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Andrew K. Koch EDITOR

Improving Teaching, Learning, Equity, and Success in Gateway Courses

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Betsy O. Barefoot
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This introductory chapter defines the phrase gateway courses*, describes why these courses are one of the most compelling issues in the contemporary student success movement, and details what is at stake if the issues associated with these courses are left unaddressed.*

It's About the Gateway Courses: Defining and Contextualizing the Issue

Andrew K. Koch

The Situation

In 1992, political strategist James Carville rallied Bill Clinton's campaign workers around the mantra "It's the economy, stupid." Carville was not attempting to insult anyone's intelligence. Rather, he was making the simple yet profound political point that discussing issues other than the economy would waste resources and time, and probably result in Clinton's defeat. Originally posted on an office wall placard and intended only for the campaign staff, Carville's quip quickly became the de facto slogan for the entire campaign. It helped the Clinton team develop and maintain a focus that ultimately won the election. In years since, "It's the economy, stupid," has become part of American political pundits' vernacular—a mechanism for quickly pinpointing what matters most in an election (Galoozis, 2012).

Carville's mantra and its associated lessons also happen to form the perfect rhetorical concept for explaining why an increased focus on gateway courses—foundational college courses that are high-risk and high-enrollment—is necessary. This volume is intended to provide guidance for the faculty, staff, and administrators in the vanguard of gateway-course improvement who are taking steps to advance and bring to scale this new direction for higher education. I, along with the chapter authors featured in this volume, argue that in 2017, what matters most in the student success movement is our ability to develop and maintain a focus on gateway courses.

Many of us who have worked in and provided thought leadership for the student success movement in the United States over the past 40 years have not paid attention to gateway (or "killer") courses in which students face the greatest risk of poor performance or outright failure. Instead, we

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have focused on other efforts such as learning communities, orientation programs, first-year seminars, and a whole host of other "high-impact practices" (Barefoot et al., 2005; Barefoot, Griffin, & Koch, 2012; Greenfield, Keup, & Gardner, 2013; Koch, 2001; Koch, Foote, Hinkle, Keup, & Pistilli, 2007; Kuh, 2008; Stein Koch, Griffin, & Barefoot, 2013; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). To date, these high-impact practices have circumvented the experiences that undergraduates have in gateway courses—experiences that may, in fact, matter most to their success. And until recent years, there has been no concomitant effort to substantively transform the way gateway courses are designed and taught. As a result, failure rates in gateway courses have largely remained unchanged. The effect of these courses can be devastating, particularly for America's least advantaged, first-generation, and historically underrepresented students (Koch, 2017; Koch & Gardner, In Press).

Early student success leaders, however, should not be faulted for their lack of focus on foundational courses. They and their efforts were products of the space, place, and time in which they were operating. David Pace, the accomplished historian and scholar of teaching and learning, aptly described the environment in which student success pioneers were acting. Making his opening comments during a workshop at the 2017 American Historical Association annual meeting, Pace quipped, "In the 1970s and 1980s, the classroom was like the bathroom. You knew something important happened there, and you *never* talked about it!" (Pace, 2017). To date, student success thought leaders have generally focused their actions on activities other than undergraduate courses, including gateway courses, and have had little interaction with faculty.

But this is 2017. And we can now safely say that the sum total of the student success efforts created and initiated in the four-plus decades spanning the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have not managed to budge the retention and completion needle in any significant manner. For example, according to ACT, 68.3% of all students who started in a college of any type in fall 1999 returned to that college in fall 2000 (ACT, 2000). In 2015, 15 years later, the rate was 68.0% (ACT, 2015). The good news is that since the 1960s, legislation such as the Civil Rights Act and the Higher Education Acts greatly expanded access to postsecondary education. And contrary to what might have been logically predicted, increased access did not lead to decreases in retention and completion. But neither have there been widespread gains in these outcomes, even though there has been a large influx of state and federal resources to support student success programs.

Thanks to a new and growing body of scholarship on teaching and learning that has emerged over the past decade, we can now point to an array of evidence-based approaches and strategies that have the potential to move student success rates measurably beyond their persistently static level (ACT, 2000, 2015). And unlike most of the efforts that preceded them,

these strategies are directly embedded in gateway-course classrooms of all kinds—online, blended, or face-to-face.

Gateway Courses Defined

This publication's chapter contributors and I are all drawing on a definition for *gateway courses* that is being used in the Gateways to Completion (G2C) project sponsored by the nonprofit John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education (Gardner Institute). Forty institutions, including 2- and 4-year, public and private, not-for-profit, and proprietary, enrolling nearly 700,000 undergraduates, have been involved in the G2C effort since it was launched in fall 2013. With significant input from a national advisory committee, Gardner Institute staff members crafted the following definition, which is applicable to diverse institutions.

Gateway courses are defined by Koch and Rodier (2014) as any courses that are:

- **Foundational**: These courses may be non-credit-bearing developmental education courses—which often serve as initial paths to the gateway courses—and/or college credit-bearing, generally lower-division courses.
- **High-risk**: Such courses are identified by the rates at which D, F, W (for any form of withdrawal on the transcript) and I (for incomplete) grades are earned across sections of the course(s). Note that there is no set threshold rate; what constitutes an acceptable rate should be discussed and defined in local institutional contexts. Also note that W and I grades are included in the mix. Some argue that W and I grades should not be included because these grades do not factor into the grade point average. However, W and I grades do very much have deleterious implications for students over time.

W grades indicate withdrawal for any reason once the formal drop period has ended—usually a few weeks after the start of a term. Unlike a drop, Ws do appear on the transcript, and often they reflect a student's leaving the course before the end of a term as an alternative to earning a D or an F. What's particularly important about the W grade is the fact that the federal government only allows Ws to constitute a certain proportion of overall grades in its "Satisfactory Academic Progress" (SAP) formula, which is associated with determining eligibility for financial aid. In short, if students earn too many Ws, they will lose eligibility for federally backed loans and grants. For many students, failure to qualify for federal aid of any kind essentially rules out attendance and completion altogether. It does not, however, absolve students' responsibility for past loans. Thus, students—especially those from low- and middle-income families—who no longer qualify for federal aid leave college in debt, without their degrees, and with debt collectors soon to follow when the students discover

they lack the credentials to get jobs that would help them pay back what they owe.

Unlike W grades, I grades do carry grade point average implications, even if they are not as immediate as those associated with the D or F grades. These implications are realized after the term limit has expired. As explained on the website for the University of Missouri's Office of the Registrar, "An undergraduate student who receives an I grade must complete the course requirements either (1) within one year from the date it was recorded ... or (2) before the date of graduation, whichever comes first." The policy continues, "When an incomplete is satisfactorily resolved, the faculty member responsible for the grade change will notify the registrar of the revised grade. Otherwise, the registrar will remove the I and record a grade of F in classes graded A–F ..." (University of Missouri Office of the Registrar, 2017). The University of Missouri's policy reflects common practice across the majority of colleges and universities in the United States. What also is fairly common across colleges and universities is that there is a significant proportion of students for whom I grades revert to Fs—significant enough to prompt the former U.S. Department of Education researcher Cliff Adelman to begin tracking the I grade as part of a "DWI index," where DWI stood for "Drops (legitimate, in the drop-add period), non-penalty Withdrawals, Incompletes" (Adelman, 1999, 2006).

- **High-enrollment**: These courses are identified by the number of students enrolled within and/or across course sections. Note here that we do not set a number threshold, since context matters. My colleagues and I believe that all institutions, whether they enroll 400 or 40,000 undergraduates, have high-enrollment courses. What constitutes high enrollment at one institution differs from another—but the courses are a ubiquitous feature in U.S. higher education.

Why This Issue Matters

To better understand the impact of gateway courses in contemporary twenty-first-century postsecondary education, we must further explore the issue within the context of who is coming to college and what educators must do to meet the demands associated with changing demographics.

There is something very important at stake in gateway courses. Simply stated, as supported by a growing body of scholarship produced over the past decade, the students who do not succeed in gateway courses disproportionately come from lower-income, first-generation, and underrepresented minority groups (Koch, 2017). They are the students least likely to attempt college, and, even when they do attend, are the least likely to complete a degree. Also, their failure in gateway courses is directly correlated with their departure from college. They leave with their dreams diverted if not extinguished and frequently with debt that they might never be able to repay.

My Gardner Institute colleagues and I believe that these findings have serious and negative implications for equity and social justice in U.S. higher education.

Institutional enrollment management and related financial factors also must be considered when examining gateway-course issues. The pool of high school graduates is projected to decrease nationally for the near term (approximately 15 years). Where and when the number of high school graduates grows, it will do so primarily in high-risk demographic pools—historically underserved students who are unlikely to attend college and even less likely to complete a postsecondary degree even if they enroll (Prescott, 2008; Prescott & Bransberger, 2012). In short, if nothing is done to transform the gateway-course experience, institutions and their budgets will be much smaller—and less able to support their missions.

The situation and conditions described in the previous two paragraphs should never be misconstrued as a call to "give everyone an A." We believe that expectations should be high; standards should be maintained. However, it is one thing for students to leave college if they fail to put forth effort. It is another thing altogether if students do put forth strong effort and the institutions that they attend fail to reciprocate by investing effort in course improvement.

Twenty-first-century learners require twenty-first-century teaching and learning strategies—strategies that take into account the students' potential gaps in social and cultural capital (Braxton et al., 2013; Wells, 2008a, 2008b). Alas, many faculty and institutions are not using these strategies (National Research Council, 2012; Seymour & Hewitt, 1997), even if these approaches are correlated with so much improvement that, as one researcher put it, "if the [course redesign] experiments analyzed here had been conducted as randomized controlled trials of medical interventions, they may have been stopped for benefit" (Freeman et al., 2014).

Because gateway courses are largely untouched territory in the contemporary student success movement and because they increasingly enroll some of postsecondary education's most at-risk students, we believe they constitute the greatest higher education student success challenge of the early twenty-first century in the United States and, potentially, in many other countries across the globe. But attempting to focus on improving student success in gateway courses without focusing on improving gateway-course teaching and learning is folly.

In the present day, responsible academic leaders and academic communities must undertake wide-scale efforts to transform teaching and learning in their gateway courses and, where they already exist, these efforts must be expanded so they are not limited to a few motivated, but overwhelmed, faculty members. These actions will be difficult and complex, but, in light of demographic changes and societal needs, doing otherwise borders on malfeasance—because, when it comes to the twenty-first-century student success movement, the focus clearly needs to be on gateway courses.

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