

THE SUMMER BEFORE:
IMPROVING COLLEGE WRITING BEFORE FRESHMAN YEAR
FINDINGS FROM 10 YEARS OF A COLLEGE PREPARATION PROGRAM



WILLIAM G. TIERNEY
PULLIAS CENTER FOR HIGHER EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

For the last decade the Pullias Center has offered a writing program for college-bound youth.

Goals

- to increase writing competence, and
- to improve students' college knowledge (CK) and better prepare them for freshman year.

Objectives

- to increase students' expository writing abilities,
- to improve students' grammar and language capabilities through exposure to college level writing,
- to increase students' ability to serve as a self-editor and evaluator of their work, and
- to provide students with resources and tools for transitioning from high school to college.

When students enter the SummerTIME Program, their reading and writing levels are low, their time management skills are weak, and their knowledge about what it takes to succeed in college is frequently non-existent. Our program impacts these realities. We understand the effects of poverty and inequality in these students' lives and provide them with the critical tools needed for their transition to college life. Our SummerTIME program has a proven track record pertaining to academic enrichment so that students are better prepared for rigorous college courses.

The SummerTIME daily schedule includes a "college knowledge" workshop. These sessions equip students with the information needed to prepare for the college application process and provide tools to successfully navigate university life as they transition to college. Topics include career planning and navigation skills, college majors, admissions requirements, the personal statement, financial literacy (including financial aid), college culture and campus resources, self-directed learning skills including time management, study skills, and academic performance awareness. Hosting the program on the USC campus helps students build familiarity with the college setting.

Theory of action First, we assume that students need to develop learning strategies for college success that are framed by self-regulated learning. The assumption here is that learners need to have a sense of self-efficacy and control over their work. We have coupled the idea of self-regulated learning with the idea of group learning. Group learning assumes that individuals learn within a group rather than as autonomous individuals. The purpose of SummerTIME has been to enable and sustain self-regulated learning within the activities and actions built by a group.

Outcomes Based on pre and post-tests student learning has been high with regard to the improvement of writing. Although students have demonstrated knowledge of the College Knowledge curricula, we are less certain that the demonstration of issues relating to time management, for example, gets translated into practice once a student arrives on campus.

Findings: What Works

Over the last 10 years we have been able to distill our ideas about writing into four principles that have correlates not only in our work, but also in the research literature.

Principles

- Set specific and understandable goals.
- Teach students how to revise.
- Teach summarizing, not analyzing.
- Require more and longer writing.

Correlates

- Teach students strategies for planning, drafting, and revising their compositions.
- Teach students strategies and procedures for summarizing reading material.
- Develop learning strategies where students work together to edit their compositions.
- Set clear and specific goals for what students are to accomplish with their writing.
- Teach students how to write complex sentences that convey simple, clear ideas.

