

## Dawn White, M.A.

Faculty, English — Davidson County Community College

### Increasing Student Engagement and Improving Learning Outcomes in Developmental English with Aplia™

Professor Dawn White has been a faculty member at Davidson County Community College since 2010. She teaches Developmental English, curriculum English, and study skills courses to a diverse student population comprised of traditional students and those returning to school for career or other life changes. Dawn's biggest challenge is keeping students motivated and engaged so they finish her courses — which are required for those who must complete pre-curriculum coursework prior to entering college-level classes — and her students' biggest challenges are critical thinking and composition skills, and staying focused on their studies, even in the midst of very busy, active lives.

#### COURSES AND PARTICIPANTS

Davidson County is a rural area of North Carolina that had primarily been home to the furniture manufacturing and tobacco industries. As jobs within the furniture industry have moved offshore, many of the jobs available to high-school graduates have seen a significant decline. Aviation, health care, and other new industries are emerging in the area, so "there needs to be a lot of training and retooling of the economy," says Dawn. "I will have a good number of high school students, but I've really had a lot of returning workers just trying to get their [lives] on a new path." Dawn's courses are taught both on campus and online, and typically have no more than 20 students per section.

Dawn is seeing major changes emerge in her courses as well. Davidson County Community College is at the forefront of implementing the redesigned Developmental English curriculum being mandated by the North Carolina Community College System. The new curriculum will integrate Reading and Writing courses in several levels. As a member of the NCCCS Developmental English & Reading Redesign Task Force charged with creating and implementing the new curriculum, Dawn has been seeking resources that support its revised requirements.

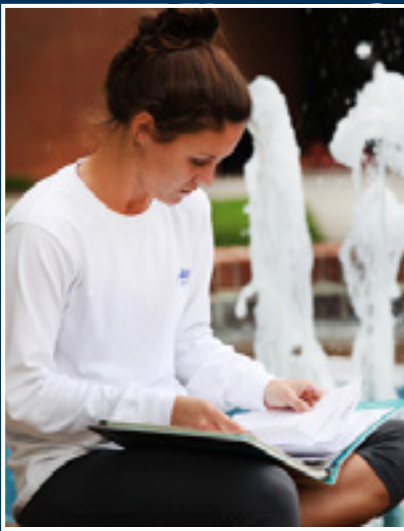
#### THE CHALLENGES

Dawn's biggest challenges in teaching are student engagement and retention, and ensuring all the relevant material is covered sufficiently before the course is through. "On the state level, our courses were redesigned to be eight weeks long," says Dawn, admitting that, unaided, she can't cover all the material as deeply as she'd like to in that amount of time.

Her students' single greatest challenge is staying focused on their studies — despite the obstacles and curve balls that everyday life can present. Dawn notes that these potentially derailing obstacles are usually of the students' own making. "It's usually personal things; it's not so much just school things. But, she adds, "if they connect and begin to work hard, they stay and they do well. It's just organizing their lives so that they are successful."

Many of her students also struggle with critical thinking and composition skills—skills they most likely acquired during high school, but may be in need of a refresher. "They don't really need to hear it from me, but they [do] need to practice it."

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#### CHALLENGES

- **Instructors are not able to cover all material deeply enough in the allotted course timeframe.**
- **Students have a hard time staying engaged and focused on their studies,** in light of various life obstacles and competing priorities.
- **Students need a refresher on basic skills, like critical thinking and composition.**

#### SOLUTIONS

- Aplia for Integrated Reading and Writing
- Kemper, Dave, Verne Meyer, John Van Rys, & Patrick Sebranek, *Fusion: Integrated Reading and Writing*, Books 1 and 2

#### RESULTS

- **Because students can work when and where they want, Aplia helps instructors cover more material in a shorter amount of time.**
- **Aplia keeps students engaged with features such as embedded videos.**
- **Aplia lets students brush up on composition and critical thinking skills on their own, without taking away from valuable class time.**
- **Because students can work when and where they want, Aplia helps instructors cover more material in a shorter amount of time. Diagnostic tests allow instructors to assess class and individual skill levels, and tailor class discussions to students' needs.**

“[Aplia] helps me do my job better. It helps make students successful... not just in my course, but the things they are learning, they carry on into every course.”

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**Davidson County  
Community College**

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## THE RESULTS

Dawn has been using Aplia in her courses for a year now and is clearly enthusiastic about the experience. She says it helps her keep students engaged and motivated, and lets her cover the material more deeply despite the shorter course lengths. “It helps me to accelerate my courses,” she says. “I don’t think I could do it without it ...I couldn’t cover the material as [deeply] as Aplia allows me to do. Because the students’ lab time is very productive; it is time on task. And they can’t progress through the course without completing their Aplia assignments.”

Aplia also helps her students master the critical thinking and composition skills they need to brush up on. “It’s a really good way to bring them up to speed on how to use commas or just different little skills like that,” she says. She adds that, with Aplia, “students really have to think through their answers. It’s not just an ‘A, B, C, D’ multiple-choice-type situation.” The embedded videos featured in Aplia help them think more critically, too. “One thing that is really neat about Aplia,” says Dawn, “is it teaches students how to read assignments, not just do assignments. So they begin to critically think about ‘What do I need to do in order to be successful in completing this assignment?’”

More importantly, Aplia helps Dawn’s students stay engaged in the course and improves learning outcomes. The red, green and yellow bars displayed in Aplia’s diagnostic reports act as a motivator for students when Dawn meets with them one-on-one to review. “They see that visually they want to move to the green, so—they are motivated to move to the green.” She says it is especially fun to watch her students working together in the lab and see their understanding grow. “A group of [students] was working on sentence structure. They were working on gerunds and infinitives and there was a little group of about eight students working together and explaining what gerunds and infinitives were ... so they were spontaneously beginning to teach each other because of the Aplia program.” She adds, “It is one thing for me to [teach concepts] in class, but for them to actually be using it [Aplia] in a practical manner and then to be teaching each other—I mean, that’s a higher level. I’ve never had that happen with any other product before.” This fall, Dawn plans to use Aplia’s Individualized Study Paths, which deliver targeted instruction where it is needed most, all based on a student’s specific strengths and weaknesses, and will allow her students to get both the practice and the feedback they need for success.

Finally, the strength and reliability of Aplia’s technology and content help make the process problem-free, so students don’t have to add “glitches in study tools” to their list of life obstacles. “They have so many barriers already,” says Dawn. “They are already nervous about coming to college and ... and about learning online. And then you have barriers with the program, they don’t need that.”

Overall, Dawn has been extremely satisfied with Aplia. “[It] helps me do my job better,” she says. “It helps make students successful ... not just in my course, but the things they are learning, they carry on into every course.” And that’s something to be satisfied about.

Davidson County Community College  
Lexington, North Carolina



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