Student Success United: Extending Successes in Gateway Course Transformations throughout the University–Wide Curriculum at Savannah State University

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Historically, DFWI rates are disproportionately attributed to students in underrepresented populations. Thus, the efforts of redesigning "gateway" courses to promote an inclusive environment where all students can learn and perform at their highest potential is especially important for HBCUs like Savannah State University (SSU). Student Success United, Savannah State University's newly approved Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), builds on the successes achieved through the Gateways to Completion (G2C) methodology and replicates the process to impact course redesigns extending to all areas of the core curriculum and lower- and upper-division courses in all degree-granting academic programs.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

As an access institution, Savannah State University is committed to providing enrollment and educational opportunities for populations that have traditionally been underserved in higher education. Equitable academic outcomes are central to our mission.

SSU joined Cohort II in the collaboration between the Gardner Institute and the University System of Georgia. This allowed the work of formalized course redesign to begin in 2017 through SSU's ongoing participation in the Gardner Institute's Gateways to Completion (G2C) program. The G2C process offers guidance for first researching and discovering reasons for decreased student success, then guides institutions in applying a plan to tackle those factors, and finally, assists in evaluating the effect of the methods applied in the implementation stage. In all, the G2C interventions offered us a powerful set of tools for our specific institutional context.

Some of the strategies and methods used by faculty during the planning phase proved to be impactful and were extended into the next phases of the redesign work. For example, in MATH 1111: College Algebra, the new course redesign curriculum encouraged instructors to vigorously implement and enforce prerequisite requirements related to the three high-stakes semester assessments. All students were required to successfully complete every online homework assignment via myopenmath.com as well as successfully submitting every in-class assignment prior to taking the course examinations. Math faculty attribute these interventions as being the most impactful for increasing course completion rates.

The Department of English, Languages, and Cultures substantially revised the curriculum in ENGL 1101 and ENGL 1102 (English Composition I and English Composition II) to increase the vertical alignment of ENGL 1101 into ENGL 1102, which included a revised comprehensive set of learning goals, assignments that were designed using a backwards design approach, and more often and earlier substantive assessments in both courses. The faculty also added three metacognitive reflective assignments into each course.

For HUMN 1201: Critical Thinking and Communication, the Planning phase was a good opportunity for faculty to standardize elements of the curriculum delivery (e.g., using a syllabus template and shared rubrics; establishing common standards on assignments, exams, grading scales and weights; and providing early and frequent feedback on a variety of assignment types). As reflected in the Student Learning Gains Surveys, these improvements were received favorably by students.

With three years of the G2C process completed, all the redesigned gateway courses have seen reductions in the

rates at which students earn D, F, W, and I grades. The reduction in MATH 1111: College Algebra is striking, coming close to halving the rate at which students fail to complete the class. The rate in ENGL 1101: English Composition I has also fallen significantly (14% less in G2C year 2 than in year 0) and, though the reductions in ENGL 1102: English Composition II and HUMN 1201: Critical Thinking and Communication are smaller, they are measurable and trending in the right direction. These promising results indicate an opportunity to dramatically increase student success and improve students' educational outcomes in all our institution's programs.

From this strong foundation, SSU decided to fully commit to gateway course redesign across campus. Through SSU's newly approved Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), Student Success United, the institution will implement the G2C redesign principles, coupled with some additional augmentations of proven best practices in pedagogy, to improve all areas of the curriculum, university wide.

METHODS

Student Success United builds on the successes gained through the G2C methodology to impact course redesigns extending to all areas of the core curriculum and lower- and upper-division courses in all degree-granting academic programs.

The selection of courses to be redesigned will be accomplished in three phases:

Phase 1: Expansion into additional areas of the core

Phase 2: Expansion into all degree programs (lower level)

Phase 3: Expansion into all degree programs (upper level)

SSU has already identified the courses for Phase 1 by employing G2C metrics for identifying gateway courses (i.e., courses with high student contact, courses with predictive markers for future success, and especially courses with high DWFI rates). They are:

COURSES	DFWI RATES
ARTS 1101	35.67%
CISM 1130	29.81%
MATH 1001	36.65%
PSYC 1101	43.75%
SOCI 1101	37.29%

Expanding redesign to these five courses not only moves the G2C effort beyond Core Curriculum Area A (ENGL 1101, ENGL 1102, and MATH 1111) and Area B (HUMN 1201) into Area C (ARTS 1101), Area D (CISM 1130), and Area E (PSYC 1101 and SOCI 1101) but also extends the redesign's coverage of Area A by addressing a second course in mathematics (MATH 1001).

Course selection for Phase 2 and 3 will be completed by the faculty of all 30 baccalaureate programs at SSU, beginning first with at least one lower division course, and then adding at least one upper division course.

OUTCOMES

Once a course is identified as a good candidate for Student Success United's course redesign initiative, a team of 2-3 faculty members will be selected to complete the redesign efforts in their respective department or area. The faculty selection process will vary from program to program to include peer-based nominations, chair-based appointments, and/or self-selected volunteers. Faculty members on the redesign teams will be expected to attend training and professional development sessions on all principles of course redesign adopted by Student Success

United. This training will be conducted through the Center for Teaching and Faculty Development and will cover topics such as innovative approaches to teaching gateway courses, selecting courses for redesign to achieve maximum student success, backward course design, the Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TiLT) framework, High Impact Practices (HIPs) and incorporating Library resources into research projects and assignments. Participating faculty will receive course-redesign stipends for their efforts.

These evidence-based pedagogical approaches were selected to best serve our institutional mission and learners. For instance, HIPs are notably beneficial for underserved students who may not have equal access to education, and results show students' improvement in deep learning, in addition to general, personal, and practical gains (Association of American Colleges & Universities, n.d.)

TiLT is also an important pedagogical practice, especially for traditionally underserved students, as it helps the students know why and how they are to do certain assignments, which in turn creates stronger connection with the material and more confidence in the student's ability to be successful (Winkelmes, Bowles-Terry, Gianoutsos, & Katie Humphreys, 2016).

In building its G2C-based reform efforts around the work of course-specific faculty committees, Student Success United capitalizes on the ability to customize needed changes in pedagogy and course design in ways that work best for their particular gateway and barrier courses, being situated in the disciplines. This localized approach allows faculty teams to "guide the course redesign process, identify practices to foster student engagement, and build active learning environments that promote higher levels of achievement" (Hearne, Henkin, & Dee, 2011, p. 57).
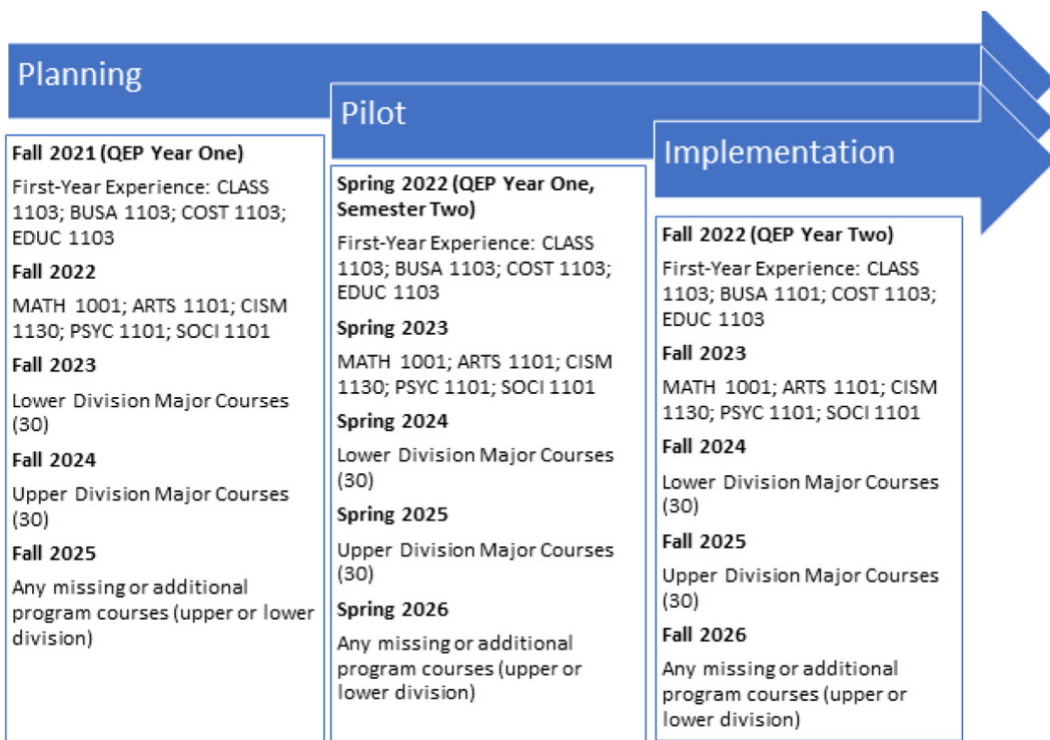
The selection of individual courses in the majors will follow the same principles of selection used in the identification of additional core courses: courses with high student contact in specific majors, foundational and capstone courses in major programs, and courses with comparatively high DWFI rates will be targeted.

Given that all four original gateway courses we have already redesigned saw an increase in student success, measured by the percentage of students receiving a passing grade in the course and that Student Learning Gains Surveys feedback gathered during these courses was very positive, we are quite optimistic that we can achieve similar results for students in the rest of the core and in the chosen programs of study.

We are hopeful that the outcomes from our expansion of the G2C course redesign efforts will mean that more students (potentially many more) will pass courses more consistently, proceed through their degrees more quickly, graduate earlier and with less debt, all while enjoying a more rewarding and a more academically and intellectually fulfilling experience during their studies at SSU. Given the scope of our redesign expansion, if successful, these efforts will touch every student at SSU and thus represent a transformative change for the institution that could continue to positively impact students for literally generations to come.

PLANS FOR CONTINUATION AND EXPANSION

The implementation of the Student Success United's curricula redesign will roll out in cyclical stages as the QEP progresses with the goal of reaching at least 73 courses, including all undergraduate degrees, transformed over the span of the QEP. Our plan expands the kinds of high impact practices that have already proven to be successful in the first courses our students take at SSU and grows with them as they move through their degree. Their own familiarity and comfort with these kinds of pedagogical approaches and methods will only increase and will, we are confident, amplify the successes students achieve.

Planning

Fall 2021 (QEP Year One)

First-Year Experience: CLASS 1103; BUSA 1103; COST 1103; EDUC 1103

Fall 2022

MATH 1001; ARTS 1101; CISM 1130; PSYC 1101; SOCI 1101

Fall 2023

Lower Division Major Courses (30)

Fall 2024

Upper Division Major Courses (30)

Fall 2025

Any missing or additional program courses (upper or lower division)

Pilot

Spring 2022 (QEP Year One, Semester Two)

First-Year Experience: CLASS 1103; BUSA 1103; COST 1103; EDUC 1103

Spring 2023

MATH 1001; ARTS 1101; CISM 1130; PSYC 1101; SOCI 1101

Spring 2024

Lower Division Major Courses (30)

Spring 2025

Upper Division Major Courses (30)

Spring 2026

Any missing or additional program courses (upper or lower division)

Implementation

Fall 2022 (QEP Year Two)

First-Year Experience: CLASS 1103; BUSA 1101; COST 1103; EDUC 1103

Fall 2023

MATH 1001; ARTS 1101; CISM 1130; PSYC 1101; SOCI 1101

Fall 2024

Lower Division Major Courses (30)

Fall 2025

Upper Division Major Courses (30)

Fall 2026

Any missing or additional program courses (upper or lower division)

Our multi-tiered approach to administering the full curricular redesign incorporates ongoing, planning, piloting, and implementation that is faculty-driven, self-recursive, and equitable, giving each program the autonomy to identify courses, design curricula and test improvements, and refine their own practices in order to maximize the impact of these curricular revisions on student success. The process is incremental in nature, spanning over three semesters for each course's redesign cycle. Involving teams of faculty from each program to work exclusively within their own areas of expertise ensures a customized set of course revisions that are embedded in best practices within specific fields, as well as encouraging maximum faculty buy-in within departments due to a reasonably scheduled timeline.

LESSONS LEARNED AND POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

G2C focuses on student success but also on faculty success. This stems from the philosophy that learning and teaching work in tandem, and faculty must be adequately informed and provide professional development opportunities for students to succeed academically. This includes training sessions on "instructional and curricular guidance, and analytics tools to redesign teaching, learning and success in gateway courses" (University System of Georgia, 2016, para 4). Future efforts to expand will have to commit to the growth and nurturance of the faculty as teachers.

Any course revision geared toward increasing student success is admirable and encouraged; however, singular course revisions or improvements may not be as far-reaching or have an impact on a large population of students, as it may only benefit the students enrolled in that particular section. That is why we are taking a holistic approach to gateway course redesign with Student Success United, as well as providing co-curricular support for students taking the various gateway courses. Combining the resources offered by G2C and the Gardner Institute with our own faculty development initiatives and student support infrastructure will benefit many students, as many enroll in these gateway courses; this benefit only adds up over time exponentially as more and more students are positively affected by these implemented changes.

REFERENCES

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