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Senior English/College Credit Now Writing 121, 122, 123 (through Chemeketa)

Last summer, I was instructed by my principal to attend the Willamette Promise Kick-off at Central High School, where attendees were given an overview of the program; we then broke into groups by subject area, where we were given more detail about the writing credits available in the Willamette Promise. I left the meeting feeling alarmed, filled with questions, and, quite frankly, dumbfounded.

I am in my 28th year of full-time teaching; the last 20 have been with upperclassmen. I have taught SAT prep classes, Junior English classes, Senior English classes, college prep workshops, and a few others. For four years, I was one of the coordinators of GEAR UP, which is a federally funded program that focuses entirely on helping kids prepare for college. Through these positions, I believe I have a very, very good idea of what my students need to be successful in college and “the real world.” The Willamette Promise did not meet those needs or the standards that students will face in a real college class; in fact, it didn’t even come close. Because of that, I asked my administrators to allow me to continue with the College Credit Now classes instead of switching to the Willamette Promise.

I am not opposed to dual credit programs, but I am opposed to dual credit programs that set my students up for failure or send them off with a false sense of accomplishment. That is my overriding concern about the Willamette Promise. College classes should be difficult for high school students; they’re difficult for college students. The expectations should be the same. I cannot understand why anyone would think it’s okay for a high school student to write 2 “on demand” essays, “polish” a final draft of one, write a reflective essay about the writing, and then receive four college credits. (These are the requirements for the Writing 115 and 121 classes through the Willamette Promise.) Even if the student is an exceptional writer, he or she is not demonstrating competence in the kind of writing and research that is necessary in college, nor is he or she completing the same tasks that are required of college students.

More difficult to understand is how students are expected to learn writing (and the many skills involved with it) without being taught, practicing, receiving feedback, and revising. Writing is a skill like math or volleyball that requires time to learn, repetition and instruction. It doesn’t simply improve as students grow older; it requires hard work, and, as I’ve said before, instruction. The idea of “imbedding” college writing assignments into any high school English class is nonsensical. High school teachers have their own curriculum that must follow the Common Core Standards. English teachers cannot just throw in two or three extra essay assignments and expect students to be successful without dramatically changing the curriculum and then teaching that curriculum. I teach college writing in a college writing class; I teach Senior English in a Senior English class. The two are nowhere near the same. Nor are the abilities of the students.

With the expected failure rate of the new Smarter Balanced Test to be near 70%, the idea that all high school students can write at a college level is even more perplexing. How is it possible to receive college credit but not pass a state test? We cannot disregard students’ skill levels when implementing college courses in high schools. The idea that 14-18 year olds have the maturity and/or the ability to do academic work designed for adults is a dangerous misconception.

During the thirteen years I have taught the CCN classes, I have worked closely with my liaison from Chemeketa through meetings, emails and phone calls. Because of this essential connection, I am confident that my writing curriculum is closely matched with the college classes, and more importantly, that my students are being adequately prepared for the rigor of college writing. Without the curriculum, I simply could not provide them with the necessary support they need to learn to research and write college level essays, including the use of the Chemeketa library's research database.

I know what my students need. They need instruction. They need practice. They need guidance. They need a teacher with a curriculum that prepares them for college. They need college level textbooks. They need access to computers. They need access to research data bases. They need to be taught how to use the databases. Finally, they need to work very hard. A dual credit program must meet these needs if we really want our students to be successful in college.