The Liberal Arts Gateway Program at Austin Community College

Liberal Arts Can Save the World!

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The Mission

What courses would we create for our disciplines if the goal were to equip and empower students to live aware, meaningful, informed lives?

- **make the student experience central and do everything we could to connect the student's experience to the heart of our discipline**

- **cast the largest possible net, and welcome divergent voices and perspectives into our ever-expanding great conversations**

- **anticipate the needs of everyone touched by our students in the future, and build in reflective preparation for those needs**

How excited are faculty when asked to review programming and the courses they teach?

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a: I HAVE SO MUCH TO DO ALREADY, AND NOW THEY WANT ME TO DO MORE?

b: THINKING OF WAYS TO SABOTAGE THIS...

c: OH GREAT. LOOKS LIKE THERE'S NO GETTING OUT OF THIS.

d: WHOA! THIS COULD ACTUALLY BE FUN...

The Problem

- Large and Diffuse Department
  - 41 full-time faculty (36 English and 5 INRW) and approximately 127 adjunct faculty (114 English and 13 INRW)

- Departmental Malaise
  - Stagnant curriculum
  - Faculty morale
  - Teaching on autopilot

- Top-down Approach to Innovation in Pedagogy and Curriculum
  - Small scale changes
  - Limited to individual faculty
  - Does not lead to wider departmental/divisional reform

- Cycle of Dysfunction
  - Loss of faith in the department by the administration
  - Faculty feel disconnected from the mission of the college

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Developing a Solution: Motivating Faculty

- Listen to Faculty
  - What's important
  - Who's talking

- Remove Roadblocks
  - Quick, small, free to fail
  - Intervene with the higher-ups
  - Compensate

- Spread the word
  - Advertise success
  - Create rewards for those who engage

- Create a Narrative
  - Faculty Empowerment = Student Success

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Year 1: Finding the Right People

- Identifying and empowering faculty
  - Small innovative group
  - Open to change

- Reconnect faculty with their passion: their discipline
  - Thematic courses
  - Courses structured around "big" questions

- Providing group with institutional support
  - Course load reduction
  - Stipend for adjuncts

- Articulating the principles
  - Create pilot courses
  - Create an application process

- Allowing for experimentation without consequences
  - Suspend overemphasis on student evals for a semester or two

Year 2: Growing the Program

- Establishing a presence
- Promote the program within the college
  - Advising
  - Website

- Expansion
  - 7 to 25 sections in 1 year
  - This fall
    - over 55 sections in Composition and Literary Studies
    - 13 sections in Philosophy, Religion, & Humanities

- College Support:
  - Fellowship structure with Teaching and Learning Excellence Division

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Year 3: The State of the Program

- Disciplinary and Pedagogy Incubator
  - Big problems solved on a small scale
  - Effective practices adopted by the department

- Training, Onboarding, and Ongoing Support
  - Communities of Practice
  - Curriculum Development
  - Building Community

- Showcasing Student Voices
  - Student Academic Journal: *Curiositas*

- Expanding to Other Disciplines
  - Foreign Languages
  - Student Development

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Activity and Discussion:

- **What courses would we create for our disciplines *if* the goal were to enable students to live aware, meaningful, and informed lives?**

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Developing LAG within the Composition & Literary Studies Department

- Meet in fall 2019 (7 faculty)

- Create Classroom Guidelines for Composition

- Generate "Disciplinary Toolkit" of shared assignments & resources

LAG Classroom Guidelines for Composition

- Pluralism
- Literacies
- Evidence
- Equity
- Engagement

LAG Classroom Guidelines for Philosophy, Religion, and Humanities

- Reflective
- Scaffolded
- Integrative
- Multicultural
- Communal

Ideas for Equity. Promote Student success regardless of previous educational experience or technological mastery.

- Create welcoming and inclusive syllabi.
- Discuss/demystify college/academia norms and expectations.
- Explore English trauma, concepts of multiple intelligences and growth mindset.
- Chunk up/scaffold assignments so that skills build.
- Build in motivators to help students persevere.
- Provide information on multiple avenues of support for student success (tutors, counselors, emergency fund assistance, childcare).

Ideas for Equity Continued

- Discuss belonging in college and its links to signifiers such as clothing and speech.
- Explore idea of multiple discourse communities.
- Assign readings and/or writing assignments that explore issues of equity and social justice.
- Pair skilled writers with those less skilled, as peer mentors.
- Use Glenn Singleton's "Courageous Conversations about Race" compass to initiate discussion of potentially uncomfortable topics.

Disciplinary Toolkit: Assignments for Equity

- Adversity personal narrative
- Discussion Board posts on real lived experiences of race, class, gender, religion
- Readings and videos on varieties of English: dialects, jargon, levels of diction, code-switching, power of Standard Spoken and Edited English
- Analysis Essay on the UN Declaration of Human Rights
- Persuasive essay on a local problem

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Ideas for Engagement. Create Community. Foster a sense of belonging and meaning.

- Assign first week scavenger hunt in groups

- Give students a role in creating class policies

- Pair experienced students with newbies and maintain "peer support groups" throughout semester

- Let students design a "class snapshot" survey

- Design group activities in class and at least one graded group project

- Ask students to share research findings (particularly for research projects that ask for primary research)

- Design group problem-based learning assignments

- Design writing assignments that are "renewable," i.e. have a life beyond the classroom, have an impact in the world, address a real audience

- Include journal/blog for connecting class to life

Disciplinary Toolkit: Assignments for Engagement

- Group activity building paper airplanes that generates laughs while teaching teamwork, process, research
- Textual analysis in groups, using a tournament format
- Textual analyses in groups leading to production of a variety of written and multi-media texts (Playbill, Poster, essay)
- Semester-long group "Commonplace Book" group assignment using Wakelet
- StoryCorps-style interview project
- Students who chose same research topic teaching the class about topic

Data Collection

- Worked with Office of Institutional Research and Analytics (OIRA) to compile disaggregated data on student success in LAG courses compared to traditional courses

- Distributed end-of-semester surveys to LAG composition students.

- Conducted end-of-semester focus groups with LAG composition students.

- Compared results for LAG students and traditional students in departmental assessment of student analysis essays.

Data on Student Success: Comp I

- Modality: face-to-face sections had best results, then synchronous online, and then asynchronous online.

- Semester-length:
  - 8-week courses performed a bit better in spring and 16-week in fall for both LAG and traditional sections.
  - 12-week classes had the worst performance for LAG and traditional sections.

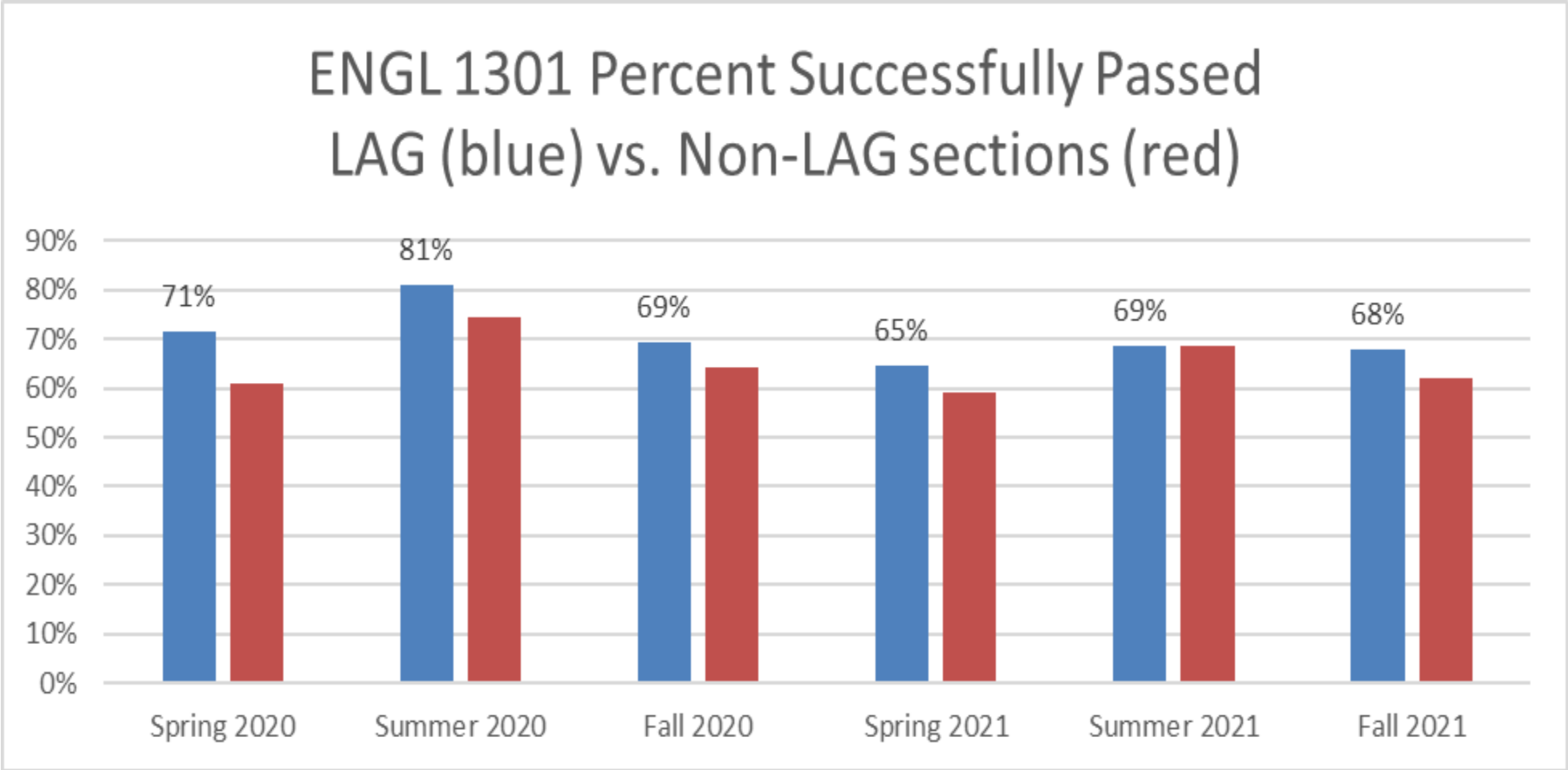# Table 1: Student Success in LAG Composition I

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

Table 2: Student Success in LAG Comp I by Student Population
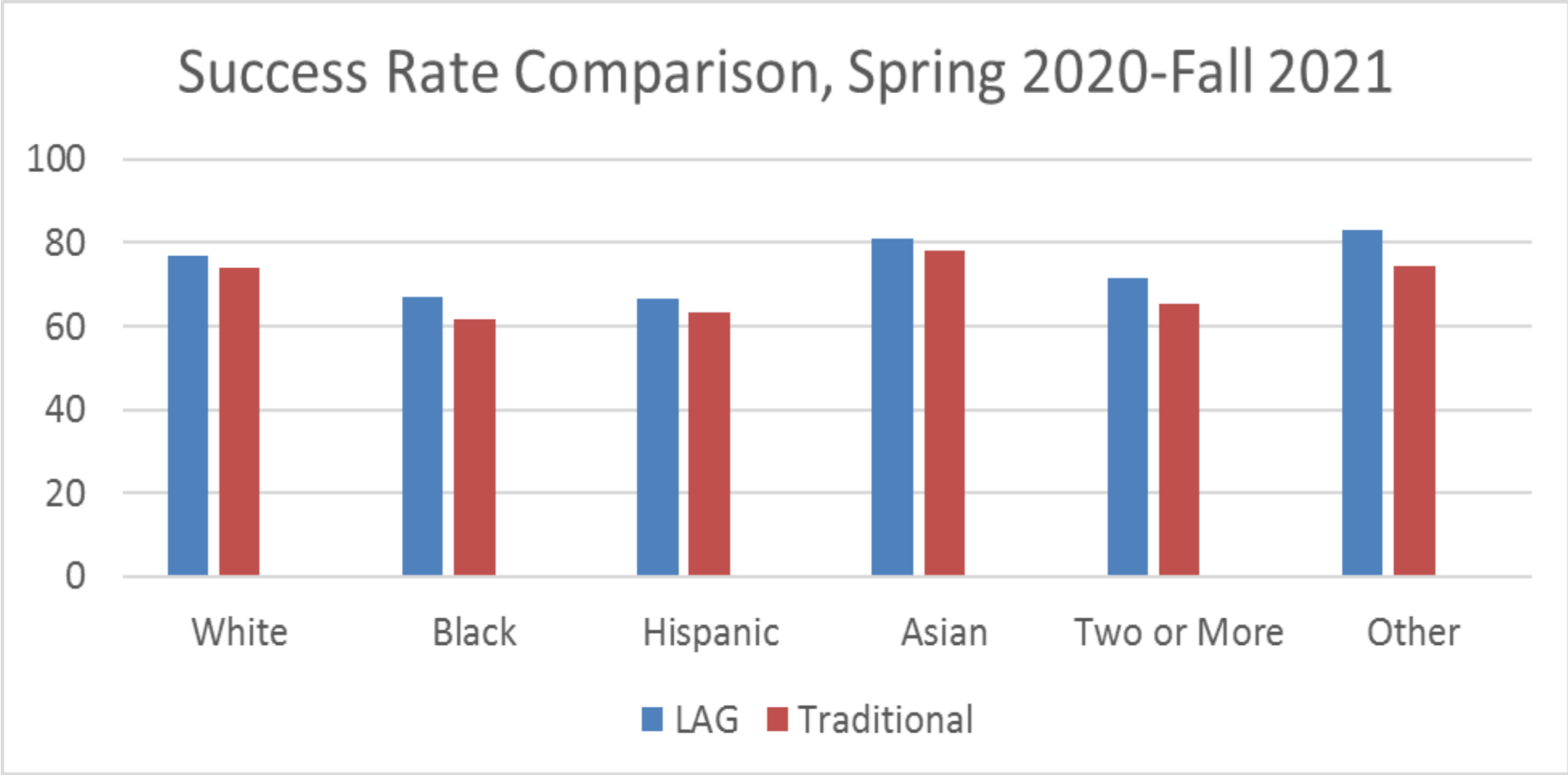

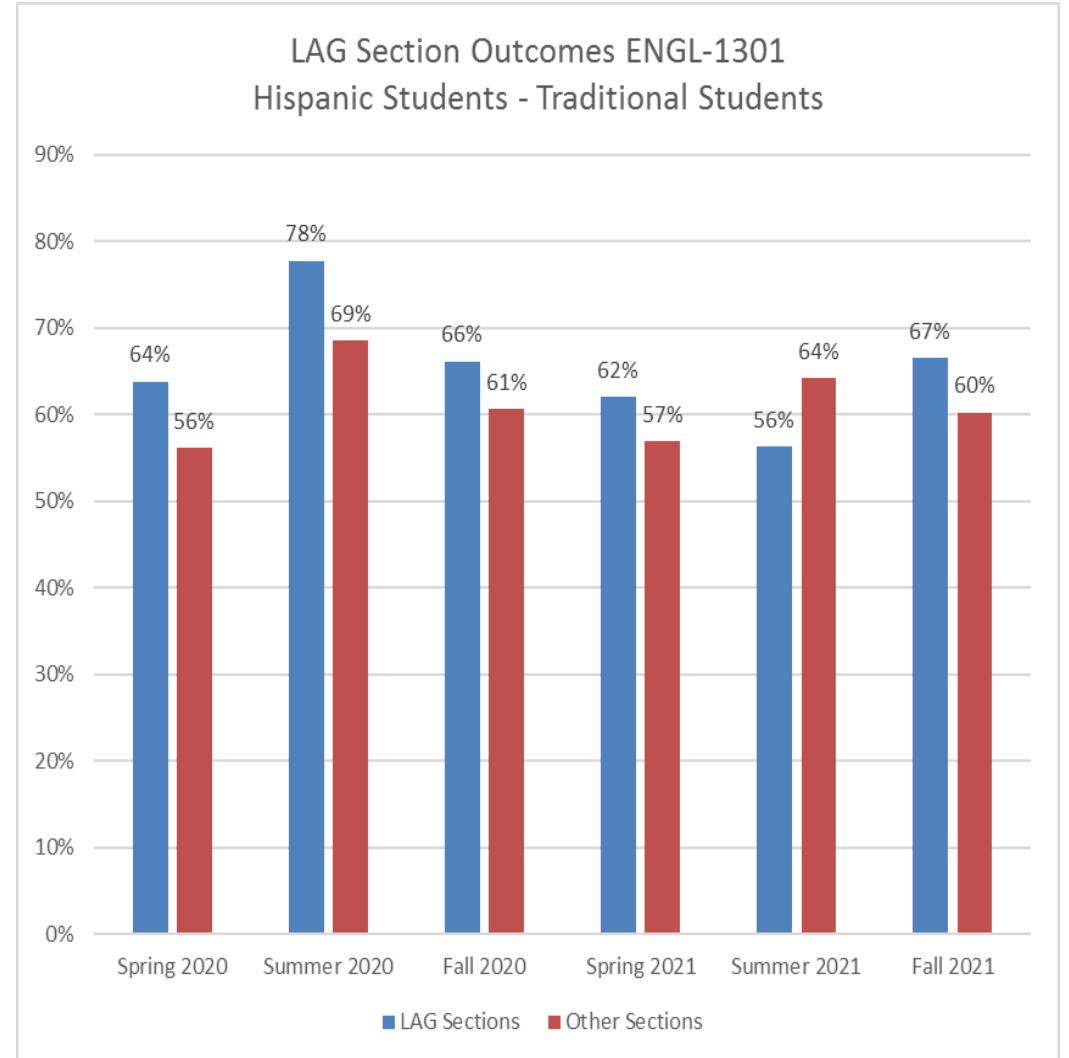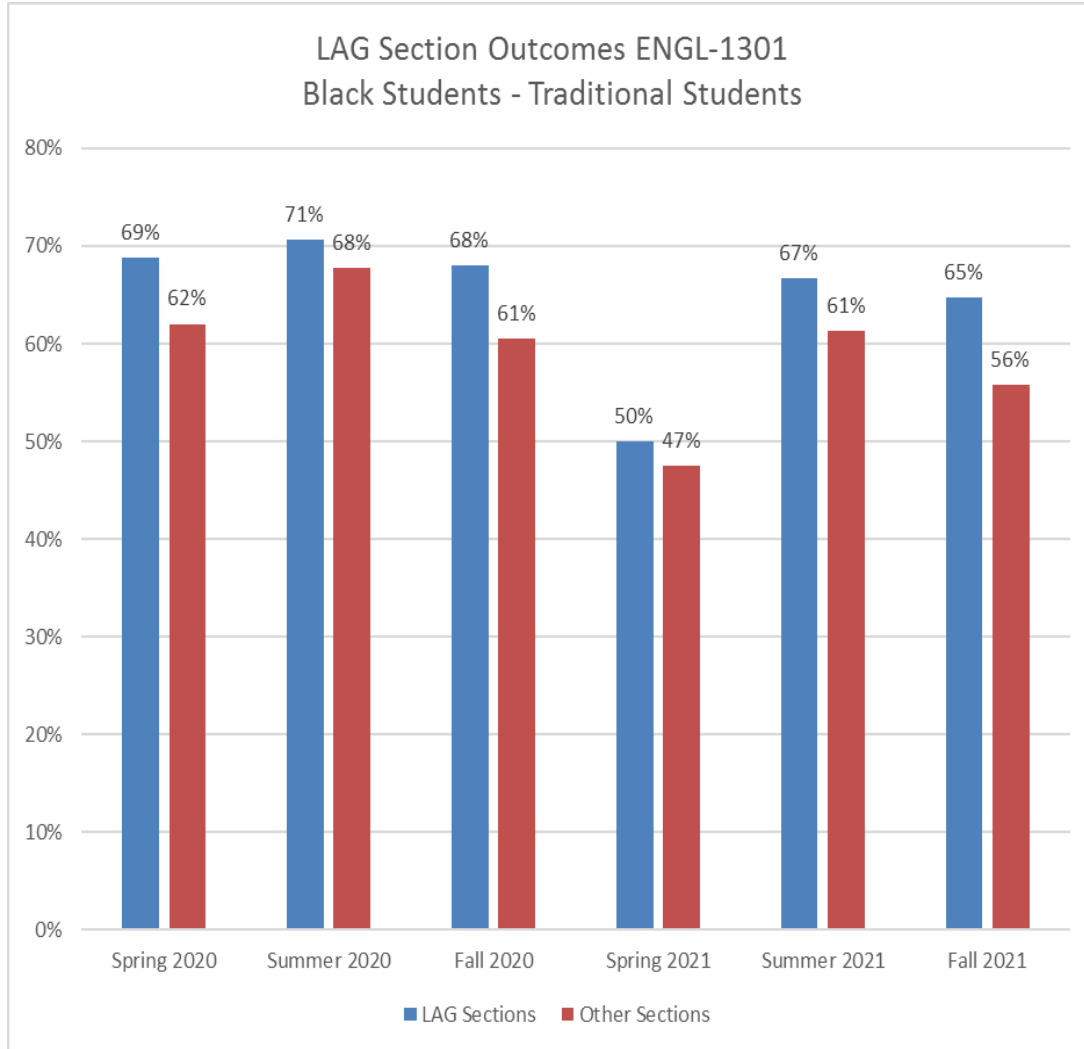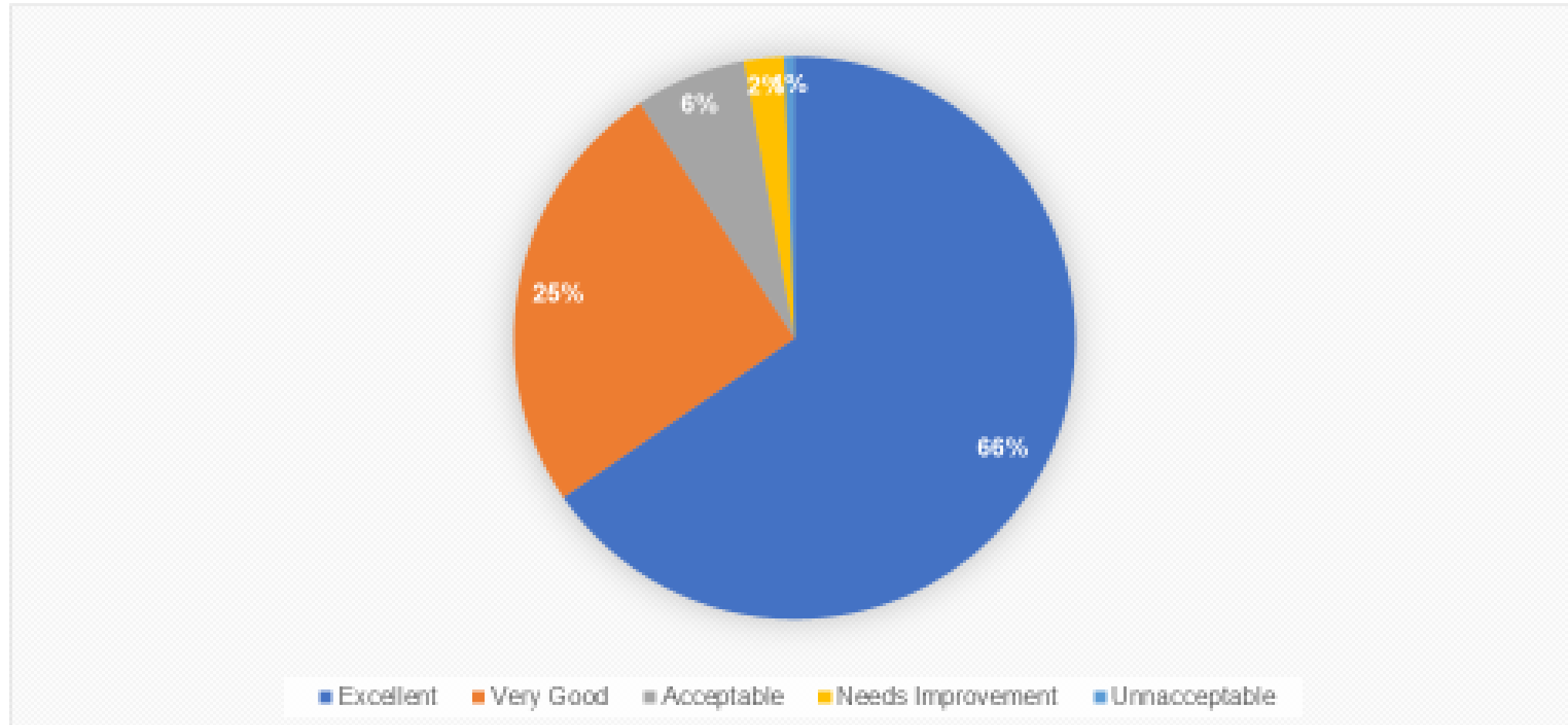Success Rate Comparison, Spring 2020-Fall 2021

Table 3: Black and Hispanic Student Performance in LAG

Compared with other courses you've take this semester, how would you rate your experience taking LAG Composition?

- 392 students, fall 2021 and spring 2022

Pie chart:
- Excellent: 66%
- Very Good: 25%
- Acceptable: 6%
- Needs Improvement: 2%
- Unacceptable: 1%

Legend: ■ Excellent ■ Very Good ■ Acceptable ■ Needs Improvement ■ Unacceptable

Top Value found in LAG Composition Classes

- I felt included in the class—89.2%

- I am confident that I can find trustworthy evidence—88.5%

- I am better prepared for future college courses—87.9%

- Material was relevant to my life—87.9%

- I was able to assess my learning and track my progress—87.3%

- I am a more effective writer—87.3%

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Focus Group Results

- Valued exposure to a wide variety of texts, gaining intercultural awareness.
- Felt more able to support/develop ideas and arguments, be a stronger reader.
- Professed more engagement with world events.
- Developed strong sense of what critical thinking means.
- Had muddled ideas as far as defining Liberal Arts.

Departmental Assessment Results

- 215 analytical essays assessed
- LAG students had lowest rate of essays assessed as "not passing" (18%).
- LAG students had highest rate of essays rated "good" or "superior"
  - LAG 37%
  - Traditional 31%
  - Co-Req 26%
  - Dual Credit 20%
- LAG students scored highest in the category of critical thinking

Summation: Reasons for Success

- faculty driven and collaborative
- places primary emphasis on student equity and engagement
- asks faculty to identify fundamental principles of their discipline
- offers practical help via the Disciplinary Toolkit of assignments
- focuses on what research tells us works best for retention: community building and assigning work that is relevant to students' lives

Challenges

- Program Level
  - Faculty workload
  - Adequate compensation for adjunct faculty
  - Turnover

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- Program Level
  - Faculty workload
  - Adequate compensation for adjunct faculty
  - Turnover
- Dean Level
  - The Principle of Sufficient Uniformity

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