



The Liberal Arts Gateway

A Brief Overview and a Report on
the Effectiveness of the Liberal Arts
Gateway Program at ACC

MAY 2022



About the Liberal Arts Gateway

Liberal Arts Gateway (LAG) courses grow from faculty members' areas of expertise and passion and are founded upon key Liberal Arts principles, such as critical inquiry, diversity and equity, and standards of evidence. The LAG program takes the goal of engaging students seriously while enabling them to thrive in a pluralistic society by learning to live an aware, meaningful, and informed life.

Liberal Arts Gateway classes first began in spring 2020 with twenty-five sections of newly-conceived courses in Composition I and Composition II. Since then, the program has grown to include over fifty sections of composition courses and twenty-two sections of Philosophy, Religion, and Humanities courses.

LAG Principles

The guiding principles of the Liberal Arts Gateway are

- Equity and Inclusion—awareness of barriers to success, strategies to help students persevere
- The Student Experience—a focus on student motivation, ownership of learning, and production of meaningful work
- Responsiveness to Down Path Stakeholders—consideration of the next course in the sequence, the next college, the workforce or professional path

With these principles in mind, Departments are free to define their own specific Disciplinary Classroom Guidelines. The following guidelines were developed by the LAG committees within the Composition & Literary Studies and Philosophy, Religion, & Humanities Departments, respectively:

LAG Classroom Guidelines for Composition and Literary Studies

Pluralism: The Liberal Arts celebrate diversity. Pluralism holds that people of different beliefs, experiences, and values all have a voice within a thriving democracy and a thriving classroom. Respecting and exploring many ways of seeing produces the fullest vision.

Literacies: The Liberal Arts celebrate all forms of literacy. Linguistic creativity, power, and precision exist within many communities, though certain literacies are culturally dominant and bring access to opportunity and power. A key goal is to investigate how different communities and disciplines think, speak, read, write, and understand evidence.

Evidence: The Liberal Arts celebrate evidence-based thinking as the basis for arriving at fact and truth. Key to the pursuit of truth are research-based inquiry, flexible thinking, awareness of biases, learning from mistakes, and attention to nuance and context.

Equity: The Liberal Arts celebrate equity and seek to understand barriers to equity and access in all areas of society. A core goal is the investigation of root causes of inequity and commitment to providing opportunity.



Engagement: The Liberal Arts celebrate intellectual curiosity and the pursuit of truth. Students are encouraged to bring their experiences and passions to the classroom. They are encouraged to be open-minded and to focus on exploration and personal growth within a supportive learning environment.

LAG Classroom Guidelines for Philosophy, Religion, and Humanities

Reflective: Provides opportunities for meaningful reflection early and often throughout the course about values and content relevance, encouraging students to relate course content to personal experience, self-development, and social responsibility

Scaffolded: Focuses upon course delivery and instructional methods that are intuitive, accessible, easy to navigate, responsive, and supportive skill development over time to ensure student success

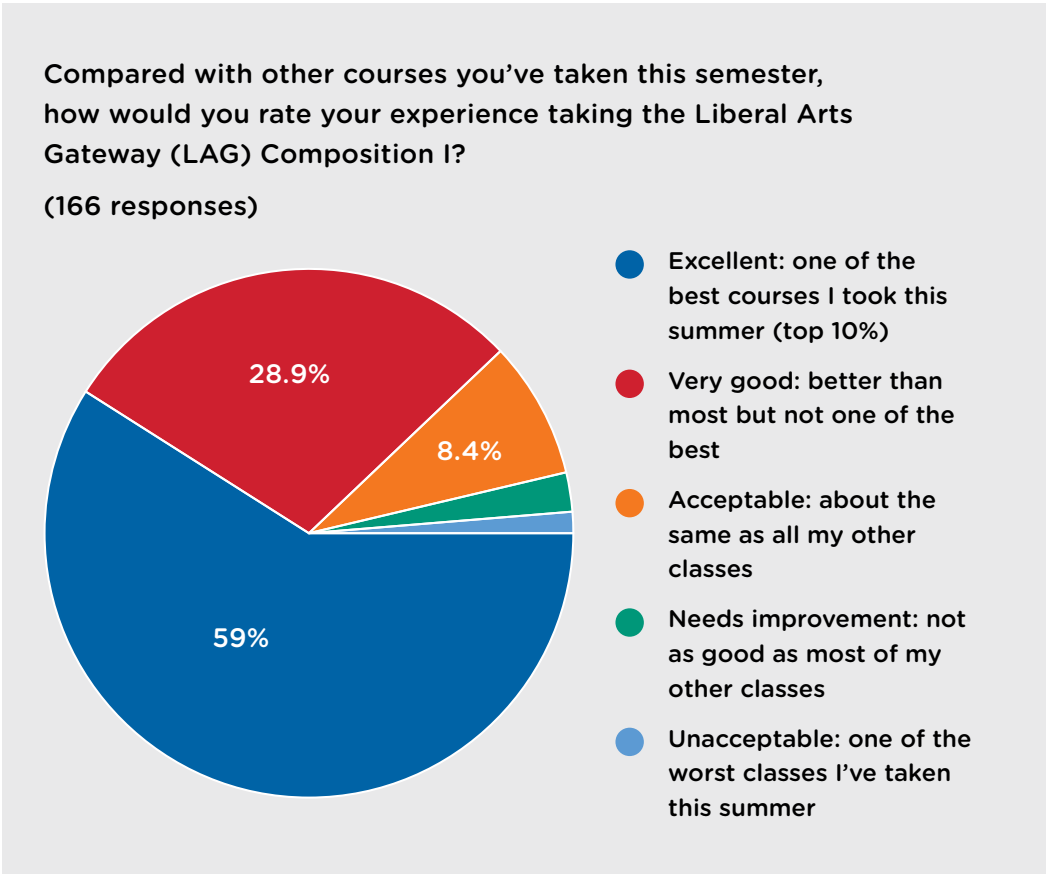
Integrative: Interweaves students into the fabric of the college at multiple points of contact, while also facilitating the transfer of knowledge, skills, and empathy to students' personal and professional lives

Multicultural: Emphasizes course content from multiple cultural contexts in addition to the traditional Western canon, highlighting materials that are culturally relevant for a diverse student body

Communal: Creates course structures that focus upon collaboration, presentation, discussion, sharing, and student ownership of material in order to foster community within the classroom and outside of the college environment

The Student Experience in Liberal Arts Gateway Courses

In fall 2021, LAG students completed an end-of-semester survey and participated in focus groups. Here are some results from the survey, which was submitted by 166 students.



Top Value found in LAG Classes (includes Comp I and Comp II)

89.2%

I felt included in
the class

87.9%

Material was
relevant to my life

88.5%

I am confident that I
can find trustworthy
evidence

87.3%

I was able to assess
my learning and
track my progress

87.9%

I am better
prepared for future
college courses

87.3%

I am a more
effective writer

Student Feedback

Student feedback was overwhelmingly positive. 89% of students said they “felt included in the class.” 88% of survey respondents noted that the class “better prepared them for future college courses” and that the coursework was relevant to their lives. Students indicated that the LAG courses fostered a sense of belonging and purpose. On the next page are some sample student comments from the survey:

“

What made a difference in this one, was the welcoming environment to express one's thoughts and the constant communication the professor had with the class.

“

I just want you to know that this is the best class I have taken the entire time I have been in college at ACC. I have loved every single second and this class has given me confidence and made me feel like the amount of reading I do in a day has value.

“

People shared more of their lives in this class than they do with their friends. I pay more attention to things in the news. I relate things I learn to this English class.

“

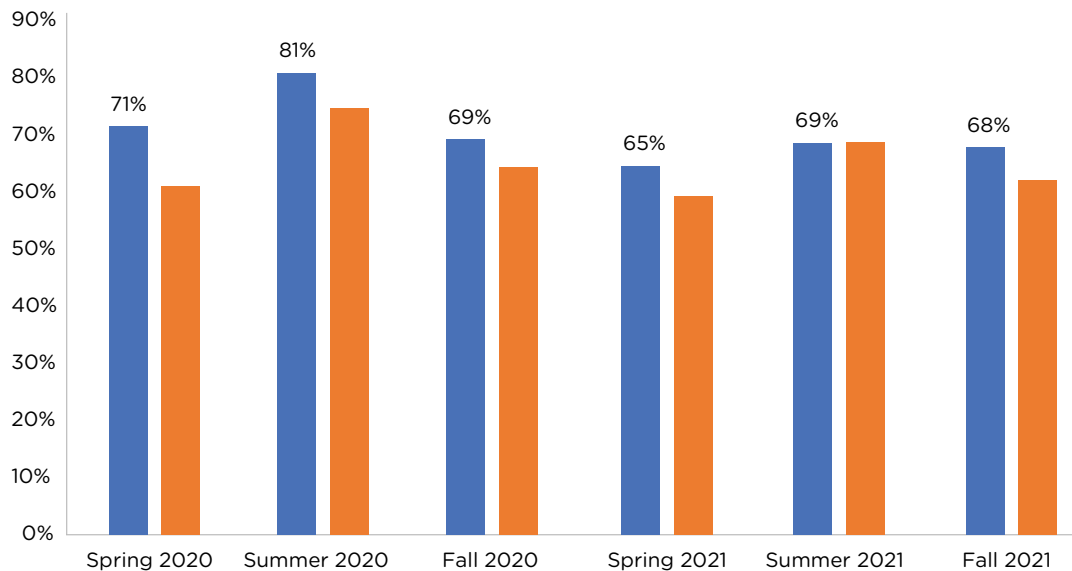
This class was absolutely amazing. . . . We were challenged to think deeper about not only the texts assigned but our own lives. I dare say this class caused change in my own life. A different perspective on things grew for sure. I am left wanting so much more! This Liberal Arts Gateway class stands out from the rest. This is my fourth year in college but my first at ACC and I've never taken anything like it. It creates a natural desire to do well in the course and leaves you questioning and wanting to learn more. Please offer more of these types of courses! It's done nothing but increase my hunger for knowledge and love for education. What an eye opening experience this has been. 10/10 would recommend.

Overall Student Performance in Liberal Arts Gateway Courses

The first cohort of LAG Composition I included nine sections in spring 2020 and grew to thirty-three sections by fall 2021. Composition I is a nearly universal entry-level course for new college students, and we now have data on student performance in the first six semesters of the program.

Table 1: Student Success in LAG Composition I

*ENGL 1301 Percent Successfully Passed
LAG (blue) vs. Non-LAG sections (orange)*



(Note that this chart compares LAG students to traditional students taking 1301, excluding Dual Credit and Early College High School students.)

Qualitative data indicate that students succeed at a higher rate in LAG courses because the course material is relevant to their lives. The professors also created a welcoming atmosphere that made students comfortable and helped them succeed. In addition, students also noted that they understood the value of the LAG course and its connection to other aspects of their academic and personal lives. All LAG courses include the Reflection Exit Assessment (REA), an essay that students complete at the end of the semester, where they reflect on their experience in the class, the course material, and their growth. Below are some sample responses from the REA:

- *I have previously tried to go to college twice. Both times I quit within the first two weeks. This semester was different. I am using my G.I. Bill benefits and I was very worried about failing because you have to pay the money back...I ended up going to class and from Day 1 [the] professor made me feel at ease.*
- *I haven't been in school in so long I was afraid to come back but I am so glad I did. I have learned so much this semester not only about the basics and punctuation, but also how to be a better essay writer. That is huge to me! I personally think I wouldn't have done as well in my other classes if it wasn't for taking this class.*
- *This first semester of college has been pretty hard for me. I have had a lot of personal things go on. I did enjoy the class 100%!... and English is my favorite subject. I...was able to learn and expand on topics I was aware of but had not thought deeply about. I honestly didn't think a class could allow me to feel like I can...use these concepts not only in my college career but throughout life.*

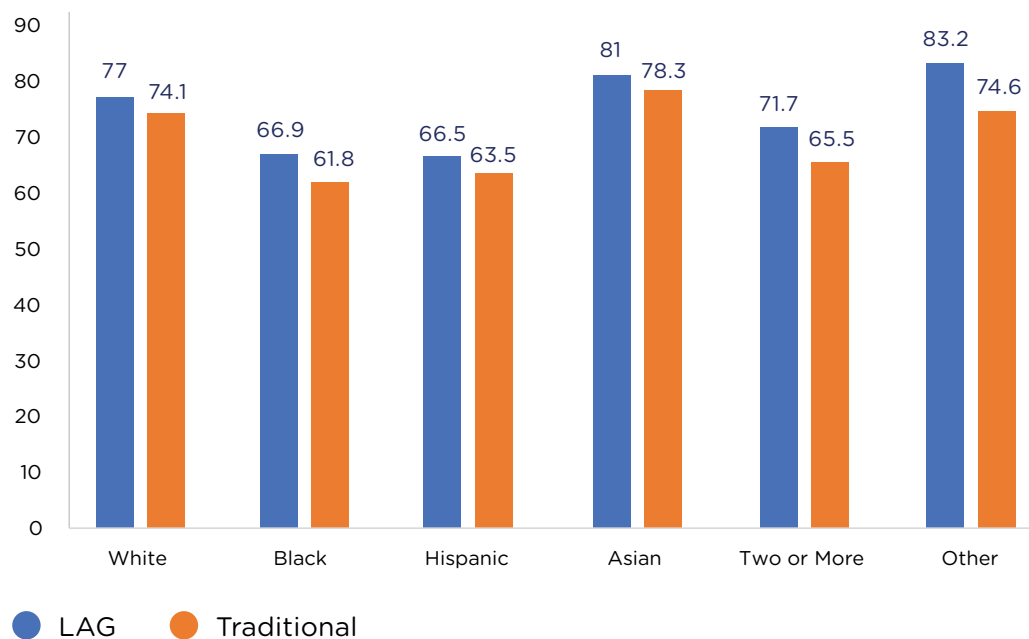


Qualitative data indicate that students succeed at a higher rate in LAG courses because the course material is relevant to their lives.

Performance by Students of Color in Liberal Arts Gateway Courses

Students of color showed solid gains in LAG courses, outperforming their peers in traditional sections, as seen in the charts below. The one anomaly was the summer semester of 2021, where Hispanic students did better in traditional sections versus LAG.

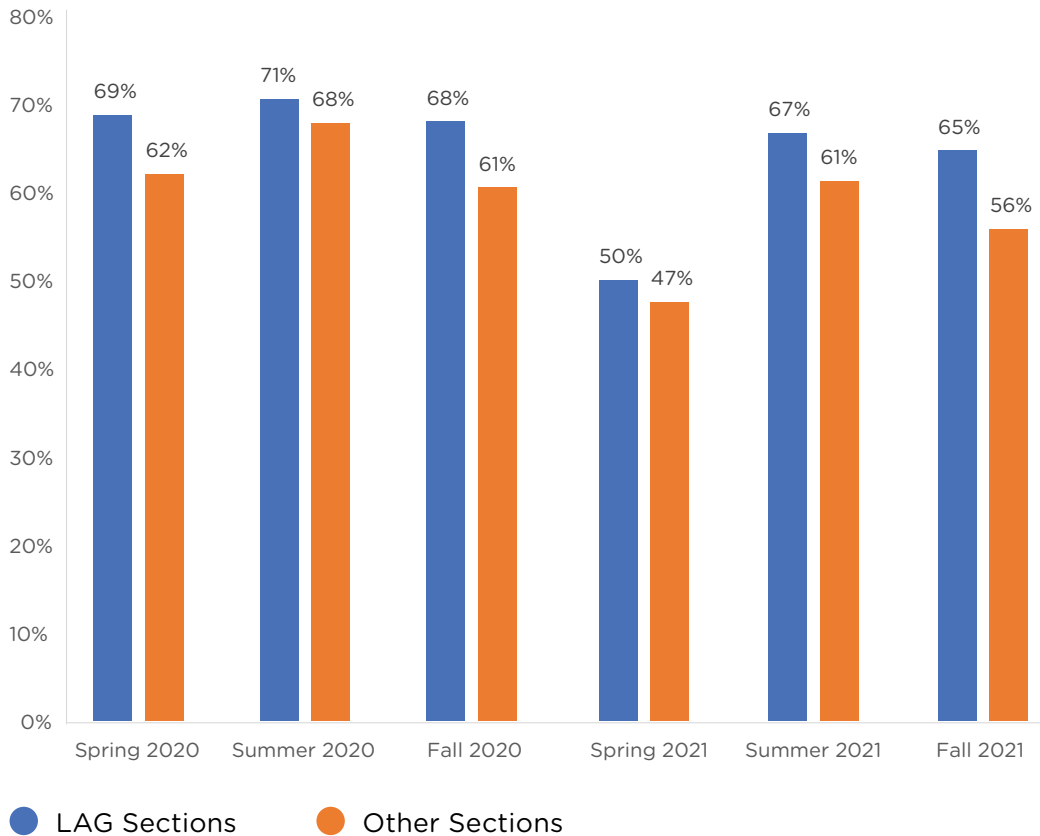
Table 2: Student Success in LAG Composition I by Student Population
Success Rate Comparison, Spring 2020-Fall 2021



(Note that this chart also excludes Dual Credit and Early College High School students, as do the two below.)

Table 3: Black Student Performance in LAG vs. Performance in Other Comp. I Sections

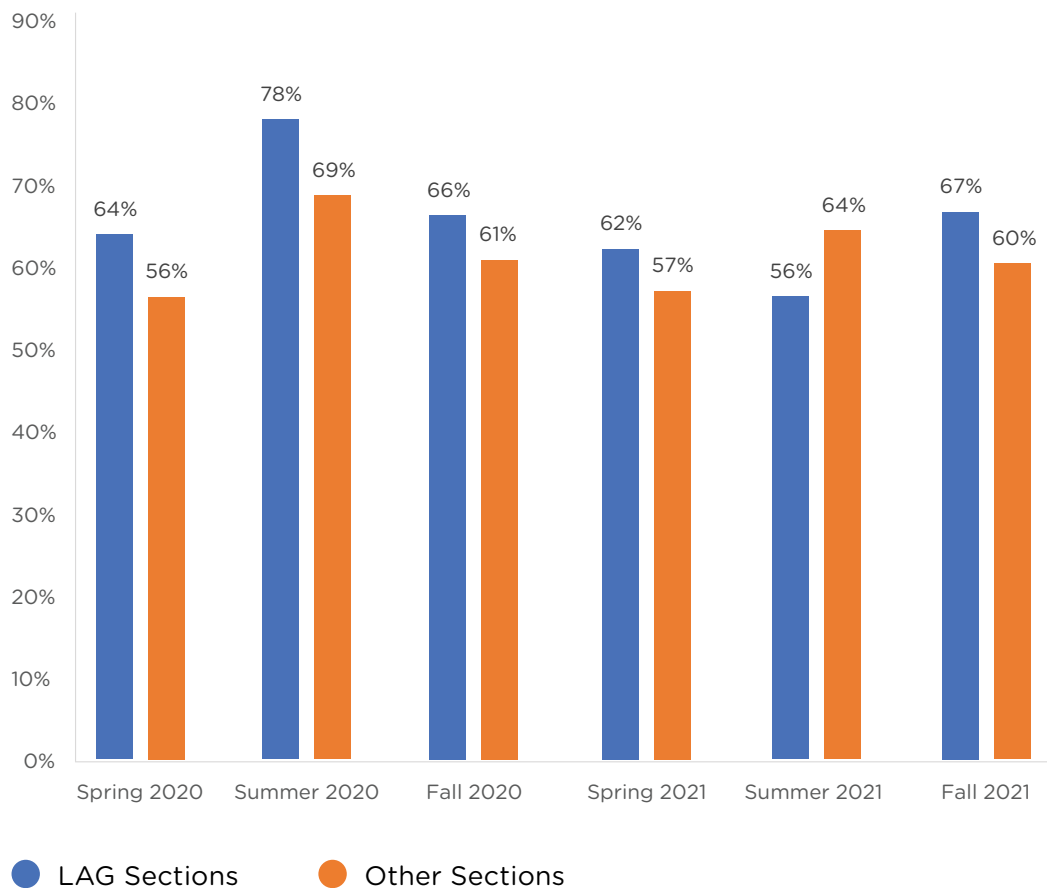
LAG Section Outcomes ENGL-1301 Black Students - Traditional Students



“I’ve experienced and seen racism so to me this [research essay] was so meaningful I felt like I was able to really express myself in it talking about how racism has impacted what I want to be when I get older... [W]riting my essay...made it so clear to me why I’m so drawn and inspired to being an immigration lawyer and an activist.”

Table 4: Hispanic Student Performance in LAG vs. Performance in Other Comp. I Sections

LAG Section Outcomes ENGL-1301 Hispanic Students - Traditional Students



These charts indicate significant gains in success rates for LAG students compared to other 1301 students, with particularly strong gains for students from traditionally marginalized groups.

Qualitative data also indicated that Black and Hispanic students felt that the assignments and material in LAG courses related personally to their struggles and spoke to their experiences. Here are some sample responses from the LAG REA:

- *[O]ne of the most meaningful texts to me this semester had to be the poem by Etheridge Knight, "A Watts Mother Mourns While Boiling Beans." The reason this text was so meaningful to me is because of the conversation that the class had surrounding the text...because to this day black Americans, no, black kids still have to get, "The Talk"*

- *I've experienced and seen racism so to me this [research essay] was so meaningful I felt like I was able to really express myself in it talking about how racism has impacted what I want to be when I get older... [W]riting my essay...made it so clear to me why I'm so drawn and inspired to being an immigration lawyer and an activist.*

- *As a whole, I want[ed] my [paper] to make my audience reflect. I want[ed] my audience to put themselves in the shoes of women of color; to just momentarily think about their struggles and hardships...The issue I speak about is just as important as many other issues, and just because not everyone else experiences it, it does not mean it is not real. My hope is that we get better at making women feel heard and understood, especially the girls who are growing up today. Words hurt, and if it is so easy to utter a word, it should be just as easy to not say that word. Women of color are not exotic, they are women, they are humans.*



“Now, my perspective has changed a lot because now I will say that I’m more open-minded and that I am more understanding about things going around me, all thanks to the readings.”

Several students noted that taking a LAG class made them more open-minded and deepened the understanding of their place in the world. In addition, students who did not belong to marginalized communities developed empathy, awareness, and a complex appreciation of the struggles faced by some of these other groups. Below are some sample responses from the LAG REA:

- *While reading about the LGBTQ community I became more culturally sensitive to their situation and gained a deeper understanding of the discrimination the community faces every day. In fact, on a recent work trip I ran into drag queens in my elevator and had an eye-opening conversation.... Had this been before taking Composition Two, I am ashamed to say that the elevator ride may have been an uncomfortable experience for me....I now make a conscious effort to deeply educate myself on all aspects of a subject before speaking or writing about it. Being tolerant is another important item on this list, as this helps me to be an objective writer and not let my personal feelings toward a topic influence my writing.*
- *Now, my perspective has changed a lot because now I will say that I'm more open-minded and that I am more understanding about things going around me, all thanks to the readings. These are the assignments that made me open up my mind and made me be aware of things that are around me...I didn't know that being a citizen actually has a meaning in society and that we are more than we thought and that we can so [sic] much more things to be able to help out society.*
- *I wrote an essay about the topic of reparations while taking this course. While researching the topic and looking for credible sources to support my argument for reparations for African Americans, I found many pieces that argued against reparations and it gave me a new perspective. I still stand behind reparations for African Americans, but reading articles that opposed my stance on the matter opened my eyes to the difficulties surrounding the subject of reparations for African Americans such as the difficulty of determining who should get reparations. This proved to be a fair argument, and it helped me see some of the flaws the idea of reparations has, and that fair approach to a subject is something I will carry into my future writing and even into my life.*

Summation

In fall 2021, over 2000 analytical essays were collected from Composition I sections across the college, and in spring 2022, 215 were assessed using a rubric that measured content, critical thinking, organization, and grammar/mechanics. LAG students submitted the lowest number of essays scored as “not passing,” while scoring among the highest in the categories of “Good” and “Superior.” Clearly, the Liberal Arts Gateway curriculum prepares students for their academic career while providing them with an enriching, meaningful, and rewarding experience. It is also clear that our students, especially our students of color, succeed at higher rates and find these courses increasingly relevant.

Faculty involved in the Liberal Arts Gateway have found the initiative enormously energizing and rewarding. Some of the reasons for the success of the program include the fact that it is faculty driven and collaborative, that it places primary emphasis on student equity and engagement, that it asks faculty to identify fundamental principles of their discipline, and that it offers practical help via the Disciplinary Toolkit of assignments developed by the program.

In terms of student success, an energized instructor helps create energized students. Moreover, the LAG principles foreground what research tells us works best to foster retention: community building and assigning work that is relevant to students’ lives.

Naturally reworking classes in accordance with LAG principles and maintaining them at a high level is labor-intensive. LAG faculty, especially in CLS, note the heavy workload and time commitment that go into a semesters-long course redesign, and the course redesign does not stop after the first year: faculty are constantly changing readings, consulting with their colleagues, and developing new assignments to deploy in their classrooms every semester. In addition, the inherently collaborative nature of the program requires faculty to commit substantial time to LAG work during the semester. Finally, thoughtful feedback, equitable grading and deadline practices, and more commitment to individual students can be draining. We hope the College will rethink its attitude towards the inherent value that the liberal arts bring to the student experience here at ACC and find creative ways of supporting faculty as well as the Liberal Arts Gateway while building on its success!



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www.gateway.acclahc.org