curriculum. Students were not randomly assigned to groups. Those identified as needing additional support based on placement criteria were enrolled in the corequisite course. Faculty administered the pre-test during the first two weeks of the semester and the common post-test during the final weeks. Faculty members evaluated student work

COREQUISITE LEARNING IN COLLEGE LEVEL COMPOSITION COURSES

using a shared rubric, and scores for both assessments were recorded on standardized data collection sheets.

Only students who completed both the pre- and post-assessments were included in the final dataset. The Office of Assessment compiled all submissions and conducted descriptive statistical analyses. Outcomes were reported as the percentage of students scoring at each performance level (Novice, Emerging, Developing, Proficient) for each rubric criterion. Results were reported separately for students in the corequisite and standalone entry-level composition courses.

Additionally, course grade data were obtained from the Office of Institutional Research for students enrolled in both course types. Where available, follow-up grades were collected for English Composition II, the next course in the writing sequence.

Results

Learning Data

Tables 1 and 2 present the results for the standalone entry-level course and the corequisite-supported entry-level course, respectively. For both courses, the percentage of student work at each of the four achievement levels on the rubric are reported across the eight rubric criteria for both the pre-test and post-test stages.

At the pre-test, students in the corequisite course demonstrated lower initial writing proficiency than their peers in the entry-level composition course (see Tables 1 and 2). Novice-level performance was higher across seven of the eight assessed criteria for students in the corequisite. Specifically, novice scores in the corequisite group ranged from 5% to 35%, compared to a range of 8% to 14% in the entry-level course.

By the post-test, the percentage of students scoring at the novice level was lower across all criteria in both the corequisite and standalone courses. In the corequisite course, novice-level performance ranged from 0% to 8%, while in the entry-level course it ranged from 1% to 4%. The percentage of students scoring at the proficient level was higher at the post-test compared to the pre-test for both groups. For the corequisite, proficient level performance ranged from 0–14% at the pre-test to 22–49% at post-test, and for the standalone entry-level course, from 14–33% at the pre-test to 32–56% at post-test.

With respect to specific criteria, at post-test approximately 70% of student work in both groups was rated at the developing or higher level with respect to sentence-level mechanics including punctuation and spelling, conjugation and grammar, and sentence structure. By the post-test, 82% of student writing in the standalone entry-level composition course was rated as developing or proficient in organization compared to 80% in the corequisite course. More than 80% of student work samples in both the standalone and corequisite courses were rated developing or proficient at post-test in criteria assessing thesis and development and use of rhetorical

COREQUISITE LEARNING IN COLLEGE LEVEL COMPOSITION COURSES

mode structure. At post-test 73% of student work in the standalone course was rated developing or proficient in textual support for thesis compared to 68% in the corequisite course.

Table 1

Standalone Entry-Level English Composition Course: Pre-Post Assessment Results (N=153)

Criterion	Measure	Novice	Emerging	Developing	Proficient
Thesis & Development	Pre-Test	8%	21%	38%	33%
	Post-Test	1%	14%	34%	51%
Punctuation & Spelling	Pre-Test	14%	38%	33%	14%
	Post-Test	4%	18%	47%	32%
Conjugation & Grammar	Pre-Test	10%	39%	27%	24%
	Post-Test	3%	19%	42%	37%
Sentence Structure	Pre-Test	12%	37%	27%	24%
	Post-Test	3%	19%	41%	37%
Organization	Pre-Test	8%	19%	39%	33%
	Post-Test	2%	16%	26%	56%
Use of Rhetorical Mode Structure	Pre-Test	8%	18%	44%	31%
	Post-Test	1%	16%	34%	49%
Textual Support for Thesis	Pre-Test ^a	11%	20%	42%	27%
	Post-Test ^b	3%	24%	29%	44%
Analysis & Explication	Pre-Test	8%	20%	42%	30%
	Post-Test	2%	23%	34%	41%

^an=130

^bn=146

COREQUISITE LEARNING IN COLLEGE LEVEL COMPOSITION COURSES

Table 2

Corequisite-Supported Entry-level English Composition Course: Pre-Post Assessment Results (n=49)

Criterion	Measure	Novice	Emerging	Developing	Proficient
Thesis & Development	Pre-Test	12%	35%	39%	14%
	Post-Test	2%	12%	37%	49%
Punctuation & Spelling	Pre-Test	35%	39%	27%	0%
	Post-Test	6%	24%	47%	22%
Conjugation & Grammar	Pre-Test	29%	31%	37%	4%
	Post-Test	6%	24%	41%	29%
Sentence Structure	Pre-Test	29%	45%	24%	2%
	Post-Test	6%	29%	39%	27%
Organization	Pre-Test	16%	43%	35%	6%
	Post-Test	8%	12%	31%	49%
Use of Rhetorical Mode Structure	Pre-Test	12%	33%	51%	4%
	Post-Test	6%	4%	45%	45%
Textual Support for Thesis	Pre-Test ^a	5%	53%	33%	10%
	Post-Test	4%	29%	35%	33%
Analysis & Explication ^b	Pre-Test	15%	38%	46%	2%
	Post-Test	0%	17%	56%	27%

^an=40

^bn=48

Pass Rates

To align with previous studies reporting on course pass rates (e.g., Complete College America, 2016; Denley, 2015a, 2015b), pass rates and progression data were also analyzed. Results were generally comparable for students in the standalone entry-level English course and the corequisite-supported course. With the exception of the Spring corequisite cohort pass rate of 72%, pass rates exceeded 90%. Across both semesters and course types, more than 80% of all students in this first-year English composition course at the college progressed to English Composition II the following semester. Pass rates for English Composition II, which focused on the critical analysis of literary works and the composition of a research essay, exceeded 80%

COREQUISITE LEARNING IN COLLEGE LEVEL COMPOSITION COURSES

across all semesters and course formats with the exception of the Spring corequisite course, which had a 67% pass rate.

Discussion

The results of this study provide additional evidence of the effectiveness of the corequisite model in supporting underprepared students. Consistent with prior reports (Complete College America, 2016; Denley, 2015a, 2015b), pass rates in the corequisite course were high, and most students progressed successfully to English Composition II. Importantly, this study extends the existing literature by documenting achievement of learning outcomes rather than focusing solely on course completion rates for students enrolled in a corequisite-supported composition course. The results demonstrate that this model effectively addresses learning gaps among students identified as needing additional academic support. Moreover, the analysis identifies specific skill areas in which students in the corequisite achieved levels of proficiency comparable to those of their peers in the standalone entry-level composition course. These findings demonstrate that a well-designed corequisite model can effectively address learning gaps among students requiring additional academic support.

Learning Gains and Skill Development

Pre-test results confirmed that students placed into the corequisite course entered with lower writing proficiency than those in the standalone course, supporting the validity of the placement measures. Post-test findings, however, revealed substantial progress in both groups. Across all rubric categories fewer students performed at the novice level and a greater proportion achieved developing and proficient levels. Nevertheless, roughly half of all students remained at the developing level, indicating the need for continued attention to foundational writing instruction.

Two rubric criteria, those measuring use of rhetorical mode and textual support for thesis, were inconsistently applicable at the pre-test stage; many of the initial writing assignments took the form of personal essays. This likely accounts for some of the variation in sample size and scoring frequency observed for these two criteria.

Organization emerged as a notable area of progress indicating a growing ability to structure ideas effectively. This skill is likely to benefit students not only in subsequent English courses but also across their broader academic coursework. Additionally, results suggest that students are gaining greater control over essay structure and genre conventions as indicated by ratings assessing thesis and development and use of rhetorical mode structure.

However, providing textual support for thesis remains an area for instructional focus. Only 33% of students in the corequisite course achieved a proficient rating on this criterion, compared to 44% of students in the standalone entry-level course. This gap suggests that students in the corequisite course may benefit from more sustained and explicit instruction in locating, integrating, and analyzing textual evidence to support their arguments.

Completion and Persistence Patterns

Pass rates for both the standalone entry-level composition course and the corequisite-supported course were high and comparable (over 90%) with the exception of the Spring corequisite section that had a pass rate just above 70%. Examination of pass rates for English Composition II, the subsequent English course, suggests continuing benefits of the corequisite model for student success. The lower pass rate for the corequisite students (67%), however, may indicate that learning gains among corequisite students are more fragile. Students completing the corequisite in the Spring may not re-engage with writing instruction until the following Fall, and this gap may contribute to a degree of summer learning loss that appears to have a greater impact on students entering with lower levels of preparation.

Implications and Program Design Factors

Although this is a descriptive study without random assignment or matched controls, the findings are robust across two semesters and student groups. By moving beyond course completion metrics to directly examine the development of writing skills, this study makes a valuable contribution to ongoing discussions of the role of corequisite instruction in composition pedagogy.

This study affirms that a well-structured corequisite model that aligns closely with the credit-bearing composition course and is taught by the same instructor can foster learning gains comparable to those of students enrolled directly in the entry-level course. Several features of the pilot implementation likely contributed to its success, including the intentional alignment between the corequisite and the required course. This design promotes more coherent learning experiences and facilitates skill transfer and timely application of writing strategies across both course components. Continuity of faculty, with instructors teaching both sections, also ensures consistency in expectations and feedback, enabling faculty to address individual student needs and tailor support in real time.

Limitations

While the findings of this study provide promising evidence of the effectiveness of a corequisite English composition model, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research design is descriptive and based on a convenience sample. Students were not randomly assigned to conditions nor matched on background variables such as prior academic performance or demographic characteristics. Second, the pre-test assignment was not standardized and was developed independently by instructors. Although rubric scoring was applied consistently, variability in the nature and genre of the pre-test may have affected the comparability of baseline scores across students and sections. Third, the relatively small sample size in the corequisite group, particularly in the Spring semester, limits the generalizability of the findings.

Finally, the study was conducted during a pilot implementation of the corequisite model. Faculty development, course alignment, and student support structures are likely to continue evolving, and outcomes from future implementations may differ as the model is refined and

scaled. Continued research will be essential to understanding how evolving instructional practices and support structures influence student success in corequisite composition models.

Conclusion

This study extends prior research on corequisite reform by examining direct measures of student learning in addition to course completion rates. Learning gains were noted for the corequisite-supported and standalone English composition course as were comparable course completion rates. These findings may be associated with features of the current corequisite design suggesting that the aligned instructional support results in positive short-term outcomes for underprepared students. The lower pass rate for the next composition course for the Spring corequisite suggests that gains may be less stable for some students over time. This finding may contribute to mixed results related to longer-term outcomes of corequisite participation including persistence and degree attainment (e.g., Ran & Lee, 2025; Ran & Lin, 2022). These findings highlight the importance of considering sustained academic supports as students transition from corequisite structures to fully college-level coursework. Integrating direct assessment of student learning into evaluations of corequisite interventions can help identify specific instructional needs to incorporate into ongoing supports.

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COREQUISITE LEARNING IN COLLEGE LEVEL COMPOSITION COURSES

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Appendix

ENG 111 RUBRIC

	1 Novice	2 Emerging	3 Developing	4 Proficient
Thesis & Thesis Development	The thesis is entirely unclear or missing from the introduction. The essay wanders without a focus.	Thesis is present in the introduction but not clear; it lacks development and relevance. The thesis may get lost across the essay.	The thesis is clear and demonstrates a developed thought; its relevance may not always be clear but it is maintained across the essay.	The thesis is perfectly clear, thoroughly developed across the essay, and relevant.
Punctuation & Spelling	Many mistakes in use of punctuation (comma, semi-colon, etc.); pervasive spelling errors; lack of capitalization.	Some mistakes in use of punctuation (comma, semi-colon, etc.); few spelling errors; capitalization accurate.	Virtually no punctuation or spelling errors; those present are clearly an editing issue.	No punctuation or spelling errors; appropriate use of capitalization.
Conjugation & Grammar	Essay shows consistent errors in subject-verb agreement, pronoun reference, verb tense, etc.	Essay shows occasional errors in subject-verb agreement, pronoun reference, verb tense, etc.	Essay shows no errors in subject-verb agreement or pronoun reference; verb tense may still shift across essay.	Essay shows no errors in subject-verb agreement, pronoun reference, verb tense, etc.
Sentence Structure	Many run-on (comma splice or fused) and fragment sentences; dangling clauses and phrases cause confusion. Sentence style shows little variety.	Few run-on (comma splice or fused) and fragment sentences; dangling clauses and phrases cause confusion. Some variety in sentence style.	No run-on or fragment sentences; sentence style may occasionally be awkward.	A variety of sentence styles is present; no formal errors.
Organization	The essay is missing an	The essay has all the formal parts	The essay includes all	The essay includes all

COREQUISITE LEARNING IN COLLEGE LEVEL COMPOSITION COURSES

	introduction, conclusion and/or step in the structure of the rhetorical mode.	of the rhetorical mode, but the sequencing or transitions may be confusing.	formal parts; Most transitions are clear. Logical sequencing works.	formal parts of the rhetorical mode. Transitions are clear. Logic is present.
Use of Rhetorical Mode	Does not use structure appropriate to rhetorical mode.	Essay shows confusion on structure of the rhetorical mode.	Essay adequately presents structure of the rhetorical mode.	Essay masters structure of the rhetorical mode with some stylistic twists.
Textual Support for Thesis	No or far too few references to any supporting source; any sources used are used in entirely ineffective or irrelevant ways; plagiarism may be evident.	Some references to supporting sources, but some used at times in non-effective ways; more and better use of references needed; no plagiarism.	Appropriate references used throughout much of the paper, mostly at appropriate times, with few instances of lack of support.	Appropriate references used at all possible times throughout the paper, with no instances of lack of support.
Analysis & Explication	Essay bespeaks practically no understanding of the text(s) and/or idea(s) being discussed.	Essay bespeaks some understanding of the text(s) and/or idea(s) being discussed, but gaps in logic exist.	Essay shows solid understanding of the text(s) and/or idea(s) being discussed. Provides explanations of how evidence supports the thesis, though these may require additional clarification.	Provides clear explanations of how evidence supports the thesis. Essay bespeaks exceptional, thorough understanding of the text(s) and/or idea(s) being discussed.