



Andrew K. Koch EDITOR

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



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

Andrew K. Koch  
EDITOR

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## EDITOR'S NOTES

Gateway courses—college credit-bearing and/or developmental education courses that enroll large numbers of students and have high rates of Ds, Fs, withdrawals, and incompletes (Koch & Rodier, 2016)—are a ubiquitous part of the undergraduate experience in the United States. As long as there have been U.S. colleges and universities, there have been entry courses that pose difficulties for students—courses that have served more as weeding-out rather than gearing-up experiences for undergraduates. Perhaps the gateway-course weed-out function was more appropriate in the days when a college or university credential was reserved for a privileged few, or even during the era when a high school credential was more than adequate preparation for work and life in a democratic republic. But we no longer live in those times.

I believe that the gateway-course weed-out dynamic is no longer acceptable—if it ever was. Contemporary postsecondary education is characterized by vastly expanded access for historically underserved populations of students, and this new level of access is coupled with increased scrutiny of retention and graduation outcomes. Many of those outcomes are less than desirable. Academic difficulties in gateway courses are particularly pronounced for underserved students who, along with their families, are being expected to bear an increasing portion of the financial burden of postsecondary education. As a result of these less-than-desirable course outcomes and the lower retention rates that correlate with them, policy makers are questioning the investment of public monies in postsecondary education, and students and their families question that value of the college experience itself.

Make no mistake: I am not arguing that a solution to the gateway-course problem is watering down course rigor and content, nor are the other chapter authors in this volume. We believe that those who teach gateway courses and the institutions that offer them must uphold academic standards. But we maintain that they must do so by incorporating the latest evidence-based teaching, learning, and support strategies and by making sure that what happens in the gateway classroom is not contributing to the creation of a permanent underclass. There are tremendous institutional-viability and social-justice implications at play here.

This volume can serve as a resource for those who seek ways to improve teaching and learning in courses that have historically high failure rates. As a result, the volume can also contribute to the improvement of gateway-course outcomes and completion rates—especially for America’s most historically underserved and underprivileged populations that comprise an ever-increasing portion of the student body.

The volume is organized into four parts. In Part I, “The Issue,” I define the topic in greater detail in an introductory chapter and make the case for why transforming gateway courses truly matters for the national effort to help more students (especially those who are underserved within higher education) graduate from the colleges and universities where they are admitted (aka the completion agenda).

The second part, “Data-Based Decisions and Actions,” includes chapters that share ways that institutional research data and analytics can respectively and collectively be used to improve gateway courses. In Chapter 2, Matthew D. Pistilli and Gregory L. Heileman explore how the promise of analytics—defined as the systematic analysis of data or statistics—can be realized in gateway-course redesign efforts through a combination of good data science and the application of thoughtfully designed, faculty-inclusive processes. The chapter explores matters of institutional readiness for analytics and methods for engaging faculty in applying analytics in course and curriculum redesign.

Chapter 3 details how the institutional research office at North Dakota State University helped the institution identify courses ripe for change, encouraged faculty to employ successful teaching strategies, directed students toward successful learning behaviors, and then assessed the impact of changes made. Authors Emily Berg and Mark Hanson describe how they provided data sources, assessment tools, and research application strategies to advance gateway-course reform. They also offer suggestions on how and why other colleges and universities (and particularly their institutional research offices) should do the same.

Part III, “The Role of Academic Stakeholders,” includes chapters that address how academic support, faculty development, academic administration, and discipline associations are vital components of gateway-course improvement efforts. In Chapter 4, Johanna Dvorak and Kathryn Tucker share how and why learning support strategies must be intentionally linked to gateway-course success efforts so that participation in the strategies is not left to chance, putting the most at-risk students in danger. The authors provide successful examples from a regional comprehensive college and an urban research university as well as suggestions for application at other institutions.

Chapter 5 highlights faculty and faculty developers as key actors who can improve student learning and outcomes in gateway courses. Authors Susannah McGowan, Peter Felten, Joshua Caulkins, and Isis Artze-Vega draw on the authors’ varied institutional experiences and a large national



initiative to outline common challenges, sustainable strategies, and threshold concepts in gateway educational development. They make the case that supporting faculty who teach gateway courses can be a powerful catalyst for transforming an institution's teaching culture.

In Chapter 6, Roberta S. Matthews and Scott Newman make the case that gateway-course transformation efforts should be a top priority for academic leaders because they support and enhance already existing or necessary retention and persistence efforts on campus. The authors provide examples of approaches that senior leaders on campuses of all kinds and sizes may use to engage their campus communities in gateway-course teaching and learning improvement efforts, and offer practical strategies for engaging faculty and staff in the implementation of proven approaches.

Chapter 7 explains why teaching and learning in general or survey courses matter to discipline associations. Authors Julia Brookins and Emily Swafford provide examples of what one such association—the American Historical Association—is doing to promote among its members both contributing to the scholarship of teaching and learning (Boyer, 1990) and its application in the classroom. The chapter also explores why all discipline associations should be concerned and take action to improve undergraduate teaching and learning in their respective discipline's gateway courses.

The last part of this volume, “Integrated Approaches and Systems,” includes two chapters that describe how institutions have combined various student success efforts with their gateway-course improvement strategies to increase the likelihood that the strategies are more successful and serve larger numbers of students.

Chapter 8, written by Martine Courant Rife and Christine Conner, provides a case study of how Lansing Community College in Michigan intentionally linked efforts to redesign high-risk courses with the campus's efforts to create Guided Pathways initiatives—specific programs of study supplemented by academic support programs (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). The chapter details how the intentional connection between these two initiatives, which are frequently disconnected at many higher education institutions, yielded better results for both efforts and a richer professional and teaching experience for faculty and staff. The chapter also offers considerations for other institutions looking to connect guided-pathways and course-redesign efforts.

In Chapter 9, I, along with my colleagues Richard J. Prystowsky, from Lansing Community College, and Tony Scinta, from Nevada State College, provide examples of how institutions can intentionally link various gateway-course improvement efforts to “make the whole greater than the sum of the parts.” Drawing both from lessons learned from the Gardner Institute's Gateways to Completion process and content from the previous chapters of this volume, we make the case that institutions need to purposefully examine all that they are doing, and could be doing, to improve gateway-course outcomes and, where supported by this examination

process, rebundle the components into an intentionally interwoven and supportive system to better address the teaching and learning needs of twenty-first-century students.

I thank each of the outstanding chapter authors for their contributions to this volume. Their writing furnishes new and valuable perspectives on the theme of gateway-course improvement. They also meaningfully expand the body of scholarship on this emerging topic and, in the process, provide a rich resource for instructors who teach, staff who support, and administrators who oversee gateway courses and associated continuous quality improvement efforts. It is my sincere hope that you will find as much value in this publication as my colleagues and I derived from writing it.

Andrew K. Koch  
Editor

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*ANDREW K. KOCH is the president and chief operating officer of the nonprofit John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education, located in Brevard, North Carolina.*

# PART I. THE ISSUE

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*This part defines the topic in greater detail in an introductory chapter that makes the case for why transforming gateway courses truly matters for the national effort to help more students succeed, especially those who are underserved within higher education.*

