



University of Alabama at Birmingham

HIGHER ED SOLUTIONS

In the 1930s, the University of Alabama won a federal grant to open an extension center in downtown Birmingham. The center eventually outgrew its space and moved to the Five Points South area, where in 1969 it became a campus of the University of Alabama system. In the four decades since, the university has pushed the frontiers of science, medicine, the arts, and the humanities and has garnered national and international respect. Today it serves more than 16,000 students and is ranked among the top 15 percent of U.S. colleges and universities by the Princeton Review.

“The Pearson team was unbelievable. I’m amazed at the level of support I received. They make me feel like I’m the only client that Pearson has.”

—Rita Treutel
English instructor

In fall 2007 the University of Alabama at Birmingham’s (UAB’s) quality enhancement plan indicated that undergraduate writing had room for enhancement. Creating an online writing presence was suggested, and soon thereafter a writing task force was charged with conceiving exactly what an online presence would look like, what it would offer students, and, most important, how to make it happen.

English instructor Rita Treutel was director of the English resource center at the time, as well as a member of the writing task force. “The English department was successfully using Pearson’s MyComplab, so it was a logical first step to contact our Pearson rep and inquire about whether Pearson could help,” she says.

Pearson Learning Solutions worked with the task force to create a customized Web portal whose online delivery alleviated scalability, update, and storage issues. “Immediately, the question *how?* disappeared, becoming *we can do this and this and this,*” says Treutel. “Pearson either had published or had access to all of the content we could have wanted. Their library of materials enabled us to gather a huge amount of information. That information forms the foundation of every section of our portal, and we can add to it whenever we like.”

From initial conception as a supplemental resource, the portal blossomed into a content-rich and collaborative site that can be used by students and faculty in every department on campus. Treutel stepped forward as administrator of the portal and is responsible for assigning faculty codes, teaching faculty how to get

the most out of the portal, and acting as liaison with Pearson Learning Solutions. Today the University Writing Web offers an opportunity for students in all disciplines and at all levels to write papers, take diagnostic tests, and receive writing tips from their professors in one centralized, online location.

The University Writing Web combines two elements: (1) an online presence that promotes writing instruction at all levels of the undergraduate curriculum and (2) Pearson’s powerful MyComplab program. Freshman composition students purchase a customized University Writing Web handbook plus five years of online access to both the MyComplab program and the Writing Web site for less than the price of the textbook plus one-semester MyComplab access code as was delivered previous to the portal’s launch.

Alison Chapman, Ph.D., chair of the University Writing Task Force, sees the University Writing Web as an invaluable resource to students throughout their undergraduate careers, especially once every undergraduate department has submitted its materials to the database. “Students finally have a resource to help improve their writing and answer the question, What is my instructor looking for in this paper?”

Upon entering the site, students are presented with a link to UAB’s on-campus writing resources: the English Resource Center and the University Writing Center, MyComplab, and a tab through which they can explore writing in other disciplines.

“The portal reinforces that good writing impacts and is the responsibility of the school as a whole,” says

Treutel. "All disciplines involve writing; it's how we communicate. Yet how physicists write is different from how creative writers approach their craft. Students can now learn—at any time, anywhere with Web access—what type of writing is appropriate for their disciplines. For example, a business student can click on that department's link and find an archive of documents that indicate common conventions and dos and don'ts relevant to their future profession. There are even specific assignments. It's targeted, manageable, and convenient."

Each school and each department is allotted space on the portal to post discipline-specific resources, samples of the types of writing valued in those areas, suggestions from UAB instructors, and examples from UAB classes. Content varies from simple documents to eBooks and may later include video and podcasts as well. "Ultimately, we hope each department will take ownership of its section and continue to build on it," says Treutel.

The customized handbook and comprehensive portal represent an important contribution to a larger UAB effort to boost student success. That effort includes an early alert system for at-risk students, the requirement of First-Year Experience courses, and elevated admission requirements. "It's working," says Treutel. "As of fall 2009, retention is up for 100 to 200 courses.

"My students are hungry for alternative methods of learning," says Treutel. "They're very vocal about seeking resources like MyComplab to bridge the gap between what takes place in the classroom and what happens when they leave. They won't sit with a handbook and do exercises, but they'll watch animated presentations and do exercises online."

Once online, however, students sometimes aren't equipped to judge the validity of the information they find. "The Writing Web provides students with a resource they can trust that is stocked with proven strategies and is pedagogically sound," says Treutel.

Students aren't the only ones who benefit from the customized portal and MyComplab solution. "The Writing Web has enabled me to become a more effective teacher," says Treutel. "I can send a specific set of grammar instruction directly to the handful of students who were identified via online diagnostics—and without holding up the rest of the class. It means I meet departmental requirements in a way that is consistent with how I teach and what my students need. As a result, my class is more engaged; there's no wasted time.

"Pearson Learning Solutions has spoiled me," says Treutel. "They've done a great job of supporting me throughout the process. They're experienced and professional, and it comes through in their awareness of the institutional politics of an organization of our size and the impact that change of this magnitude has in our environment."

Treutel is confident that she and the other members of the writing task force have met their goal of providing a top-notch writing resource for both instructors and students in UAB's undergraduate program. "From freshman-level writing to core classes, to courses in each of the disciplines, the University Writing Web is fast becoming the university's default resource," she says.