Success Story

Southcentral Kentucky Community & Technical College



Challenge

Improving Student Preparation While Supporting Diverse Learning Needs

Solution

McGraw Hill Connect Composition with *Writing to Read, Reading to Write* by Alison Kuehner, Affordable Access and the Evergreen™ delivery model

Result

Better Student Preparation Leads to Stronger Outcomes



Dr. Stephanie Tolliver Hyman
Dean, Arts & Humanities Division



Professor Ashley Garrett
English Instructor and Assistant to the Dean, Arts & Humanities Division

The Challenge

Each year, approximately 1,200 students enroll in ENG 101: Writing I at Southcentral Kentucky Community & Technical College (SKYCTC). Many students entering the course—including multilingual learners, developmental writers, and students enrolled in corequisite English courses—require additional academic support to build the reading, writing, and critical thinking skills necessary for college success.

Prior to adopting Connect Composition with *Writing to Read, Reading to Write* by Alison Kuehner, the English department relied on a different digital platform that faculty found difficult to use and poorly aligned with course instruction.

"The previous platform created barriers for both faculty and students," said Professor Ashley Garrett. "The materials didn't naturally connect to what we were teaching in class, and the platform itself was often frustrating to navigate. For many of our most vulnerable students, those challenges became obstacles to learning."

From an administrative perspective, the department sought a solution that would improve both the student experience and measurable academic outcomes.

"We wanted students to have tailored support in the specific areas where they needed help," explained Dr. Stephanie Tolliver Hyman, Dean of the Arts and Humanities Division. "We serve many multilingual learners and developmental students, so it was important to adopt materials that could adapt to individual learning needs while reducing barriers to access."

The department established three primary goals for implementation:

- Increase completion of assigned reading
- Improve students' reading comprehension and writing skills
- Increase the percentage of students earning a grade of C or better in ENG 101

Equally important, the college wanted a platform that would integrate seamlessly with Blackboard, support its Affordable Access model, and provide instructors with actionable learning analytics to guide instruction throughout the semester.



We have seen dramatic increases in student success and performance as a result of implementing Connect.

—Dr. Stephanie Tolliver Hyman

Connect has transformed how we teach writing. Students come to class better prepared, more engaged, and more confident, allowing us to spend less time introducing concepts and more time helping students apply them.

—Professor Ashley Garrett

The Solution

Building Foundational Knowledge Before Students Enter the Classroom

Beginning in Fall 2025, SKYCTC integrated Connect Composition with *Writing to Read, Reading to Write* by Alison Kuehner into its ENG 101 curriculum. Faculty adopted Connect to complement their existing curriculum with an intuitive, comprehensive resource that supports diverse learners while strengthening critical reading and writing skills. By combining SmartBook®, adaptive learning assignments, Connect homework, and pre- and post-assessments, the department enhanced its ability to provide consistent, high-quality instruction and better prepare students for success in their academic programs and transfer pathways.

For Professor Garrett, SmartBook quickly became the cornerstone of her instructional approach.

"I assign SmartBook before introducing new concepts in class so students develop foundational understanding first. When they arrive, they're already familiar with the terminology and ideas, which allows us to spend class time practicing and applying those concepts through writing."

Approximately 70% of her Connect assignments consist of SmartBook activities, supplemented by Connect homework and exams. Students typically complete one or two SmartBook chapters each week aligned to upcoming instructional units.

Rather than relying primarily on lecture to introduce new material, Professor Garrett now uses classroom time for active learning, collaborative writing, and targeted practice. This shift aligns with institutional research led by Dr. Stephanie Tolliver Hyman between 2022 and 2026, which found that students value more one-on-one interaction with instructors and prefer collaborative, in-class writing experiences with immediate feedback. By building foundational knowledge through Connect before class, students arrive better prepared, allowing faculty to dedicate class time to the guided writing practice and personalized support that students say helps them learn most effectively.

"Connect is now delivering much of the foundational instruction that I previously had to cover through lecture," she said. "That allows me to focus on helping students apply what they've learned instead of spending most of class introducing concepts."

Adaptive Learning Assignments reinforce grammar and writing concepts while allowing students to receive additional practice in areas where they need the most support. Department-wide pre- and post-tests from the *Connect Composition Essentials Handbook* Question Bank provide consistent benchmarks for measuring learning growth throughout the semester, giving faculty valuable insight into student progress and informing instructional decisions.



Connect integrates seamlessly with the broader course experience, allowing Professor Garrett to combine instructor-created activities, open educational resource (OER) readings, and Connect assignments within Blackboard. Automatic grade synchronization keeps the LMS gradebook up to date, providing students with a real-time snapshot of their course performance while reducing administrative work for instructors.

Connect's reporting tools have also become an important component of instructional planning. Professor Garrett regularly reviews Assignment Results, Student Performance, At-Risk Reports, Assignment Progress, Completion Time, Learner Metacognition, and Challenging Concepts reports to better understand how students are engaging with course materials.

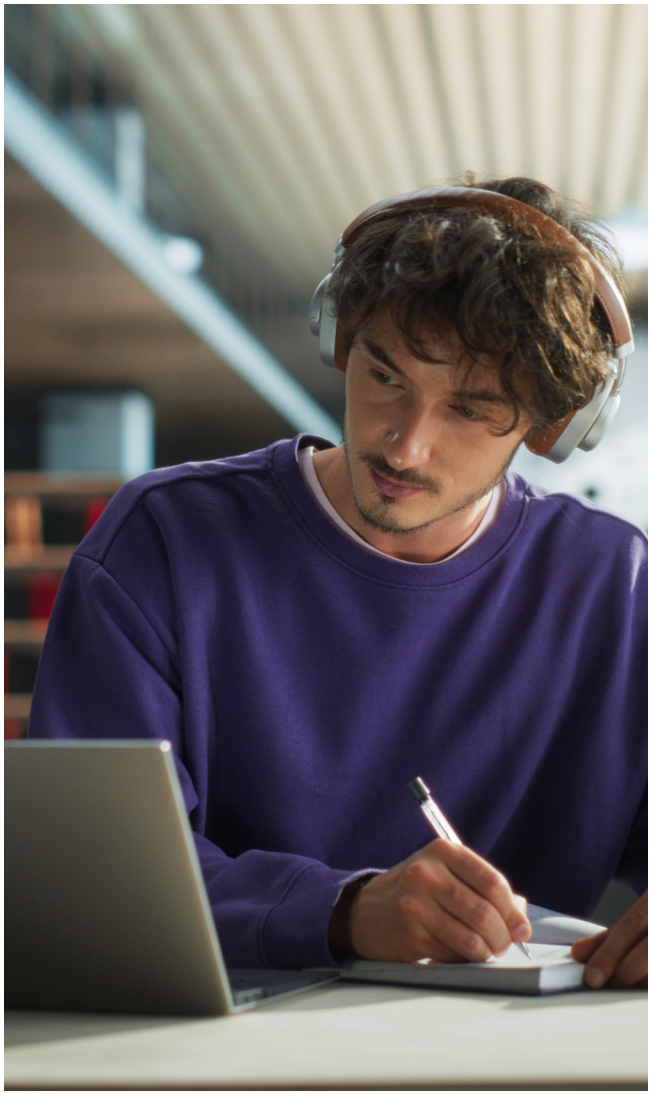
"The reports tell me whether students are struggling because they didn't spend enough time interacting with the material or because they genuinely need additional instruction," she explained. "Sometimes students feel very confident about a concept, but the data shows otherwise. Those insights help me have productive conversations about study habits, time management, and metacognition while also identifying concepts that need additional reinforcement before students move forward."

From the dean's perspective, Connect also supported broader departmental goals by allowing faculty to customize assignments aligned with course outcomes while ensuring equitable access for all students.

"We wanted high-quality materials that students could access immediately without cost becoming a barrier," said Dr. Tolliver Hyman. "Connect allowed us to customize learning experiences while supporting students with adaptive instruction that meets them where they are."

Faculty also noted significant improvements in customer support compared to their previous platform. When students encounter technical issues, they are typically resolved quickly, minimizing disruptions to learning. Likewise, instructors receive proactive communication from McGraw Hill support staff whenever course configuration issues affect student access.

> **The SmartBook assignments are the workhorse of my course. They prepare students before class, strengthen their understanding of writing concepts, and allow us to spend our class time applying—not just introducing—those skills.**
>
> —Professor Ashley Garrett



The Results

Following implementation of Connect, faculty observed meaningful improvements in student engagement, classroom participation, and overall academic performance.

One of the earliest indicators of success was a noticeable increase in students' preparation before class. Rather than arriving unfamiliar with course concepts, students began referencing ideas introduced through SmartBook assignments during classroom discussions.

"I regularly hear students bringing up concepts from their SmartBook assignments during class," Professor Garrett said. "That simply wasn't happening before. They're retaining the material and using it when discussing writing with their peers."

Because students develop foundational understanding outside the classroom, instructional time is now devoted primarily to active learning and writing practice. Students also receive immediate feedback on assignments, helping them identify misconceptions before completing major writing projects.

Professor Garrett has also observed improvements in student confidence and writing performance.

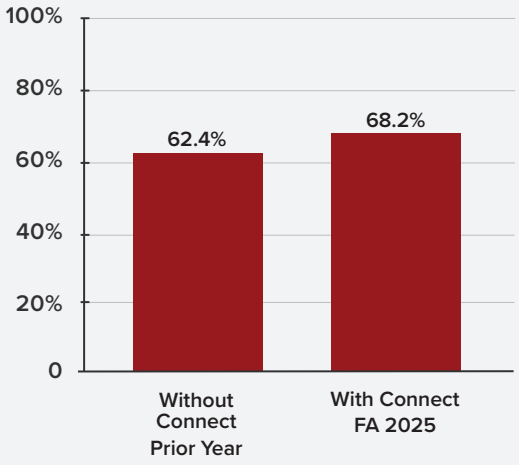
"More students are earning grades of C or better on their major essays, and the majority of students who complete my courses now earn A or B grades. I believe that's because they have a much stronger understanding of the concepts they're being asked to demonstrate."

At the institutional level, implementation of Connect corresponded with measurable improvements in student success.



Following adoption of Connect in Fall 2025, the percentage of students earning a grade of C or better increased from 62.4% to 68.2%, representing a 5.8 percentage-point improvement over the previous year (Figure 1).

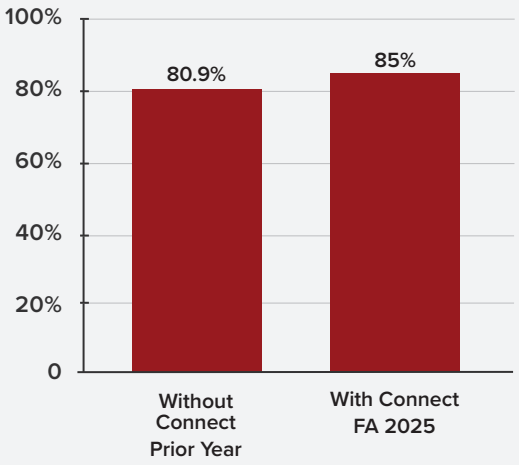
Figure 1
ENG 101 Student Success Rates



▲ +5.8 percentage-point improvement

Retention also improved, with 85% of ENG 101 students enrolling in the subsequent semester—a 4.1 percentage-point increase compared to the previous fall (Figure 2).

Figure 2
Student Retention



▲ 4.1 percentage-point increase

Faculty have likewise observed improvements in General Education Outcomes Assessments measuring writing quality, citation practices, and formatting, suggesting that stronger engagement with course concepts is translating into improved writing performance.

Connect's adaptive learning features have also encouraged students to spend more time actively engaging with course materials outside the classroom.

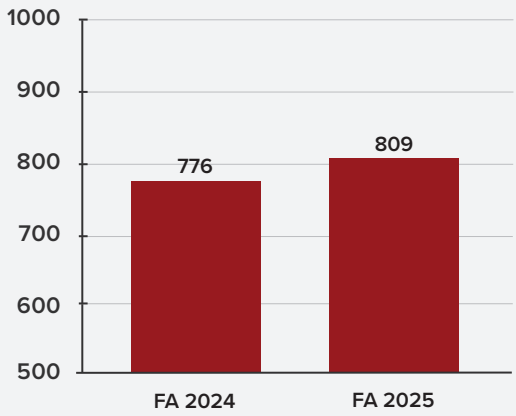
"They're not just reading," Professor Garrett explained. "They're interacting with the material, thinking critically, receiving feedback, and revisiting concepts when needed. That deeper engagement shows in both their classroom discussions and their writing."

Administratively, Dr. Tolliver Hyman has seen another important indicator of success: the absence of student complaints.

"Since implementing Connect, I haven't had students coming to my office with concerns about the courseware or eBook," she said. "Previously, complaints about our digital materials were a regular occurrence."

The positive outcomes were achieved while serving a growing student population, with enrollment increasing from 776 students in Fall 2024 to 809 students in Fall 2025, excluding dual-credit students (Figure 3).

Figure 3
ENG 101 Enrollment



Beyond improvements in course success and retention, SKYCTC also observed stronger performance on its General Education Outcomes Assessment. Following implementation of Connect, the percentage of students demonstrating competency in critical reading and writing increased by 3.5 percentage points, providing additional evidence that students were developing the foundational skills emphasized throughout the course.



Conclusion

For SKYCTC, adopting Connect Composition has resulted in more than a technology change—it has reshaped how faculty prepare students for success in first-year writing.

By combining adaptive learning, SmartBook assignments, meaningful analytics, and seamless LMS integration, instructors have been able to shift class time away from introductory lecture and toward higher-value learning experiences centered on writing, collaboration, and application.

Professor Garrett encourages instructors considering Connect to explore the platform's capabilities and make full use of its reporting tools.

"There are so many features available that it's worth taking time to experiment in a sandbox course," she said. "Once you understand what the reports can tell you about student learning, you can individualize support or reinforce concepts for the entire class based on real evidence."

Dr. Tolliver Hyman credits the successful implementation not only to the quality of the instructional materials but also to the partnership with McGraw Hill.

"We knew Connect with *Writing to Read, Reading to Write* by Kuehner would serve our department well, but the level of customer support has exceeded our expectations. McGraw Hill has become a true partner in helping our faculty and students succeed."

By reducing barriers to access, strengthening student preparation, and providing instructors with actionable insights, Connect has helped SKYCTC create a more engaging and effective learning environment—one that is producing measurable gains in student success while better supporting the diverse needs of first-year writers.



Featured Administrator

Dr. Stephanie Tolliver Hyman is Dean of Arts and Humanities and Quality Enhancement Plan Coordinator at Southcentral Kentucky Community & Technical College (SKYCTC). A first-generation college graduate, she has more than 20 years of experience in higher education as an English faculty member, department chair, writing center director, and academic leader. Her research focuses on student retention, corequisite English, and educational equity in the community college, and the writing programs she has developed have received state and national recognition for improving student success. She is passionate about creating equitable learning environments that help all students achieve their academic goals.

Featured Educator

Ashley Thomas Garrett is an Instructor of English and Assistant to the Dean for Arts and Humanities at Southcentral Kentucky Community and Technical College. Her work focuses on advancing postsecondary faculty development and evidence-based student support strategies for first-generation students and other learners facing barriers to academic success. Ashley is pursuing a PhD in Education Science at the University of Kentucky, where she studies the experiences of first-generation college students who become postsecondary faculty and how those experiences shape teaching, mentoring, and student support.

Institution Profile

Southcentral Kentucky Community & Technical College (SKYCTC) is one of 16 independently accredited institutions within the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS). Serving a 10-county region across six campuses, SKYCTC offers associate degrees, diplomas, and certificates designed to prepare students for transfer or the workforce. The college is nationally recognized for its commitment to student success, including its award-winning Quality Enhancement Plan, Writing: Where Your Voice Begins. Guided by a strong "Culture of Caring," SKYCTC is dedicated to creating an inclusive, supportive learning environment where students have the resources and opportunities to achieve their academic and career goals.

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