

## **“SHOW ME THE MONEY”: LEARNING SUPPORT SCHOLARSHIP WRITING AT TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY**

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### **Abstract**

Student success in college requires the ability to write at the college level, and to this end the focus of the co-requisite learning support to Freshman English at Tennessee State University has been on assisting students in building skills in English composition and promoting their engagement and persistence. This article details a pilot English learning support curriculum that focuses on finding and composing scholarship and internship applications. By integrating scholarship applications into English learning support, the curriculum provides students a robust and authentic context for building all aspects of their writing. The scholarship curriculum incorporates growth mindset in its use of strategies and collaboration, as well as Universal Design for Learning in its use of choices and transference.

**Keywords:** Learning Support/Developmental Education, Retention, Growth Mindset, Universal Design for Learning

### **Introduction**

In the 2017- 2018 academic year, learning support writing students at Tennessee State University (TSU) struggled to complete the course, resulting in a 69% success rate in the fall and a 60% success rate in the spring. Attendance was low and was a major factor in the low success rate. Many of the students who failed to complete the learning support

course (ENGL1011) also failed to complete the co-requisite freshman English course (ENGL 1010). When we asked students in our Spring 2018 course survey, “If you could design a new workshop to be used in ENGL 1011, what material would it cover?” we found a potential answer to this concerning issue when a student suggested that we cover “how to apply for scholarships.” Integrating “how to apply for scholarships” into the English learning support curriculum results in improved access to additional opportunities for financial support and encourages students to remain in school, matriculate successfully to completion, and work harder to maintain academic success by securing grants and scholarships. This curricular focus has also improved student interest in developing writing skills.

### **Context**

Tennessee State University was founded in 1912 and is Tennessee’s only public Historically Black College/University (HBCU). The University has an undergraduate enrollment of 6,125 students, 78.0% of whom identify as non-white, and 63.1% are female. Almost half of the University’s students are Pell eligible. The freshman retention rate is 64.3%, and the six-year graduation rate is 33.0% (Tennessee State University, 2019). Learning support is therefore a vital service for these students.

Students are enrolled in learning support English (ENGL 1011) by scoring below an 18 on the ACT English, below a 490 on SAT Evidence-based Reading and Writing, or below a 250 on the ACCUPLACER Next Gen assessment. Once placed in the course, students have an opportunity to advance out of learning support English by scoring a six or higher on the ACCUPLACER WritePlacer assessment. Those students who continue in ENGL 1011 meet once per week for 55 minutes, during which students have the opportunity to work on assignments for ENGL 1010 or on scholarship writing with the assistance of their instructor, a full-time professional Writing Center tutor. The course is graded satisfactory/unsatisfactory. A primary goal of the co-requisite learning support model is to improve student retention and completion.

Many of the students placed in ENGL 1011 are first-generation or low-income college students who face additional barriers to retention and successful degree completion. A first-generation college student, by definition, is an individual whose parents have not received a college degree from a two-year or four-year institution (Ishitani, 2006).

These First-generation college students face several unique obstacles to success. For example, when they first arrive on campus, they have a lack of knowledge about the college experience. Although their families love and support them, there are no stories or advice to be passed down from them (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Additionally, about 43% of the students who work during college, the so-called working learners, are low-income college students (Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2018). Income also correlates with degree completion. Only 16% of students whose household income is below \$30,000 per year graduate with a bachelor's degree in six years (Markowitz, 2017). Seventy percent of college dropouts reported receiving no financial or scholarship aid, in contrast to 40% of college graduates (Lewin, 2009). It is not surprising, then, that 28% of incoming freshmen and 39% of incoming first-generation freshmen reported distracting financial problems (Ruffalo, 2018). In addition, 65% percent of incoming freshmen desire assistance in obtaining a scholarship (Ruffalo, 2018). Given these sobering realities, the direction we needed to go seemed obvious: we would center our learning support writing curriculum on scholarship writing.

### **Program Design**

The scholarship-centered curriculum was piloted in the 2018 Summer Completion Academy (SCA). SCA is a week-long bridge program in which students receive intensive instruction in math, reading, or writing in order to help meet their English, math, or reading course competencies before the academic school year begins. The writing instruction consisted of four days of three-hour instructional sessions, which focused on helping students learn to write high-quality scholarship essays. Supplemental workshops were also offered to the students during this period; these workshops were team-taught and addressed timed writing and developing thesis statements. In the main instructional sessions, students chose topics, planned and brainstormed their essays, and developed sentences, paragraphs and essays, which they then organized and revised.

This curriculum is built around Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles. According to Tobin (2014), "UDL is an approach to the creation of learning experiences that incorporates multiple means of engaging with content and people, representing information, and expressing skills and knowledge" (p. 14). In this context, giving students the opportunity to choose the type of scholarships for which they apply allows for

authentic and personalized instruction. Assignments take various forms because students are working on different scholarship applications, but these assignments provide a robust foundation for detailed writing instruction. Further, the curriculum prioritizes transfer by focusing writing instruction on student development of a theory of writing that can be applied in multiple contexts (Tinberg, 2017). The SCA program was designed to include substantive instruction on all aspects of a successful writing process. The first session covered brainstorming and how to create ideas. Next, we discussed sentence structure and sentence variety (simple, compound, and complex). In this session, students brainstormed and wrote sentences that could be used in scholarship applications. Instructors then had the opportunity to help students review and revise their work. Also, the correction of common errors including comma splices and fused sentences happened naturally. After students had drafted sentences, we discussed how they could use what they had written to enter scholarships that required only three to five sentences. The specific scholarships considered were the Active Life Scholarship for Financial Literacy (\$1,000) or the Scholarship to Tackle Your Weakness (\$1,000).<sup>1</sup> We also discussed various scholarships from [www.dosomething.org](http://www.dosomething.org) ranging in value from \$1,000-\$5,000 that required very little writing.

On the second day, we introduced strategies for developing a paragraph. Students wrote topic sentences to address a scholarship of their choice, and then composed a paragraph elaborating or developing their topic sentences. Again, faculty had an opportunity to review, correct, and discuss how those paragraphs could be developed further. Class assignments focused on several scholarship applications which required 250 or fewer words, including the Do-Over Scholarship (\$1,500), the Flavor of the Month Scholarship (\$1,500), the Courage to Grow Scholarship (\$500), the Gen and Kelly Tanabe Scholarship (\$1,000), or the Unigo Scholarship (\$10,000). In taking this approach, students developed skills in each stage of the writing process while completing actionable writing.

The third day of instruction covered essay writing. Key content areas included writing a good introductory paragraph, experimenting with various thesis statements, and

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<sup>1</sup> A full list of the scholarships we share with students in this curriculum can be found at the Scholarship Tigers blog: <https://scholarshiptigers.com/>.

bringing the essays to a close. This instruction in the writing process was followed by supplementary workshops that focused on how to apply these writing skills to the ACCUPLACER WritePlacer assessment. Also, as students developed their essay writing skills, scholarships requiring essays were highlighted. For example, the \$1000 Spirit Button Academic Scholarship asks students to write 700-1000 words addressing the question what piece of literature inspired my life the most and why?, the RentLingo Dream Big Scholarship requires that applicants write an 750 word essay about their dream job, and the \$1000 JonesTshirts.com Love Your Career Scholarship asks students to describe at least three steps they plan to take in the next year to start a path towards having a career that they love in 1,000 words or more.

On the fourth day, we covered editing and revisions, and we also discussed how the students could do their best on the WritePlacer assessment and in other on-demand writing situations. We reviewed strategies for editing common grammar and punctuation. Additional scholarship databases students could use to search for scholarship money and opportunities were also described. Scholarship applications provided a convenient opportunity to talk about audience and discuss appropriate voice and content. Throughout these exercises, students wrote: they wrote sentences, developed paragraphs, engaged in peer review, and submitted drafts of assignments into a scholarship ePortfolio. They drafted complete essays for which instructors provided feedback. In addition, the students chose at least two scholarship competitions to submit work to; on the fourth day, students had conferences with the instructor to receive feedback and pointers to help them do their best on the WritePlacer and improve their writing for the scholarship essays. This conference also described how the TSU Writing Center would be available after students met their learning support competencies. The conference concluded by pointing out each student's growth in writing mastery and opportunities to finance education.

The ACCUPLACER WritePlacer was used as the pre-test and post-test for the SCA English workshop. Students who achieved a score of 6 or higher diagnostically advanced out of Learning Support Writing, whereas the students who did not diagnostically advance were placed into shortened (eight-week) SCA sections of ENGL 1011, the learning support Freshman English Workshop.

## **Results**

The percentage of SCA Writing students diagnostically advancing was higher than the percentage of ENGL 1011 students diagnostically advancing in the fall. (See Table 1).

*Table 1. Diagnostic Advancement of SCA Writing 2018 and Fall 2018 ENGL 1011 Students*

	<i>SCA Writing Students, 2018 (n=22)</i>	<i>ENGL 1011 Students, Fall 2018 (n=387)</i>
# Diagnostically Advanced	4	31
% Diagnostically Advanced	18%	8%

The students who were enrolled in the SCA writing course showed growth in their writing skills during the program (See Table 2).

*Table 2. Growth from Pre-test to Post-test in SCA Writing 2018*

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>Growth Range</i>	<i>Average Growth</i>
WritePlacer Scores, SCA Writing 2018 (n=20)	4.7	4-6	-1 to +2	+0.5

Although most students' WritePlacer scores remained the same from pre-test to post-test, almost as many students were able to increase their score from pre-test to post-test (See Table 3).

*Table 3. Change in Test Scores from Pre-test to Post-test in SCA Writing 2018*

	<i>Decrease (%)</i>	<i>No Change (%)</i>	<i>Increase (%)</i>
WritePlacer Scores, SCA Writing 2018, (n=20)	1 (5%)	10 (50%)	9 (45%)

Significantly, students who were enrolled in SCA writing performed 6% better in ENGL 1010 than the students who were enrolled in fall semester ENGL 1011 (See Table 4).

*Table 4. ENGL 1010 Pass Rate by SCA Writing 2018 and Fall 2018 ENGL 1011 Students*

<i>Student Sample</i>	<i>ENGL 1010 Pass Rate</i>
Did Not Diagnostically Advance in SCA Writing 2018 (n=16)	81%
ENGL 1011 Students, Fall 2018 (n=437)	75%

### Discussion

ENGL 1011 instructors who were involved with SCA also incorporated scholarship writing into their regular sections of the course in Fall 2018. In previous semesters, students claimed they did not have anything to work on in their English classes. The

scholarship curriculum provides authentic writing projects for students to use as they hone their writing skills. Scholarships are open to everyone, and many students become motivated to write once they discover scholarships available to them. In the end-of-course survey, several students indicated the scholarship information and focus was helpful and contributed to their writing success in other classes. One student indicated the scholarship curriculum helped him or her “learn how to apply for scholarships and how to use the eLearn ePortfolio.” Dweck (2016) says, “individuals who believe their talents can be developed (through hard work, good strategies, and input from others) have a growth mindset” (p. 2). Our scholarship curriculum promotes this growth mindset as students incorporate the strategies we teach them into scholarship essays, and they work with both peers and Writing Center tutors on their writing.

The pilot program will be extended in several areas. A library of student reflection videos will allow students who completed the class to become mentors for those in future classes. Additionally, we will follow up with students to find out if they won any of scholarships they applied to in their learning support writing course. We also plan to promote student awareness about scholarships by adding a wall of scholarship and internship opportunities in the Writing Center, partnering with classes to conduct in-class workshops, and having students enter a scholarship related to their class assignment. Further, to assist students with scholarship writing, we plan to add a Writing for Scholarships module and a scholarship discussion forum to our Virtual Writing Center. This discussion forum will provide additional opportunities for students to network with their peers and instructors about available scholarships and their progress towards obtaining scholarships. We will also create a Scholarship Tigers community with regular meetings, and we plan to work with participating students to make the community a Tennessee State University student organization. Eventually, we would like to start a Writing Center scholarship and a publication for scholarship essays.

In order to achieve our goals, we are considering how to enhance the scholarship writing experience in SCA, as well as how we can better integrate the one-week scholarship writing experience into the semester-long ENGL 1011 course. As we prepared the scholarship curriculum for our pilot, we discovered a lack of research and information about integrating scholarship and writing into first-year college composition instruction.

To update our pilot, students with ACT English and SAT writing scores closest to the college level were enrolled in the summer 2019 SCA Writing sessions. Also, students in the Learning Support class part of SCA Writing received team instruction, with an additional instructor walking around the class helping students individually with their writing. In addition, the goal of ENGL 1011 remains to support students in their ENGL 1010 classes, so in ENGL 1011 we are tasked with balancing the scholarship curriculum with the continued need to support students with completing ENGL 1010 assignments. However, we are confident that we can build a successful learning support writing course focused on writing for scholarships that will motivate students to write and to apply for scholarships to help pay for college tuition and expenses and reduce their student debt, one of the major barriers to their college success.

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