

**Historically Underrepresented Students' First Year Writing Experiences at
the University of North Carolina Charlotte**

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Abstract

Since effective written communication is an institutional-level outcome at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC), we need a better understanding for how racially diverse students fare in the foundational writing instruction that comes from the WRDS 1103 or 1104 faculty. This study seeks to explore how historically underrepresented minority students experience their First Year Writing (FYW) course at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and to track their success in the writing assignments in “Writing and Inquiry in Academic Contexts” (WRDS 1103 or WRDS 1104). We are looking to combine student voices with disciplinary and institutional data to create a more complete understanding of historically underrepresented minority students’ efficacy in FYW. Using focus groups to capture student experiences in WRDS 1103 and 1104, we will look for patterns in responses that might indicate how they navigated both the challenges and successes in their FYW course in Fall 2021. We will combine their experiential data with the scoring of writing portfolios from the course in Fall semester 2021 to get a more complete picture of the ways they met the outcomes of the course. We will analyze whether or not historically underrepresented minorities encountered obstacles as writers that other student populations did not. The findings of our study will impact how we are serving UNCC undergraduate minority students’ writing needs and help us align best practices from antiracist scholarship in Writing Studies with the experiences of our UNCC students.

Budget

Lead Principal Investigators: Angela Mitchell, Jan Rieman, Tonya Wertz-Orbaugh

Principal Investigator 800#: #800975930

Title of Project:

Historically Underrepresented Students’ First Year Writing Experiences at the
University of North Carolina Charlotte

Lead Principal Investigator: Dr. Angela Mitchell

Fiscal Year One (January 15, 2021 to July 30, 2022)

Faculty Stipend	Paid directly from Academic Affairs fund on May 15, 2022	\$1,500 (\$500X3)
911250	Graduate Student Salaries	
911300	Special Pay to Faculty other than Grantee	
915000	Student (Undergraduate or Graduate) Temporary Wages	\$2,500
915900	Non-student Temporary Wages (see PD-17)	
920000	Honorarium (Individual(s) not with UNCC)	
921160	Subject Incentive Fee: Gift Cards	\$25x50: \$1,250
925000	Domestic Travel	
926000	Foreign Travel	
928000	Communication and/or Printing	

930000	Supplies	
942000	Computing Equipment	Dedoose: \$14.95x 5m \$74.75
944000	Educational Equipment	
951000	Other Contracted Services	
TOTAL FUNDS REQUESTED		\$5,325.00

SOTL Proposals that do not receive SOTL funds may be eligible for support from the Office of Assessment and Accreditation. If your SOTL proposal is not recommended for funding, would you like for your proposal to be shared with the Office of Assessment for review and consideration for funding from that office? **YES**

Budget Narrative

Most of the budget will go to incentives for student participation. The target population of first-year historically underrepresented minority students will receive incentives to participate in the focus groups and share their portfolios from their FYW course for evaluation by a scoring rubric. Participation in focus groups will occur in Spring 2022. The incentives will be gift cards for the amount of \$25 each and will require \$1,250 to

cover the Spring 2022 semester of focus groups. The graduate student will receive \$2,500 for transcribing and coding during May, June, and July.

The budget for the proposed project will also require funds to pay the three faculty investigators a small \$500 summer stipend to assist in the coding and transcribing of the data from the focus groups and to assemble it with other data collected from the institution (Grades, Portfolio Scores, and other readily available institutional data).

The project will also require equipment fees for 5 months use of Dedoose at \$14.95 a month. Dedoose is our coding software, a web-based application designed for qualitative and mixed methods research that will be used for the handling of text transcriptions and spreadsheet data. Dedoose provides a workspace for coding, retrieval, and memoing; data management, excerpting, and analysis for download; and easy to read data visualisations for reports and presentations. Dedoose will also allow us to integrate our qualitative data with demographics and quantitative data if we choose to continue our research at a later date.

Has Funding for the project been requested from other sources? ____ Yes **X** No

If yes, list sources.

Project Narrative

Specific Aims

This study will produce a rich quantitative and qualitative dataset on historically underrepresented first year students who took WRDS 1103 and 1104 at UNCC in Fall 2021. Our evidence will create an in-depth portrait of FYW experiences for these students, and importantly, allow us to determine if students show differing or equal levels of writing success depending on their racial and ethnic backgrounds. Institutional data indicate, for example, that historically underrepresented minority students at UNCC received Ds and Fs at a higher rate than other students in FYW, ranging from 2-5% higher on average per semester. In another example, we also see a large discrepancy in the number of historically underrepresented minority students placed in 1103 (the 3-credit course that “more advanced” students are placed into as opposed to the 1104, 4-credit course). For example, in Fall of 2020, there were 18 African American students enrolled in 1103, compared to 167 white students. We look to understand how historically underrepresented minority students experience both 1103 and 1104 FYW classes in Fall 2021 and compare the qualitative responses to our quantitative data for that semester. Institutional quantitative data can only tell one side of the story. Our FYW program needs to include student voices from racially diverse students on campus. We need to listen to the experiences of our historically underrepresented minority students and look closely at the ways they navigate the FYW classroom at UNCC. This study seeks to combine institutional data with qualitative and quantitative data from historically underrepresented student experiences in WRDS 1103 and 1104.

Specific Objectives to be Achieved

In the Summer of 2020, the Writing, Rhetoric & Digital Studies (WRDS) department, like

many academic departments across the country, created an Antiracist Summer Working Group and wrote a [WRDS Antiracist Statement and Action Plan](#). Since that time we have met regularly as a department in an [Antiracist Reading Group](#) and have run a pilot program for Antiracist mentoring. In addition, FYW was awarded an [assessment grant](#) for two faculty members to work with the Office of Assessment and Accreditation assessing labor/contract grading and to assess its effect on historically underrepresented minorities in WRDS 1103 and 1104. The results of this project with the Office of Assessment and Accreditation are being analyzed and will be presented at a national spring conference in March. However, there is much more work to be done. Transformative change requires widespread programmatic initiatives. [UNCC's goals and efforts toward equity, justice, and inclusion](#) demand developing frameworks that are centered on how race and ethnicity may impact student learning. We are in the process of compiling rich institutional quantitative data sets to help see the stories the numbers tell us. However, the WRDS department's focus on creating an inclusive learning environment for students from a variety of different backgrounds and experiences would greatly benefit from more mixed methods data on historically underrepresented minority experiences in FYW.

Specific Research Questions to be Addressed

- 1) How do historically underrepresented minority students experience WRDS 1103 and 1104?
- 2) How do historically underrepresented minority students measure in portfolio evaluations of [FYW's Threshold Concepts /Student Learning outcomes?](#)

3) How do the target students' reflections help us to understand any obstacles or challenges they faced in 1103 or 1104?

4. Proposed Project Rationale and Impact

The proposed study has the potential to significantly impact how FYW is taught in order to best reach all of the racially diverse students who will come through those courses in their first-year. This project will have a direct impact on how writing is taught in the FYW Program. Since data indicates that underrepresented minorities receive Ds and Fs at a higher rate, our project addresses racial inequities in student success by learning more about the student's experiences: their successes as well as the obstacles and challenges they encountered. As a gateway course, we believe that this impact will likely serve to increase overall retention from the first-to second year for historically underrepresented minorities.

The findings of our study will also indicate how UNCC is serving the writing needs of historically underrepresented minorities and enable us to hold conversations with various stakeholders across campus about how to design antiracist faculty development programs to meet student writing needs.

B. Literature Review

Antiracist Approaches in FYW

Although the discipline of Writing Studies has been implicated in racist approaches to student writing in the past, work in the past decade in the field has centered on antiracist approaches, which can be seen in disciplinary statements such as [CCCC Students' Rights to Their Own Language](#), [Second Language Writing and Multilingual Writers](#), [This Ain't Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!](#) [CCCC Position Statement on Writing Assessment](#). Writing Studies research on curricular and pedagogical approaches in the past decade have also called for implementing antiracist curricular approaches for students. For example, in *Performing Antiracist Pedagogy*, Frankie Condon and Vershawn Ashanti Young seek to help create openings to address race and racism not only in course readings and class discussion in writing, rhetoric, and communication courses, but also throughout the academy.

Disciplinary scholarship and best practices, however, need to be aligned and assessed with real students in real writing classrooms. Student experiences provide a relevant and necessary piece to understanding how our writing instruction is working. Focus group interviews can provide a key approach to collecting this experiential data. Kevin Roozen argues in “Reflective Interviewing: Methodological Moves for Tracing Tacit knowledge and Challenging Chronotopic Representations” that “reflective interviewing, [is] a methodological approach that creates a discursive space in which writers can both develop an understanding of themselves as writers and the wealth of literate activities they are engaged in and communicate that understanding to themselves and others” (251). Further, Ruth E. Ray writes that “students are not merely subjects whom the teacher-researcher instructs and assesses; they are co-researchers, sources of

knowledge whose insights help provide new directions for the study” (175). This study seeks to add historically underrepresented minority student perspectives to our disciplinary conversations about creating and sustaining antiracist curriculum and pedagogies for first-year writing classes.

Portfolio Reflection for Assessment

In this study we will also use scoring of FYW portfolio reflections to help us assess historically underrepresented minority students' understandings of what they learned in WRDS 1103 or 1104. Educational theorists have highlighted the central role that reflective practices have played in student learning for decades—an importance made evident in the widespread integration of reflection in pedagogies across the disciplines (Yancey, K. (2016); Gupta, T., Burke, K. A., Mehta, A., & Greenbowe, T. J. (2015) Sommers et al., (2016); Turns, Cuddihy, & Guan, 2010). Within composition studies, reflection is identified as a threshold concept instrumental in students' development as writers because of its relationship to transfer (Taczak, 2016). Kara Taczak argues that reflection is an essential threshold concept for student writers because it leads to metacognition (79). Scholars define metacognition as knowledge of one's own thinking processes and choices (Yancey, K. 2016); therefore, reflection activities in the composition classroom can promote metacognition by enabling students to examine their writing experiences. Their reflections can be used to align with the achievement of student learning outcomes. The results can be used to judge the effectiveness of the program and the individual teachers in achieving both the sponsoring institution's learning outcomes and in mastering threshold concepts.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework for supporting our study about how racially diverse students navigate FYW comes from Johnathan Alexander et. al's metaphor of "wayfinding" as a way to study how students navigate writing ecologies in FYW. According to Alexander, et. al, "wayfinding tracks an individual's agency in determining what, when, and how to write, as well as in defining what writing should be valued—and how that agency is complicated by discourses, objects, dispositions, and other elements that participants and researchers identify" (124). Categories that seem to characterize the moves and experiences of wayfinding can include: the importance of affect, anticipated knowledge, identity as a writer, and unexpected discoveries (123). These categories will assist us in thematically coding the focus group questions. The individual reflections we collect in portfolio scoring and in focus groups can be effective at helping faculty and administrators see the "human cost" of some of our "traditional" "programmatic" writing pedagogies.

C. Methods, Materials and Procedure

Our target study participants are historically underrepresented minority students recruited from a pool of undergraduates who took WRDS 1103 or 1104 in Fall 2021. We will receive names and UNCC email addresses from Institutional Research for self-identified historically underrepresented minorities who enrolled in WRDS 1103 or

1104 in Fall 2021. These students will be sent a [recruitment email](#) asking for them to participate in the study. The first 25 responders will be chosen to participate.

Participants will be asked to submit their portfolios from WRDS 1103 or 1104. Trained raters will score writing samples for evidence of the use and mastery of each of the five [FYW's Threshold Concepts /SLOs](#) (rubric scale= 0, indicating no evidence for outcome to 4, indicating strong evidence of mastery of outcome). Follow-up [focus group participants will be asked questions](#) that help them reflect on their academic writing experiences and writing projects in FYW during the Fall 2021 semester.

Quantitative analyses: Each participant's writing portfolio will be scored for every SLO; the results of each participants' overall scores will then be averaged. This will allow us to determine the degree to which historically underrepresented minority students found success in academic writing assignments in FYW.

Qualitative analysis: Focus group sessions will be recorded and the discussions similarly coded and ranked with a score of 1-3 in Dedoose in order to provide qualitative evidence to supplement the quantitative data and to give voice to historically underrepresented minority students' experiences in FYW.

Assignments in UWRT 1103 and 1104 provide practice writing in a variety of academic contexts, developing conceptual and applicable knowledge of how writing works differently in these contexts; the courses focus on five key student learning outcomes (SLOs): 1) knowledge of disciplinary and grammatical conventions and how these influence readers' and writers' expectations; 2) rhetorical knowledge to identify and apply strategies across a range of texts; 3) composing process strategies writers use to

conceptualize, develop, and finalize projects; 4) critical reading abilities to analyze, synthesize, interpret, and evaluate information; and 5) critical reflection to articulate what choices were made in a piece of writing and why. These are designed to equip students with effective strategies adaptable to any writing task.

We will examine institutionally-available academic records on grades, credit hours, and retention to gain insight into how this group of students fares overall during their first academic year.

Limitations: Our sample size is achievable, but a future, larger study may be warranted if our data suggests differences in URM student experience and success. After analyzing data from this study, WRDS may want to launch a longitudinal study that tracks these students through all 4 years in “W” classes at UNCC.

D. Evaluation

This mixed methods approach will be of high significance and impact, as it will allow UNC Charlotte to evaluate whether the current curriculum adequately supports all students.

Quantitative analyses: Academic records will be aggregated from data from UNCC’s Institutional Research office and will be based on GPA and will be compared to non-underrepresented minorities. This data will provide big-picture insight into how

these students fare academically during their first year. Writing portfolio scores for each SLO for each participant will be averaged together and used to provide an overall holistic score. This data will allow us to determine if historically underrepresented minority students show differing levels of success in first year writing assignments from other student populations.

Qualitative analysis: Focus group sessions will be recorded and the discussions theme coded in order to provide qualitative evidence to supplement the quantitative evidence provided by the rubric scores of students' submitted portfolio and reflective writing.

E. Knowledge Dissemination

The proposed work would meaningfully expand on our department's antiracist work. Past work by this group of principal investigators was presented at national conferences and shared with the FYW faculty at large in order to inform FYW curricular changes. The proposed study has the potential to significantly impact how FYW is taught in order to best reach all of the diverse students who will come through FYW in their first-year. The study findings will be shared with the WRDS faculty, including the Curriculum Committee. Project findings will be shared with Communication Across the Curriculum to facilitate dissemination of study insights to faculty in the disciplines. We will also share our research through Center for Teaching and Learning workshops and prepare a presentation for Carolinas WPA 2022 Fall conference at Wildacres. We will also disseminate our findings in the *Writing Program Administrators* journal.

F. Human Subjects

All study procedures will be conducted with the approval of UNC Charlotte's Institutional Review Board.

The Principal Investigator will submit an IRB by the end of October 2021.

G. External Funding

Our next step would be to plan a longitudinal study that tracks exempted students further through UNCC and analyze retention numbers for participants in the original study.

Words: 2200 approx.

H. Proposed Study Timeline

January: Send out recruitment emails

February: Set up Focus Group Appointments and Collect Portfolios

March: Hold Focus Groups

April: Hold Focus Groups

May: Transcribe and Code responses from Focus Groups

June: Transcribe and Code responses from Focus Groups

July: Analyze data and compile report

July: Report findings

Selected References

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CHARLOTTE

COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS & SCIENCES

Office of the Dean

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October 19, 2021

SOTL Grants Committee
Center for Teaching and Learning
ctl@uncc.edu

Dear Committee Members:

On behalf of Dean Nancy Gutierrez in the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences, I am writing this letter in support of the SOTL proposal submitted by Angela Mitchell, Jan Rieman, and Tonya Wertz-Orbaugh from the Department of Writing, Rhetoric and Digital Studies which is entitled, “Historically Underrepresented Students’ First Year Writing (FYW) Experiences at the University of North Carolina Charlotte.” The proposed study aims to better understand the student experience of racially diverse students in their First Year Writing course through a mixed methods approach. Qualitative data obtained from focus groups and FYW portfolios will be compared with quantitative institutional data to better inform the department on how to create an inclusive learning environment for students from different backgrounds and experiences. This proposal addresses the following area of current need as indicated on the SoTL Grant RFP: Equity Gaps.

I support this proposal and understand the impact it can have on FYW instruction and the assessment of student work. The outcome of this study may result in the development of new writing pedagogies which can be disseminated throughout the department and beyond. As a result of this study, Writing, Rhetoric and Digital Studies should become more deeply engaged with the experiences of all students in their writing courses.

Sincerely,



Banita W. Brown
Associate Dean for Academic and Student Success
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Associate Professor of Chemistry

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