CHALLENGES

• No prior departmental experience with an online component

• Large number of ELL students in need of additional help with writing, especially grammar and mechanics

• Compliance with changes to developmental education standards, mandated by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board

SOLUTIONS

• Fawcett's *Grassroots with Readings: The Writer's Workbook,* Tenth Edition

• Aplia™ for Writing

RESULTS

• Reduced stress for instructors

• Improved student scores on Texas Success Initiative tests

• Increased number of students passing the class and skipping additional remedial English courses

Ricardo Vergara

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A Busy Professor Discovers the Benefits of Aplia™ and its Impact on Struggling Students

Professor Ricardo Vergara teaches the Fundamentals of Writing (COMM 0374) course at Laredo Community College in Texas. Before using his current combination of Aplia with Fawcett's *Grassroots with Readings: The Writer's Workbook*, Tenth Edition, his courses were textbook based and did not include an online component. However, just a few years ago, dramatic changes to developmental education standards were mandated by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB). The changes meant that Laredo Community College had to rethink and reorganize the developmental course sequence within his department. Additionally, Vergara and his colleagues wanted to give students a more organized, comprehensive, and independent study-oriented experience in the Fundamentals of Writing class. "Being that Laredo is on the Texas-Mexico border, many of our students have difficulties with English, even basic grammar and mechanics," said Vergara. "The COMM 0374 course is specifically designed to address these issues. The combination of Aplia with *Grassroots* targets that very well."

In response to the new standards set forth by the THECB, Laredo's Fundamentals of Writing course became the most basic of the new three-level Developmental Writing sequence. Vergara and his colleagues decided to try an online component for this course, so they spent an entire year evaluating textbook/website combinations. During that search, they turned to their Cengage Learning representative, Mandy Price, who worked on special pricing to help make adopting the Aplia with *Grassroots* combination easy and provided exceptional value for students.

APLIA INSTILLS 21ST-CENTURY LEARNING SKILLS

Vergara admits that before his experience with Aplia and *Grassroots*, he didn't understand the power and flexibility an online component could provide. "The truth is that I did not know very much about the various websites to accompany the textbooks we were evaluating," he said. "I was first impressed with the Grassroots textbook, and only after making an adoption decision and using the book and website pair, I learned how important a well thought-out online component is in the 21st-century classroom." Vergara pointed out that Aplia's ease of use for both the instructor and students, versatility in organizing the course, and powerful communications options were what immediately sold him on Aplia.

Vergara found that Aplia helped them assist struggling students. "The flexibility for the instructor in personalizing the web content allowed me to set up the class so that even low-performing students could get meaningful practice with plenty of feedback and options for improving their score as they improved their skills."

Immediately after they began using Aplia, the instructors noticed a difference in their students. "I think that the first key benefit was that students were independently engaged

with the material we covered in class and got immediate feedback on their efforts, all while using media with which most of them are very comfortable," said Vergara. "I quickly realized I did not have to worry so much about covering all the chapter exercises in the classroom because I knew they would get extra practice with Aplia." Vergara found Aplia to be easy to use and a source of helpful information. "I was amazed at how easy it was for me to monitor students' work and progress on the course website and to communicate with them there as well. I honestly feel less stressed about covering the material for the course and more satisfied with my students' progress, especially those who opt to retest on the Texas Success Initiative placement test for Reading, Writing, and Math (TSI)."

MORE STUDENTS MASTER THE CONCEPTS

As a professor who has had plenty of experience with college students, Vergara knows how today's students want to learn. He knows that today's students are expecting a web component in their classes, and that younger students react very positively to material presented in this way. He said all his students reacted positively to the use of Aplia, and the "older students like having an easy-to-use introduction to technology that benefits them in many ways."

Vergara is pleased that the use of Aplia has helped more students pass the class and succeed. "One approach to improve college readiness at our institution is to have students re-test on TSI. My students have had great success in this area. In Fall 2013, one of my COMM0374 classes was selected to retest. Out of 19 students who did so, eight students (or 42%) passed to college-level English by scoring 5's on the Essay Writing portion of TSI. In Spring 2014, two of my classes were selected and out of 38 students who retested, 24 students (65%) passed the Essay Writing portion. All of these students who passed jumped two levels of additional developmental classes, saving them at least two semesters and over a thousand dollars in tuition, fees, and textbooks. I am very happy about that, and I believe that the secret to success on TSI for my students is their level of familiarity with the material covered on the test. There are two skills areas that are especially important on the test: sentence structure and organization. The way that these topics are presented in the textbook and reinforced in the Aplia exercises engages students in such a way that they actually learn and internalize the patterns. This makes it much easier for them to use the sentence patterns correctly when it comes time to retest."

Overall, Vergara is very pleased with the all-around success he's seen since Aplia became part of the curriculum at Laredo Community College. "Now, I feel that my students are receiving a more coherent, more meaningful, and more relevant-to-them interaction with English skills than they had before."

As Vergara said, "My experience has been enlightening and has opened up new approaches in my teaching repertoire."