Sarah F. McGinley first stepped onto the Wright State University campus over 20 years ago as a graduate student in the English Department. She became a Teaching Assistant and realized that “being a teacher actually is something I can do. Something I can enjoy” and that she did not have to be “this authoritarian person” in front of the class. More specifically, she was influenced by the Director of Writing Programs, who “was a big fan of having individual conferences with students.” Ms. McGinley learned how “to actually have conversations with students rather than talking at them in front of the room,” which made a “radical difference” in how she taught. Through her time as a teaching assistant and later as a full-time instructor, she realized English courses are “really Intro to College 101,” where students can make a “human connection” with their teachers and learn “how to be college students.” Ms. McGinley values connection with her students because she was a “rebellious student,” who was “bored” by the traditional passive teaching approach that dominated her schooling in England.

Since then, Ms. McGinley has taken an interactive teaching approach in her corequisite English composition and developmental writing course. Ms. McGinley implements student-centered strategies that help students “communicate their own ideas effectively” and realized “that what they have to say matters...rather than saying ‘no, this is the idea that you have to communicate.’” One example of this approach is the way she wants students “to be writing something authentic” when they work on their essays. Yet, she has to help them get there because her “first big battle in the room, quite often, is to get them to really believe that and to pick something that they genuinely want to write about.” Through these essays, Ms. McGinley learns about students’ cultures, values, and aspirations. Furthermore, she said, “for some kids it’s the first time ... that somebody actually took their ideas seriously beyond just checking right, wrong, right, wrong.” For Ms. McGinley, these moments of novelty and validation are the most enjoyable part of teaching.

Inside the classroom, Ms. McGinley does little lecturing as she believes “composition is a class about technique, about how to do things. And that’s best learned by doing it.” This workshop approach has allowed her to work with students one-on-one and in small groups, which helps students recognize that she’s “there to help them figure out what’s worth saying and the best way to say it.” Furthermore, Ms. McGinley said her decentralized classroom has shifted her perspective about having a “tight lesson plan” and being “responsible for every minute of what’s going on.” Instead, Ms. McGinley depends on her students to dictate how they will use the class time as she has realized students “are pretty darn good self-diagnosticians,” who are able to identify their areas of improvement. In this sense, Ms. McGinley has positioned her students to be directors of their learning—an essential aspect in validating students’ experiences.
Policy-Related Overview

About five years ago, Wright State University started an Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) in which students who test into developmental writing can enroll into a corequisite course that offers both developmental and college credits. Both areas of the course are “taught by the same person—[a] full-time English faculty.” Eligible students can enroll for the English composition credits, and then after class, the 10 to 12 developmental writing students remain for the developmental component of the course. Ms. McGinley believes one benefit of the corequisite model is that students do not need “to spend a whole semester doing a developmental class before [they] can even get into a college class.” As described by Ms. McGinley, “financially, logistically, psychologically, for all so many, many reasons, there’re a lot of students who are just going to not do it. They’re going to go, ‘This is too big of a barrier.’”

Another benefit Ms. McGinley finds of the corequisite model is that “a lot of the things that help the [developmental] students also help the [other] students because a lot of them are also still adjusting to college.” As such, the corequisite course does not feel fragmented, and the developmental students are not stigmatized, as all her students have a similar learning experience. The difference between these two groups is that some students “just need more time and space where they can focus.” Ms. McGinley recognizes the value of the corequisite model as she was also one of those students who could not thrive in a traditional “rigid” classroom environment.

Ms. McGinley said English instructors were “excited” for the corequisite model as many of them were trained by the long-time Director of Writing Programs, who “was very interested in hands-on teaching, making sure that people were comfortable in the classroom.” Under his guidance, she said English instructors learned “you’re working in a room full of human beings...you need to establish some sort of rapport and understand what’s going on with some of them.” With this approach, the English instructors at Wright State were prepared to address the “cognitive-behavioral” aspects that ground developmental writing.

Citation: