

## Leveraging Campus Collaboration to Promote Writing Support for All Students

Seb M. Prohn

Trey B. Hall

Ian Kunkes

Brian McTague

Chelsea Russell

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

Over the past 50 years, postsecondary institutions have increasingly established support services to mitigate barriers, improve outcomes, and make academia more accessible for a growing population of individuals with disabilities. One area receiving increased focus is in developing programs to improve effective literacy and writing skills. Although effective literacy and writing interventions have been developed and trialed for college students with intellectual disability, the interventions require time and resources that may not be available to postsecondary education programs. This practice brief describes a more holistic approach to writing development by strengthening campus partnerships and reimagining the application of existing resources. By combining expertise and approaches to intervention common in disability services offices, campus writing centers, and inclusive postsecondary education programs, campuses can develop sustainable approaches for addressing a range of support useful for all college students to develop as writers.

*Keywords:* inclusive writing; campus collaboration; inclusive postsecondary education; disability services

For over a decade, inclusive higher education advocates have argued that including students with intellectual disability (ID) on college campuses provides benefits their non-disabled classmates (May, 2012; Prohn et al., 2019; Westling et al., 2013). However, the benefits of inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs for students without disabilities have been primarily characterized by gains derived from sharing inclusive activities and academics alongside students with ID. Benefits to the general student population have not been described in terms of cross-campus partnerships that engage IPSE programs and the new organizational systems and structures that emerge as a result.

Guidance for forming key campus relationships has also been outlined for emerging IPSE programs (Papay & Griffen, 2013; Plotner & Marshall, 2015). Less common are models for existing programs looking to build or maintain collaborative relationships with student

service offices dedicated to supporting students in developing skills for successful college participation. This practice brief provides an overview of how collaboration between IPSE programs and student service offices can establish strategic partnerships in the provision of writing supports that benefit students with ID, as well as the larger student population. Specifically, we will describe the coordinated services provided by the VCU ACE-IT in College Program for students with ID, the Student Accessibility and Educational Opportunity (SAEO) office, and VCU Writing Center to develop a collaborative system for providing inclusive writing support resources for all students.

### Summary of Relevant Literature

Collaborative relationships among student affairs practitioners foster the practices and innovation necessary to best support all students (White, 2002). Student affairs units have added a growing number of services, but have devoted less consideration to the effective organization of service constellations. The relational structure of services influences the degree to which student needs are met (Kuk & Banning, 2009). Thoughtfully designed inter-unit relationships, especially those that overlap units' perceived scopes of responsibility, can encourage a more efficient and effective approach to meeting student support needs. LePeau (2015) described a coordinated pathway for developing partnerships in which offices share visions, soften role rigidity, and emphasize communication. Sustained and coordinated partnerships are necessary to sufficiently address student needs, including writing support for college students with and without disabilities.

Written communication is scrutinized by admission committees, emphasized by faculty, and measured to judge the efficacy of college participation. Employers also recognize written communication as one of sixteen essential outcomes (Hart Research Associates, 2013). Despite the well-placed emphasis on writing skills, one out of every five high school students in Virginia did not meet writing proficiency in the 2018-19 school year (VDOE, 2020). Nationally, the results were even more grim. The most recent Nation's Report Card (NCES, 2012) for writing showed that 73% of twelfth-graders did not meet writing proficiency, meaning those students were not prepared to use written communication to persuade, explain, or convey experiences to specific audiences. By comparison, 95% of twelfth-grade students with a disability scored lower than the "proficient" level.

Despite wide variability in writing preparation, 3,400 students with ID have gone to college since 2010 (Grigal et al., 2018). Like many college students faced with a new array of writing requirements and expectations, students with ID can improve their writing performance (Konrad et al., 2017; Pennington et al., 2014; Woods-Groves, et al., 2012). Improvements, however, are often born from targeted interventions in segregated settings (e.g., Woods-Groves et al., 2018). Most IPSE programs are unlikely to have staff expertise, time, or funding required to broadly implement similar interventions. Further, these segregated experiences run counter to established frameworks for campus inclusion (Jones et al., 2015). Alternatively, teams comprised of staff from IPSE programs, DS offices, and university writing centers can generate sustainable alternatives to provide inclusive writing support that considers college students with ID and are applicable to the larger student body.

The gap between written language requirements and student skills means that many students, especially those with disabilities, need coordinated and collaborative writing supports to improve performance. Yet, from an institutional standpoint, there are some inherent problems in how universities have historically approached supporting students with disabilities. In many cases, disability services (DS) offices and other student support offices function independently from one another. This fragmentation means that the determination of appropriate writing accommodations and the provision of interventions occur in isolation of one another. When services occur in tandem by providers with appropriate training and frequent intercommunication, then interventions could become more collaborative and ideally yield better student outcomes.

### **Description of Institutional Partners**

To improve writing supports, we planned and enacted a collaborative partnership between the VCU ACE-IT in College Program, SAEO, and the VCU Writing Center. ACE-IT in College is a two-year, inclusive, individualized, and comprehensive transition program for students with ID. ACE-IT was initially funded through a U.S. Department of Education Transition and Postsecondary Program for students with ID (TPSID) grant. After three semesters of academic coursework and paid employment on campus, students participate in a community internship during their final semester. Upon successful completion of academic and career development requirements, students earn a certificate through VCU's School of Education. The program staff is comprised of a director, academic advisors, employment specialists, and trained student workers who provide peer support in academic and social environments.

The Office of Student Accessibility and Educational Opportunity (SAEO), located within VCU's Division of Student Affairs, is the DS office serving all students on VCU's Monroe Park Campus. As of January 1, 2019, about 1,800 students had self-disclosed a disability to the SAEO office, seeking some form of support or resources. This number has steadily increased every semester for the past three years.

The VCU Writing Center, housed in the unit of Student Success, is a learning support service for all disciplines and stages of the writing process. Writing Center administration consists of a director and coordinator. The staff utilizes a one-on-one peer-tutor model, and consists of graduate and undergraduate students. Student workers are referred to as Writing Consultants, meaning appointments are consultations: two colleagues from two different fields meeting with the common goal of improving writing skills.

### **Processes and Practices**

Each of the offices involved in this campus collaboration possessed specialized knowledge. Cross-training, therefore, served as a productive mechanism for communicating expertise and student support strategies between offices. Cross-training is a technique used to better define team members' roles and to develop a shared sense of interdependence (National Research Council, 2015). Each semester an ACE-IT representative met with Writing Center staff to share program objectives, an overview of

ID, and research-based strategies for supporting students with ID. From these meetings, ACE-IT staff trained peer supports in academic consulting strategies informed by Writing Center pedagogy so that peer supports could better assist ACE-IT students (e.g., Goldfarb, 2018) and quickly connect them to the Writing Center. Similarly, the SAEO director led a workshop and created a training module specifically for ACE-IT peer supports staff on the university's responsibilities and practices for supporting students with disabilities. These consultations and cross-training opportunities between offices occurred several times each semester and led to ACE-IT's invitation into the Writing Center's Campus Partner Project.

In spring 2017, the VCU Writing Center created the Campus Partner Project series to expand writing resources across campus. Each spring semester, the Writing Center partnered with another department to build pamphlets catered to target populations, such as students with ID and English Language Learners. Materials were designed for an intended audience of students with the greatest need for writing-related interventions, but also embedded writing resources and concepts that are useful to the entire VCU student population. A member of ACE-IT served as a Campus Partner, supervising the development of one such writing resource. ACE-IT worked closely with a Writing Center small group throughout the semester to share field expertise and guide the resource development process. As the Writing Center worked more closely with ACE-IT on the Campus Partner Project, it became apparent that this approach to resource development could apply more broadly to students with disabilities who utilize SAEO.

Based on the success of this initial project, a collaborative and dedicated writing support system for individuals with disabilities emerged between SAEO and the Writing Center at the start of the 2018-19 academic year. The two offices convened to discuss common concerns that were being voiced by shared students and developed plans for a more effective and impactful approach. The first change initiated was to create a more direct referral system, in which students meeting with SAEO for academic accommodations and supports could be connected directly with the Writing Center. Upon receiving this referral, the Writing Center offered and individually tailored an initial consultation to best suit services to the student's unique writing needs. Additionally, students increasingly utilized the option of extended consultations (one to two hours depending on the student's needs), rather than the traditional 50-minute session, to allow time for additional processing and conversation. These coordinated efforts between partners have continued and discussions are ongoing regarding future initiatives, Campus Partner Project collaborations, and cross-training opportunities.

### Outputs

Initial outputs came in the form of student-led knowledge dissemination. A peer mentoring training video was developed by an ACE-IT peer support, in collaboration with the national coordinating center for TPSIDs, Think College. The instructional video, called *Writing Papers: Tips and tricks for working with [college] students [with ID]*, combined multiple practices, including those gained from the Writing Center, to directly train peer mentors at programs across the United States (Goldfarb, 2018). Further, an ACE-IT student who chose to participate in weekly consultations at the Writing Center presented at the

Postsecondary Disability Training Institute where he described the growth he made as a writer when receiving concurrent support from the IPSE, the Writing Center, and SAEO (Prohn et al., 2018). The student shared, for example, flexible Writing Center practices that encouraged him to pre-record audio responses to class prompts which Writing Consultants later used to help him organize his thoughts and words to complete class assignments.

Other partnership outputs provided benefits to students with ID, but were further diffused to students without disabilities. One universal output was the *Breaking the Blank Page* series, a creation from the previously mentioned Campus Partner Project with ACE-IT. The first product of this series was an instructive pamphlet (see supplementary materials) created by VCU Writing Center Consultants with iterative feedback from the ACE-IT program, called *How to Get Started with Reflective Writing in College*. The pamphlet, distributed through all partnering offices, employs practical and research-based strategies that promote written communication for students.

The *Breaking the Blank Page* series functions as a prism through which writing assignments are divided into ordered component parts, from deconstructing prompts to developing a concluding statement. Its structure supports writing-based executive functioning, shown to improve planning and study habits for college students with disabilities (Rivera et al., 2019). Sentence starters and templates are used to help students build momentum in their writing and gain familiarity with accepted compositional practices (Lee et al., 2016). These tools hold the potential to support students in generalizing some writing strategies across writing topics.

Used on its own, the pamphlet design encourages students to use their authorial voice. When coupled with peer support, either Writing Consultants or ACE-IT Education Coaches, it supports project-related goal-setting and improved performance in collaborative writing sessions or consultations (Rivera et al., 2019). Through this collaborative project, ACE-IT gained a high-impact resource with a minimal time investment, promotion through branding on the pamphlet, and an improved understanding of Writing Center services. As a result, all students gained more accessible writing resources on campus.

Through this Campus Partner Project, Writing Consultants were better prepared to serve a broader range of students, including those with ID. The Writing Center staff further emphasized multiple learning styles and avoiding jargon during consultations, modeling the techniques undergirding the *Breaking the Blank Page* series. In order to ground abstract concepts of writing, Writing Consultants began modeling examples of sample sentences and visually mapping out writing processes when working with ACE-IT students. Ultimately, the Campus Partner Project laid the groundwork for the future collaboration with SAEO which improved the provision of writing supports for all students, not just those with ID or even more broadly diagnosed disabilities.

Within the SAEO office, this partnership led to a positive shift in how staff connect students with available resources on campus. Historically, when a student met with the SAEO office, they were made aware of the Writing Center, but not directly referred for services. This has now shifted to a more intentional and streamlined referral model, where SAEO case

managers connect students directly with Writing Center staff. As a result, preliminary data cross-referencing Writing Center appointments with SAEO registration show that the gross number of Writing Center consultations made and kept by students registered with disclosed disabilities improved from 191 the spring 2018 semester, when the partnership began in earnest, to 293 in the spring 2019 semester. A more coordinated and holistic approach to writing support, including direct referrals from SAEO to the Writing Center and lengthened writing consultation times, may have contributed to increased use of the Writing Center by students with disabilities.

### Conclusion

Think College recently revised their 2011 Standards for Inclusive Postsecondary Education document (Weir et al., 2019). Standards 2 and 3 advise that IPSE programs establish collaborative relationships with campus partners and maintain regular communication with those key partners. Broad ties with administrative offices, student support services, and academic departments help sustain programs while assuring students have access to supports available to classmates without ID. This practice brief described how trainings, innovations, and organizational strategies that emerged from cross-campus partnerships led first to improved writing supports for students with ID, and then were scaled-up to include all students with writing-related support needs. These types of partnerships hold the potential for making all campus services and supports more inclusive for all students.

### References

- Goldfarb, M. (2018). *Writing Papers: Tips and tricks for working with students* [video]. Think College. <https://thinkcollege.net/training/peer-mentor-training>
- Grigal, M., Hart, D., Smith, F., Papay, C., & Domin, D. (2018). *Year Three Annual Report of the TPSID Model Demonstration Projects (2017-2018)*. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion.
- Hart Research Associates. (2013). It takes more than a major: Employer priorities for college learning and student success. *Liberal Education, 99*(2).
- Jones, M., Boyle, M., May, C., Prohn, S., Updike, J., & Wheeler, C. (2015). *Building inclusive campus communities: A framework for inclusion*. Think College Insight Brief, 26. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion.
- Konrad, M., Clark, K. A., & Test., D. W. (2017). Effects of GO 4 IT...Now! Strategy instruction on expository writing skills for students with disabilities. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals, 40*, 45-55.
- Kuk, L. & Banning, J. H. (2009). Designing student affairs organizational structures: Perceptions of senior student affairs officers. *NASPA Journal, 46*, 94-117.
- Lee, A., Browder, D. M., Hawley, K., Flowers, C., & Wakeman, S. (2016). Teaching writing in response to text to students with developmental disabilities who participate in alternate assessments. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities, 51*, 238-251.

- LePeau, L. (2015). A grounded theory of academic affairs and student affairs partnerships for diversity and inclusion aims. *The Review of Higher Education*, 39, 97-122.
- May, C. (2012). An investigation of attitude change in inclusive college classes including young adults with an intellectual disability. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities*, 9(4), 240-246.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2012). *The nation's report card: Writing 2011* (NCES 2012-470). Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C.
- National Research Council. (2015). *Enhancing the effectiveness of team science*. Committee on the Science of Team Science, N.J. Cooke and M.L. Hilton, Editors. Board on Behavioral, Cognitive, and Sensory Sciences, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- Papay, C. & Griffin, M. (2013). Developing inclusive college opportunities for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 38, 110-116.
- Pennington, R. & Delano, M. (2014). Improving cover-letter writing skills of individuals with intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 47, 204-208.
- Plotner, A. J., & Marshall, K. J. (2015). Postsecondary education programs for students with an intellectual disability: Facilitators and barriers to implementation. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, 53, 58-69.
- Prohn, S. M., Hall, T. B., & Carter, T. (2018). *Improving writing for all students through writing center training, collaboration and assistive technology*. Postsecondary Disability Training Institute, Baltimore, MD.  
<https://pti.education.uconn.edu/program-2018-2/>
- Prohn, S. M., Kelley, K. R., & Westling, D. L. (2019). Supports' perspectives on the social experiences of college students with intellectual disability. *Inclusion*, 7(2), 111-124.
- Rivera, C. J., Wood, C. L., James, M., & Williams, S. (2019). Improving study outcomes for college students with executive functioning challenges. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 42(3), 139-147.
- Virginia Department of Education. (2020, June 23). *SOL test pass rates & other results*. Richmond, VA. [http://www.doe.virginia.gov/statistics\\_reports/sol-pass-rates/index.shtml](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/statistics_reports/sol-pass-rates/index.shtml)
- Weir, C., Papay, C., & Hanson, T. (2019). *Introducing the Think College standards continuous improvement tool*. State of the Art, Reno, NV.  
<https://www.sotaconference.com/2019-materials.html>
- Westling, D. L., Kelley, K. R., Cain, B. & Prohn, P. (2013). College students' attitudes about an inclusive postsecondary education program for individuals with intellectual disability. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, 43, 306-319.
- Woods-Groves, S., Alqahtani, S. S., Balint-Langel, K., & Kern, A. (2018). Electronic essay writing with postsecondary students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. *Educational and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, 53, 311-324.

- Woods-Groves, S., Therrien, W. J., Hua, Y., Hendrickson, J. M., Shaw, J. W., & Hughes, C. A. (2012). Effectiveness of an essay writing strategy for post-secondary students with developmental disabilities. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities, 47*, 210-222.
- White, J. (2002). Student affairs scholarship: Reconsidering questions toward possibilities for liberation, collaboration and innovation. *NASPA Journal, 39*, 158-165.

## Supplementary Materials

### Breaking the Blank Page Pamphlets

*Figure 1.* Breaking the Blank Page: How to get started with reflective writing in college





# Essay template and examples



## Introduction

- Start with an opening statement that gets the reader's attention.
- Include background information on your claim.
- Introduce and state your claim.

*Many important questions face our generation, but one rises above the rest: cake or pie? Both desserts can be delicious, but pie has several clear advantages over cake. Due to its healthiness, pie is superior to cake.*

## Body Paragraphs

- Make points that support your claim.
- Use facts and details to make these points - these is your evidence
- Connect these facts and details to your claim

*Pie is often healthier than cake because it is more likely to contain fiber. Both sweet and savory pies are likely to have fiber. Fiber can help control blood sugar, especially for those with diabetes. Thus, pie's fiber content can make it a healthier dessert option for everyone.*

## Counter-Argument

- Show a point people may make to challenge your argument.
- Disprove that point

*Some people may say pie is more difficult to put candles in than a cake. However, silken pies like key lime pie can be used to hold candles.*

## Conclusion

- Restate your argument and supporting evidence.
- Tell your reader why your argument matters.

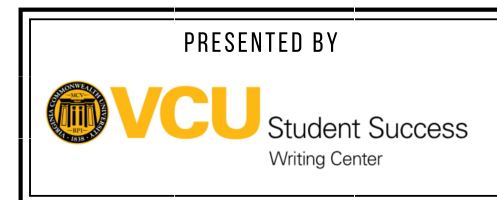
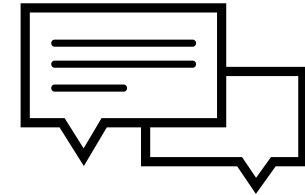
*Food choices have a direct impact on personal health. Healthy eating does not mean food has to be bland. People can enjoy delicious food and live a healthier lifestyle by eating pie instead of cake.*

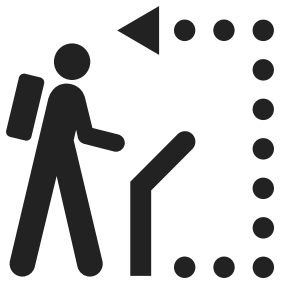
**Contributing Authors:** Madeleine Murphy, Natasha Dickerson-Amaya, Nora Blake, C. Jane Hagen, Mitchell Smiley, DeAmber Dewitt, Rowan Lucas

**Campus Partner:** Chelsea Russell

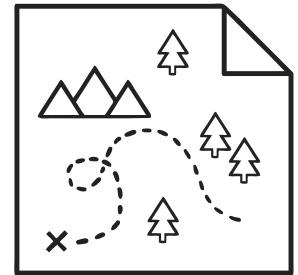
# BREAKING THE BLANK PAGE

## HOW TO GET STARTED WITH ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING IN COLLEGE





# Guide to an Argumentative Essay



## Here's some guidance before you begin



### What is an Argumentative Essay?

- An argumentative essay is a type of paper where you try to prove a point. It's like a debate.
- In the essay, you explain why someone should agree with your side of the argument.

### Why Should I Care?

Argumentative essays will help you...

- improve your reading and listening skills
- practice researching topics
- improve your thinking skills
- learn to clearly explain your points

### What will this look like?

Check out the back for a template and example essay!

**1** Find a debatable topic. This means that someone could argue against you.

**2** Research your topic. Come up with an argument that is supported by your research. This is your claim.

**3** Jot down several good reasons why you support your claim . Use your research to back up those reasons.

**4** Look at the reasons you gave and try to argue with yourself. Ask: Why would someone disagree with your reasons? What would they say?

**5** Choose one of these reasons and disprove it with your research. This is your counterclaim.

**6** Carefully organize your paper so that it moves smoothly from defending your own points to sections where you argue against the opposition.

