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Report for 2020 Diversity Grant
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Provost Curriculum Grant Report

My 2020 Provost Curriculum Grant was used to develop a small section of ENG 221 for students in the Centennial Scholars Program (CSP). I designed the course during Summer 2020, and the course was taught for the first time in Spring 2021, and I plan to continue teaching it each Spring semester. I was inspired to teach this class by my experiences teaching Honors classes, which use small classes and innovative assignments to provide engaged education for those students. I went to college as a single mother after growing up in foster care, and I was fortunate to find faculty who supported my academic growth by gently pointing out my knowledge gaps and helping me to hone my writing skills. As a full professor, I am at the stage in my career to provide mentorship for students who have been historically excluded from a university education.

The General Education course was redesigned to address diversity, equity, and inclusion in three ways. First, an environmental literature course that featured predominantly white writers was redesigned to bring forward BIPOC writers. Second, the course was redesigned to feature inclusive assessments. Writing assessments in large-section English courses can unintentionally function as gatekeeping practices that reward students who enter JMU with cultural capital. Due to the large size of General Education classes, historically excluded students might get left behind because privileged students feel more entitled to participate. My redesigned assignments taught writing as a process of revision instead of as a one-time performance. Due to the smaller size, I was able to offer multiple opportunities for peer review and one-on-one writing consultations with me. Any student who failed an assignment was encouraged to revise and refine critical reading and writing skills in the process. Third, I developed this class with the approach that teaching is mentoring. By acknowledging my own story, I emphasized strategies for academic success: “failing fast,” asking for help, and cultivating resilience. These disclosures and the small class size facilitated collaborative relationships with students. Although class is over, my students know that they can contact me at any point during their education at JMU for academic support. Moreover, students were also encouraged to deepen their systems of peer support.

The course was revised and offered in partnership with CSP Executive Director Diane Strawbridge and CSP Assistant Director Amanda Yankey. Feedback from CSP staff and mentees helped me to create a more inclusive course. Student evaluations suggest that the initial class provided foundational skills in critical reading and academic writing as well as cultivated a sense of belonging and collaboration between students. In addition, I recently worked with Carrier Library to order electronic versions of the books for this class. Making free e-books available for students will also improve access and inclusion.

Sample Student Feedback From Course Evaluations

I thought the course challenged me because I am not the strongest writer. It improved my writing skills and has shown me skills I can apply to future classes.

During my enrollment of ENG221, I enjoyed everything this class and Professor Castellano had to offer. When receiving feedback on essays and other writing assignments, she would do a video discussing her thoughts that would improve my writing instead of a simple text, which allowed me to more easily understand and correct mistakes. Dr. Castellano truly cares for her students and the education they receive from this course. Further, since it was a smaller class, it was more interactive and before every class, she would pull specific sections from each of our writings to share with the class and critique, which helped improve my writing and thought process.

Dr. Castellano created a course that was enriching and engaging. Her organization and collaboration with us outside of class helped us feel as if she truly cares about our success. Her feedback on assignments helped me develop some of my writing skills as well.

I really enjoyed ENG 221. Rather than just being a standard English class with assigned readings, there were running themes throughout about traditional ecological knowledge, our relationships with nature, and resilience in nature. This made the entire semester feel more wound together and also made grasping new concepts feel more application-based rather than having readings that are entirely different from one another.