Writing Across Institutions: Studying the Curricular and Extracurricular Journeys of Latina/o Students Transitioning From High School to College

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WRITING ACROSS INSTITUTIONS: STUDYING THE CURRICULAR AND EXTRACURRICULAR JOURNEYS OF LATINA/O STUDENTS TRANSITIONING FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE

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WRITING ACROSS INSTITUTIONS: STUDYING THE CURRICULAR AND EXTRACURRICULAR JOURNEYS OF LATINA/O STUDENTS TRANSITIONING FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE

by

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation is based on a year and a half multi-institutional study of seven Mexican American students transitioning from high school to a community college or a university. It explores the differences between high school, community college, and university literacy environments, focusing on the following: the impact of standardized testing at the high school level, the role of rhetoric and composition disciplinary expertise in shaping first-year composition (FYC) curricula, writing in the disciplines, and the digital divide between institutions. Seven case studies examine students’ literacy experiences across institutions as well as both challenges and sources of support in and beyond the classroom. Drawing on Bourdieu’s analytical tools of habitus, capital, and field as well as Yosso’s (2005) theory of community cultural wealth, the discussion explores how students formed robust networks of capital to facilitate successful transitions to college and argues that institutions need to undergo dramatic transformations to effectively serve increasingly diverse student populations. The findings have implications not only for writing teachers and scholars, but also teachers in other disciplines, institutional leaders, and state/national policy makers.
Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Introduction ..................................................................</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Study</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Linguistic Minority Students go to College and the Scholarly Response</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrasting ESL and Mainstream Learning Environments.....................</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differences between Domestic and International Students ..................</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity Issues and the Stigmatization of ESL Programs and Labels ......</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monolingual Pedagogies</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standardized Assessment</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students Transitioning to College</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The First-Year College Experience</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Community College Experience</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework and Methodology</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodological Issues and Theoretical Frameworks</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longitudinal Case Study</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopting an Active Researcher Stance</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadening the Picture with Bourdieu</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Context</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Context</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Selection</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Institutional Literacy Environments and Student Choices ....</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samson High School</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture of Testing</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP Classes: Oases of Freedom</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Year: Free from the TAKS</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing Technological Literacy</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2 Writers and English Classes</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Paso Community College</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-Year Composition</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental Writing</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2 Writers and First-Year Composition</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPCC Challenges: Time and Technology</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Across the Curriculum</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Texas at El Paso</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-Year Composition</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental Writing</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2 Writers and First-Year Composition</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Making Decisions About College</td>
<td>Pages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yesenia: Balancing Social and School Lives</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauricio: Driven by Grades and Parents to Succeed</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolina: A Supportive Family and Constant Motivation</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Conclusion</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 6: Detailed Portraits of the Community College Students’ Curricular and Extracurricular Lives</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daniel: A Question of Motivation</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background and Defining Characteristics and Experiences</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Literacy Experiences</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy and Learning in the First Year of College</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanne: Balancing Life as a Mother and a Student</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background and Defining Characteristics and Experiences</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Literacy Experiences</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy and Learning in the First Year of College</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paola: The Unpredictability of Students’ Paths to and Through College</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background and Defining Characteristics and Experiences</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Literacy Experiences</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy and Learning in the First Year of College</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Conclusion</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 7: Detailed Portraits of the University Students’ Curricular and Extracurricular Lives</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carolina: A Supportive Family and Constant Motivation</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background and Defining Characteristics and Experiences</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Literacy Experiences</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy and Learning in the First Year of College</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauricio: Driven by Grades and Parents to Succeed</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background and Defining Characteristics and Experiences</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Literacy Experiences</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy and Learning in the First Year of College</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yesenia: Balancing Social and School Lives</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background and Defining Characteristics and Experiences</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Literacy Experiences</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy and Learning in the First Year of College</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bianca: Overcoming Challenges with Valuable Sources of Support</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Background and Defining Characteristics and Experiences

- High School Literacy Experiences
- Literacy and Learning in the First Year of College
- Conclusion

Chapter Conclusion

Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusion

The Role of Habitus and Capital in Facilitating Field Transitions
- Mauricio and Carolina: Successful Transitions to College
- Yesenia and Bianca: Difficult yet Successful Transitions
- Daniel and Joanne: Difficult Transitions
- Paola: An Unpredictable Transition

Understanding Transition

Classroom, Institutional, and Societal Successes and Failures
- Classroom Level
- Institutional Level
- State and National Level

Concluding Thoughts

References

Appendix A: Beginning of study survey
Appendix B: Beginning of study interview
Appendix C: Monthly Interviews During High School and College
Appendix D: End of High School Interview
Appendix E: Beginning of College Interview
Appendix F: End of College Semester Interview
Appendix G: End of First-Year at College Interview
Appendix H: End of First-Year Interview for Students Who Dropped
Appendix I: High School Teacher interviews
Appendix J: College Instructor interviews
Appendix K: CAMP Director Interview
Appendix L: History Professor Interviews
Appendix M: First-Year Experience Directors Interview
Appendix N: Sample TAKS Test Pages

Curriculum Vita
## List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Characteristics of Samson High School</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Overview of Study Participants</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Student College Preferences</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Daniel’s First-Year Writing Experiences</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Joanne’s First-Year Writing Experiences</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>Paola’s First-Year Writing Experiences</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Carolina’s First-Year Writing Experiences</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Mauricio’s First-Year Writing Experiences</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>Yesenia’s First-Year Writing Experiences</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>Bianca’s First-Year Writing Experiences</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Figure 4.1. AYP status by year at Samson High School..................................................75
Figure 5.1. College Decision Matrix.............................................................................125
Figure 6.1. Daniel’s Sources of Capital and Challenge................................................142
Figure 6.2. Joanne’s Sources of Capital and Challenge.............................................154
Figure 6.3. Joanne’s Sources of Capital and Challenge.............................................170
Figure 7.1. Carolina’s Sources of Capital and Challenge.........................................186
Figure 7.2. Mauricio’s Sources of Capital and Challenge..........................................207
Figure 7.3. Yesenia’s Sources of Capital and Challenge...........................................230
Figure 7.4. Bianca’s Sources of Capital and Challenge.............................................252
Figure 8.1. A Slide from Natalicio’s (2007) Presentation on Graduation Rate Measures........276
Chapter 1: Introduction

“Why did your family come to the U.S.?” I asked. One student replied, “For my education.” “I think opportunity for us, for our education,” another student replied. In their book *Children of Immigration*, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) reported that the most common reason immigrants give for moving to a new country is to secure a better life for their children. Among the students I grew to know over the past few years in conducting this study, this was commonly the case. Some of the participants, like Daniel and Bianca, lived in the U.S. all their lives.1 Another, Joanne, moved to the U.S. without her parents, living with her aunt so she could attend schools here. Mauricio crossed the U.S.-Mexico border every day to attend school. Some, like Carolina, Yesenia, Paola, came with one or two parents at various points in their lives. All shared high aspirations for their educational and professional careers, wanting to attend college in order to secure better lives for themselves and their families.

With the decline of inexpensive agricultural land and manufacturing, the primary opportunity for immigrants to improve their futures lies in the educational system (Perez, 2008; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001), something very evident to the vast majority of children and parents in this study. Unfortunately, immigrants and children of immigrants often lack the resources to succeed. They often attend underfunded and underperforming schools, have parents who do not possess the language skills and knowledge to help them with homework or navigate unfamiliar educational systems, or lack access to curriculum or instructors who see their knowledge of multiple languages as an asset instead of a deficit. As a result, many immigrant children, despite coming with high aspirations, may disconnect from the school system and underperform compared to non-immigrant peers.

1 All participant names are pseudonyms.
Nonetheless, immigrants and children of immigrants are continually becoming a larger part of higher education, rewriting the definition of a “mainstream college student” who has traditionally been seen as “primarily middle class, eighteen years old, single, fresh out of high school, studying full time, enrolled in a four-year college, living away from home for the first time, meeting traditional standards of academic preparedness, and graduating in four years” (Ishler, 2005, p. 15). The new students, who are often the first in their family to attend college, are more likely to be female, older, have lower incomes, be married, and have dependents (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Given these changing demographics and the fact that minorities are overrepresented in community colleges, it is unsurprising the focal college in this study, El Paso Community College (EPCC), is 48.5% first generation college students. However, the focal university in this study, the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), is similarly diverse and actually has a slightly higher percentage of first generation students at 54% of the student body (Ward & Ritchey, 2010, p. 48). The participants in this study reflect the new student demographic. The majority of students in this study are female, while a number of them have dependents, whether as a parent or legal guardian or simply being required to take care of a younger sibling while their single mother is away at work. First generation students tend to come from lower income families as well. All but one student in this study received Pell Grants and most shared concerns over their family financial situations.

Mexican American immigrants or children of immigrants, like the students profiled in this study, are contributing to a demographic shift in the U.S. largely precipitated by the growth in the Latina/o population. From 2000 to 2007, the Latina/o population in the U.S. increased from 39 to 45 million, with over 60% of Mexican origin (Grieco, 2007). Overall, the Latina/o population is significantly younger than the overall population, and the birthrate is higher,
meaning that Latinas/os are an increasing presence in education, especially at lower grade levels (Niner & Rios, 2009). While still critically underrepresented, the percentage of 18-24 year old Latinas/os enrolled in higher education increased to 22% in 2000 from 16% in 1980 (Llagas & Snyder, 2003).

Although Latinas/os are entering the education system in greater numbers and with enthusiasm about moving up the economic ladder, there continues to be a problem of retention. As of 2000, Latinas/os comprised 17% of the total enrollment in K-12 schools but only 10% of the total enrollment in colleges and universities, which is due in part to the fact that they are less likely to graduate from high school than any other demographic (Llagas & Snyder, 2003). The higher education number further declines when considering degrees earned, as Latinas/os earn 9.1% of associate degrees, but only 6.1% of bachelor’s, 4.2% of master’s, and 2.9% of doctoral degrees (Llagas & Snyder, 2003). A commonly referenced Lumina Foundation (2007) statistic says that for every 100 Latina/o elementary school students, 52 graduate from high school, 20 go to a community college and 11 go to a four-year institution. Of the 31 who enroll in college, 10 graduate from college, with 4 of them earning a graduate degree and only 1 earning a doctorate.

Educating more minority students should not only be considered a progressive interest to alleviate social inequalities, but a national interest if the U.S. is to stay competitive in an increasingly knowledge-driven global economy. According to Lopez (2008), 60% of tomorrow’s jobs will require skills that only 20% of today’s workers have. Perez (2008) noted that by 2020, California will need 36% of its population to be college educated but will only have 28% if current trends persist. Given the rapid rise of the Latina/o population in the U.S., largely driven by Mexican Americans, it is vital to gain a fuller understanding behind the numbers listed above and to ask why only 10% of Latinas/os end up graduating from college,
despite rapid gains in Latina/o degree attainment over the last few decades (Lumina Foundation, 2007). This study is an attempt to fill that gap.

This Study

The study presented in this dissertation was designed to better understand the challenges Latina/o students face in transitioning to college, especially in regard to literacy instruction, and how these transitions can be better supported. I originally became interested in this issue upon reading Lay, Carro, Tien, Niemann, and Leong’s (1999) chapter in the collection Generation 1.5 Meets College Composition, as the authors found from interviewing multilingual students that high school literacy work was inadequately preparing them for what they faced in college. Harklau’s (2000) more in depth study on multilingual students transitioning to college was a more robust study, but her focus on identity did not address the questions I was particularly interested in. Being situated in the discipline of rhetoric and composition, I was primarily concerned with student literacy experiences at the secondary and postsecondary levels, how well high school writing instruction prepared students to write in college, and what role the first-year composition classroom played in promoting multilingual student success. However, after beginning research, I quickly found, like Leki (2007), that it was necessary to look well beyond students’ classroom experiences to develop a fuller understanding of their transitions.

Having developed the basic conceptual framework for this study, I began volunteering at a local high school to better understand the context from which students were entering the focal university in this study, UTEP. While volunteering in various classes, I developed a deeper understanding of the challenges that high school teachers faced as well as the unique lives of students at this high school located only a few hundred feet from the U.S.-Mexico border. Over the course of a year, research questions were refined and interview questions were developed
based on the knowledge I was gaining through a period of immersion in this previously unfamiliar environment. In January 2010, I asked student participants to join me for the next year and a half as they made an important transition in their life journeys. The following chapters set up the scholarly context for this study, detail the theoretical framework and methodology, and then proceed to share the participants’ stories.

Chapter 2 explores some of the research that contextualizes this study, including the few studies focused on multilingual students as they transition to college. It details the disciplinary division of labor between L1 and L2 studies and the increasing number of studies devoted to breaking down this division by analyzing multilingual student experiences in mainstream writing programs and classrooms. Given the impact of standardized testing on students’ literacy experiences at the study high school, this chapter also explores the research on how standardized testing negatively impacts students like those in this study. The discussion then shifts to the college level, focusing on the work done to promote more successful transitions to college through developing more robust first-year student experiences. Concerns of community colleges in regard to first-year student success and minority students at community colleges as also discussed, since a community college was the gateway to higher education for several of this study’s students.

Chapter 3 begins by articulating the action researcher stance used in this study, arguing that this type of inquiry allowed me to better understand the students’ learning, especially in the high school context. The theoretical framework for this study is introduced, exploring Bourdieu’s theories of habitus, capital, and field and introducing Yosso’s (2005) notion of community cultural wealth, explaining how each are valuable in the context of interpreting this
study’s data. Then, the institutions involved in this study are briefly introduced, followed by
details about the processes of collecting and analyzing data.

The next several chapters turn to the data, and secondary references are generally avoided
in these sections in order to prioritize participants’ voices, much like Leki (2007) did. Chapter 4
focuses on providing broad institutional portraits detailing how literacy is taught in the different
environments. This chapter draws particularly on the teachers’ perspectives, discussing their
attitudes towards students’ needs as well as the restrictions they feel on the way they teach
students literacy. The high school section focuses particularly on the impact of standardized
testing. The sections on the community college and university focus on contrasting the
institutions’ very different first-year composition (FYC) curricula, the presence of writing across
the curriculum, and the digital divide between the way technology is taught at the different
institutions.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 shift to the students’ perspectives, with the first chapter focusing on
the participants’ decisions regarding college, answering questions such as why attend college,
where to attend college, as well as what is considered in making these decisions. Chapters 6 and
7 present detailed case studies of the students, focusing on their literacy experiences in the
different institutions as well as challenges and sources of support both inside and beyond the
classroom that contribute to their success.

The conclusion draws on Bourdieu’s analytical tools of habitus, capital, and field and
Yosso’s (2005) theory of community cultural wealth in revisiting the stories of the students
shared in Chapters 6 and 7. This chapter explains how students formed networks of capital to
support their transitions to college and speculates why some students were more successful in
their initial transitions than others. It avoids a deficit perspective by rewriting some of the stories
shared in this project from ones of failure to stories that are still being constructed, noting that transition should not merely be considered a one-time event, but an ongoing process that everyone engages in. The chapter ends by detailing how students were supported or failed at the classroom, institutional, and state/national level, providing suggestions for transforming classrooms and institutions into spaces that support the success of increasingly diverse student bodies.

**A Note on Labels Commonly Used in this Dissertation**

Before continuing, it is important to define some of the key identity labels used in this dissertation, as I will use a variety of terms that have been contested in various ways.

**Latina/o:** Hall Kells (1999) and others have explored the problematic nature of labels surrounding U.S. Latinas/os as broad labels such as Latina/o or Hispanic can treat first, second, and third generation immigrants who originally came from a wide number of different countries as a homogeneous group. As will be evident in this dissertation, I prefer Latina/o over Hispanic because of the politicized nature the latter has acquired through being an official census and institutional term and its connotations with the colonization of the Americas by Spain. When referring to students in this study, I use the more specific Mexican American, understanding that some of the participants do not necessarily fit under this label. For instance, as will be detailed later, one of the students lived his whole life in Mexico but had a U.S. passport and was educated in the U.S. beginning in high school. While some may consider him a Mexican American, his situation is very different from the many second and third generation Mexican Americans who have completely assimilated into U.S. culture.
**Multilingual:** In general, when discussing second language (L2) learners, I prefer the term multilingual, because it focuses on students’ knowledge of multiple languages as an asset as opposed to a deficit. This view is shared by scholars such as Costino and Hyon (2007) and Goen-Salter, Porter, and vanDommelen (2009), who have reported renaming first-year composition (FYC) for L2 learners to include the term “multilingual” as opposed to “English as a second language (ESL)” to avoid the negative connotations associated with the latter (i.e., it uses English as the standard, focusing on the fact that students are not native to English).

**L2 student/writer:** Because multilingual is a very broad term, I use the more specific L2 student(writer label when specificity is necessary. In this dissertation, this term refers to students who are clearly still learning the nuances of English grammar and syntax, something that is evident from reading their writing. This term applies to all the students in this study with the exception of Daniel, who identified English as his L1. Daniel would be more appropriately classified as a developing/basic writer.

**Linguistic minority student:** This term will be most common in Chapters 2 and 8, and is used when talking broadly about L2 learners in U.S. society, considering them a minority in that they are not English dominant. Native Spanish speakers are the largest linguistic minority students in the U.S. and are the primary focus in this study.
Chapter 2: Linguistic Minority Students go to College and the Scholarly Response

In her groundbreaking article, “Bilingual Minorities and Language Issues in Writing,” Valdés (1992) drew attention to the changing U.S. population and called for more research on linguistic minority students so that teachers could know how to address their needs. In this lengthy article, Valdés (1992) set out a broad research agenda focused on four areas: the kinds of writing instruction bilingual minority students are exposed to, how teachers view their writing as a problem, the impact of language factors on students’ writing, and finally, the influence of background factors on their writing (pp. 114-115). The research conducted in this dissertation addresses all of these issues to varying degrees, examining how students’ L1 literacies are seen as problematic, how monolingual pedagogies negatively influence multilingual students’ writing growth, and finally, the underexplored area of how factors beyond the classroom play a vital role in shaping student success.

Valdés (1992) was critical of the compartmentalization of composition studies and applied linguistics, explaining how those focused on teaching writing in mainstream classrooms were members of certain organizations such as Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) and read certain journals while those who taught writing in ESL classrooms read different journals and were part of separate organizations, such as Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). This separation was further critiqued several years later by Matsuda (1999), who referred to the separation as a “disciplinary division of labor.” Similarly, Horner and Trimbur (2002) have criticized the English-only culture present in composition classes.
After the publication of Valdés’ (1992) article, an increasing number of scholars began to turn their attention to the presence of L2 writers in academic settings. This research has focused on various educational levels. It has discussed a number of issues, such as differences in learning environments, different types of L2 writers, identity issues surrounding L2 writers, and the problematic nature of monolingual pedagogies. I will now turn to some of this research before discussing research on mainstream and L2 students making the transition between high school and college, the primary focus of this project.

**Contrasting ESL and Mainstream Learning Environments**

Research on the difference between ESL and mainstream classrooms has found significant differences between these classes, especially in the way L2 students participate, learn, and interact with their peers. Harklau (1994, 1999) was one of the first scholars to focus on the difference between ESL and mainstream classrooms in secondary school. Harklau (1994, 1999) found that many of the potential benefits of being a multilingual student in a mainstream classroom went unrealized. For instance, while students would receive plenty of authentic input in mainstream classes, there were no extended interactions in the target language, largely because of a barrier between L1 and L2 writers. Also, L2 students could not expect the same kind of linguistic instruction that they received in ESL environments. Harklau (1999) recommended more coordination between ESL and mainstream teachers so that mainstream teachers could learn more about teaching ESL learners, pointing out that a one-day district training is insufficient (p. 56).

Braine (1996) examined the enrollment patterns of students in ESL and mainstream classes at the university level, finding that L2 writers in his study overwhelmingly preferred the ESL option despite the fact that mainstreaming was the typical practice at the institutions he
studied. Like Harklau (1994, 1999), Braine (1996) found that L2 students were often quiet and isolated in mainstream classrooms, but would become active and vocal participants in L2 settings. Additionally, he found that many mainstream teachers held negative attitudes towards L2 writers in their classes, complaining about them “soaking up” their office hours and, as a result, tended to direct them towards the writing center if they came asking for help. In peer review groups, L2 writers felt that the L1 writers were impatient with them, and one student overheard an L1 peer complaining to the teacher about the numerous grammatical errors in the L2 students’ papers. Overall, Braine (1994, 1996) found that L2 writers were generally not served well by mainstream placements, as these students dropped at a higher rate and were less likely to pass qualifying exams than their peers placed in ESL classes.

Motha (2006) has explored the placement of ESOL programs and their students and teachers within U.S. schools using lenses of race and colonial theory, arguing that “ESOL classrooms and indeed the pedagogical discipline of TESOL (Teaching ESOL) frequently serve as a breeding ground for epistemologies and constructs that support colonial-like relationships” (p. 76). In a study of ESOL programs in four schools (two elementary, one middle, and one high school), Motha (2006) found that the programs were considered separate from the school culture within all four institutional settings. Mainstream teachers consistently expressed a reluctance to work with ESOL writers, explaining that they needed special attention that they were not willing or did not feel responsible to provide. Moreover, when ESOL students were present in mainstream classrooms, teachers often looked for ways to keep them busy with activities such as completing worksheets or playing on computers, so they would not hinder the pace of the class. In the larger culture of the school, ESOL students were ignored in places such as the newspaper, which focused only on the culture of the dominant group at the school (p. 93).
While the issues raised by these scholars are salient in many U.S. educational contexts, they were only somewhat relevant in the academic lives of this study’s participants because the vast majority of students at their high school were native Spanish speakers. In fact, the opposite was the case as the few monolingual English-speaking students felt pressure to learn Spanish in order to interact with the mainstream culture at the school. However, as will be discussed in Chapter 4, there were some significant differences between classes at the focal high school in this study, especially between mainstream and AP/dual-credit options.

**Differences between Domestic and International Students**

Despite having such diverse backgrounds, L2 writers have traditionally been seen as a homogeneous group, a view that has been increasingly challenged over the last decade. The publication of Harklau, Losey, and Siegal’s (1999) *Generation 1.5 Meets College Composition* began a new era of studies drawing attention to the diversity of L2 writers in U.S. schools. This collection popularized the term “generation 1.5,” which Roberge, Siegal, and Harklau (2009) later defined as a term that typically refers to English language learners who arrive in the U.S. at an early age, obtain much or all of their education in U.S. K-12 settings, and arrive in college with various patterns of language and literacy that don’t fit the traditional, ‘institutionally constructed’ profiles of Developmental Writing, College ESL, or Freshman Composition. (vii)

Because “generation 1.5” students identify with multiple cultures, including U.S. culture, they are not necessarily served well by a traditional ESL curriculum, which often focuses on international students.
In the *Generation 1.5 Meets College Composition* collection, Blanton (1999) made the distinction between international and domestic L2 students, arguing that domestic L2 writers might resent an ESL placement because they attended U.S. high schools. She explained that ESL placements became more problematic when students were presented with textbooks and classroom assignments that asked them to compare “their” countries with the United States, given that immigrant L2 students might have already spent a significant portion of their lives in the U.S. (p. 124). Since curricula in ESL classrooms have traditionally focused on international students, domestic L2 students may be further marginalized and forgotten in these environments. Blanton (1999) also considered the basic writing placement for L2 writers, but pointed out that basic writing teachers may not have the knowledge to address L2 writers’ needs, as these needs differ from those of basic writers.

Matsuda (2003) further addressed this issue of placement, writing that because L2 writers are often in a basic writing class, basic writing specialists should be concerned with L2 writing scholarship. He argued for a more inclusive definition of the basic writing student because there is no certain way to identify L2 writers at all institutions and offer them all the placement options necessary. Because all teachers, including those working in basic writing, can expect to work with L2 writers, Matsuda (2003) argued that they should learn how to better address L2 learners’ needs.

As an indicator of increased mainstream interest in the diversity of L2 students and the way they are placed in writing programs, a 2006 *WPA Journal* issue was devoted to this topic. In this issue, Preto-Bay and Hansen (2006) made a distinction between domestic L2 writers and international students, with the former often being “involuntary minorities” with a sense of powerlessness while the latter, coming to study on student visas, are often members of the
privileged classes in their own countries. Friedrich (2006) addressed these distinctions in more depth, discussing differences between international ESL, resident ESL, and monolingual basic writers. She explained that international students might be more comfortable with more formal writing than the other students due to the quality of their previous literacy education. According to Friedrich (2006), basic writers know how to use English but are acquiring the academic version, international students may be acquiring both, and domestic ESL students may be somewhere in between.

Even though all but one of the seven students in this study identified Spanish as their L1 and English as their L2, they were certainly not a homogeneous group. A few of the students spent their whole lives in the U.S., albeit in Spanish dominant neighborhoods in a major border city. Others migrated to the U.S. in middle school or right before high school. Some lived on both sides of the border, while one continued to live in Mexico, crossing the border everyday to attend college as he did during high school. While the majority of students in this study placed into mainstream writing classes upon entering college, two of them, an L1 student who went to the college and an L2 student who went to the university, placed into developmental writing. The appropriateness of the developmental placements and the students’ satisfaction with these courses will be discussed in the students’ case studies in Chapters 5 and 6.

Identity Issues and the Stigmatization of ESL Programs and Labels

Much recent work has focused on the confusing nature of the various labels used to refer to L2 writers and the problems these cause for placement, raising questions about the applicability of labels like ESL to domestic students or the accuracy of more positive labels like multilingual. Harklau’s (2000) study on multilingual students transitioning from high school to college ended up focusing on identity issues when this became the most compelling focus for the
study. In general, work on identity and L2 writers has focused on placement satisfaction and the stigmatization of labels such as ESL, which is not typically as significant of an issue in El Paso as it is elsewhere in the U.S. because of the dominance of Spanish-language culture (the El Paso context is discussed more in the next chapter).

Chiang and Schmida (1999) criticized the simplistic ESL vs. mainstream division that has been created by colleges, in that it ignores the vast differences among L2 writers, especially international and domestic ones. For instance, they found that even though some students in their study may have learned English as a second language, it was currently their primary language, leading them to consider themselves native English speakers. In discussing the problems with these dichotomous labels, the authors wrote, “Our students do not neatly fit into clean-cut categories such as mainstream English speaker, ESL speaker, or bilingual students. Neither does it seem that their literacy journeys are duly served by the arbitrary and ill-challenged categories of language minority students, ESL, and international students” (p. 91).

Chiang and Schmida (1999) noted the importance of these labels in placement, revealing that a number of the students they studied enrolled in mainstream sections, even though they may have been better served in ESL sections (pp. 91-92).

Following up on Chiang and Schmida’s (1999) work, Costino and Hyon (2007) explored the connections between student attitudes toward identity labels and their FYC preferences. Their study was based on interviews with nine multilingual students, seven in a multilingual composition course and two in a mainstream course. Through asking students about their attitudes towards certain labels, the researchers showed how widely students’ perceptions of labels vary. For example, while some students viewed the “English as a second language” label positively, others saw it negatively. Many students did not associate themselves with the “ESL
student” label because they felt it was for someone with a low level of English. Towards the end of the article, Costino and Hyon (2007) reported that all students were satisfied with their institutionally-assigned placement (i.e., students in the ESL section unanimously said they would prefer to stay in the ESL section instead of switching to the mainstream one).

Reporting on case studies of three students, Ortmeier-Hooper (2008) explored how immigrant L2 students resisted the ESL label in various ways. For instance, despite the problems that one of her case students had in his mainstream FYC classroom, the student adamantly insisted that he did not belong in an ESL section. Another student in the study, who had attended a U.S. high school, resented being called ESL and compared being outed as an ESL writer and an immigrant student to being outed as a homosexual, complete with an array of social stigmas. In her conclusions, Ortmeier-Hooper (2008) emphasized the arguments of others in that composition professionals should be ready to work with a variety of students and that we need to consider identity as multiple, realizing the reductive work performed by any label, including ESL and generation 1.5.

Influenced by some of the more recent work referenced above, Ruecker (2011a) conducted a survey at the focal university in this study of around 400 L1 and L2 writers and their attitudes towards linguistic identity labels and placement preferences. He found that more students in ESL writing classes (30%) were dissatisfied with their placement than students in mainstream writing classes (2%) and that mainstream writing classes were often seen as more rigorous than their ESL counterparts. Additionally, students in the study generally saw terms like bilingual and multilingual as more positive, as it focused on the knowledge of a student as opposed to a deficit (i.e., English is not their first language).
As revealed in some of the discussions on labeling mentioned above, the ESL label and programs associated with it often carry a certain amount of stigma, which has been increasing due to the current xenophobic anti-immigrant sentiment pervading the U.S. Vandrick (1997) was one of the early scholars to raise this issue in a short piece on hidden identities. Here, she pointed out that hidden identities might be especially prevalent in ESL classrooms because the ESL label carries the understanding that ESL students are deemed deficient in their language skills and in need of certain remediation (p. 155). Similarly, Spack (1997) questioned other labels in use at school, such as nonnative speaker, which is inherently negative because it labels someone as “non.” Also, she referenced the commonly used term “limited English proficiency” (LEP) in that it automatically labels certain students as “limited,” thus bolstering any negative perceptions of them.

Because of the stigma associated with the ESL label, some students feel compelled to assimilate into the larger culture of the school, denying their identities. Drawing from race theory, Bashir-Ali (2006) reported on a case study of a Mexican student Maria who denied her Mexican identity, learned to speak African American Vernacular English, and claimed she did not know Spanish, even though it was her native language. This case is particularly interesting as she assimilated into another historically oppressed group instead of the official school culture because of her desire to be accepted by peers. This instance slightly reflects the experiences of one native English speaking (NES) student in this study, who learned most of his Spanish in high school in order to assimilate into the Spanish-speaking student culture. However, as revealed by teacher responses within my study, students classified as ESL and teachers in the ESL program were not seen too negatively at Samson because all students were considered ESL. A teacher
who had worked in multiple schools sensed a difference, pointing out that ESL teachers were viewed like special education teachers at her previous school, but not at Samson.

**Monolingual Pedagogies**

In spite of the increasing linguistic diversity of students in U.S. schools, Standard English Ideology, the belief that a standardized academic English is the only discourse that should be taught, predominates even in linguistically diverse communities. In response, scholars like Matsuda (1999, 2006), Horner and Trimbur (2002), and Canagarajah (2006a, 2006b) have recently begun to critique composition studies’ complicity with Standard English Ideology.

Matsuda (1999, 2006) has been one of the most prominent voices drawing attention to the neglect of L2 writers in U.S. classrooms and the dominance of monolingual pedagogies. He has referred to a “disciplinary division of labor” in composition studies, in that L1 and L2 writing specialists have been seen separately, with L1 specialists traditionally showing little concern for the presence of L2 writers in mainstream writing classrooms. He has extensively challenged the “myth of linguistic homogeneity,” drawing attention to the continual presence of L2 writers in mainstream writing classrooms and how this number is growing as the U.S. becomes more linguistically diverse with the increased immigration of recent decades. Matsuda (2006) recommended that composition programs prepare teachers to address the linguistic diversity of the writers in their classrooms and make them more inclusive spaces that include more multilingual pedagogies.

Horner and Trimbur (2002; Trimbur, 2006) are two traditionally mainstream writing scholars who embraced Matsuda’s call, drawing awareness to the monolingual history of composition teaching in a *College Composition and Communication* article, “English Only and U.S. College Composition.” Here, Horner and Trimbur (2002) explained how the classical
curriculum, with its inclusion of Latin and Greek and a focus on translation, shifted towards a monolingual environment in which English became the only “vehicle of instruction in writing and speaking” (p. 603). In contrast to other parts of the world such as Europe with more progressive attitudes in regard to language, English-only proponents in the U.S. have pushed for the only legitimate public language in the U.S. to be English. As Horner and Trimbur (2002) revealed, this push for English-only and its connection with a xenophobic attitude towards immigrants has only increased in recent years. They criticized even the opponents of U.S. English because these arguments are often based in the idea that immigrants are assimilating as quickly if not more quickly than previous immigrants, thus unwittingly fueling the belief that English is the only legitimate language for public discourse in the U.S. In response to this monolingual tradition, Horner and Trimbur (2002) called on compositionists to acknowledge their complicity with the U.S. English tradition and challenge this tradition by drawing “on students’ interests and existing linguistic resources to design bilingual programs of study that seek to develop students’ fluency in more than one written language and the possibilities of moving between the modern languages” (pp. 622-623).

Canagarajah (2006a, 2006b) published articles in *College Composition and Communication* and *College English* building on Horner and Trimbur’s (2002) work by offering pedagogical ideas how writing classrooms can become more multilingual spaces. Canagarajah (2006a) challenged the traditional monolingual composition model as one that “disable[s] students in contexts of linguistic pluralism” (p. 592). In contrast to ESL professionals who have come to the realization that students should master variety of codes and discourses, Canagarajah (2006a, 2006b) criticized composition teachers for maintaining a model that focuses on one target language, English. In response, he proposed designing a classroom where students are
encouraged to “shuttle” between languages, engaging in code meshing by incorporating more than one language code within their texts. He supported his arguments with an example of a Sri Lankan scholar, who had to write in different languages for different purposes and took advantage of his multilingual knowledge to conduct research that a monolingual could not do because of the linguistic knowledge it required. Canagarajah (2006a) pointed out that mainstream scholars like Elbow (1999) have begun to more actively consider students’ multilingual backgrounds; however, in this instance, he was also critical of Elbow (1999) for not deviating from the traditional monolingual model too significantly as he required students to always produce final texts in “standard” English (pp. 596-597).

Despite increasing scholarly support for pedagogies that recognize multilingual competencies, including studies on the cognitive benefits of dual-language bilingual programs (see Collier & Thomas, 2004; Thomas & Collier, 2002) the actual existence of such pedagogies are miniscule in comparison to the dominant monolingual paradigm. Even in a highly multilingual context like El Paso where the mainstream is bilingual and over 70% of the households speak Spanish (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009), only a few elementary schools in El Paso have dual-language bilingual programs in which students develop academic literacy in English and Spanish. The majority of instruction is done monolingually in English, especially at the high school level, where only one two-way bilingual program exists. As a result, students who have a hybrid English/Spanish education enter college without having full academic fluency in either language. Attempts to use Spanish in the classroom at Samson were seen negatively by both teachers and administration and one teacher, as referenced in Chapter 4, feared a backlash in implementing a pedagogy based on more progressive attitudes towards language.
Standardized Assessment

As is the case with many high schools across the country, the high school where this study was conducted had been particularly influenced by the increased focus on high-stakes mandated testing following the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), even though testing had already been a well-established part of Texas K-12 education system. As testing preparation dominated the high school’s curriculum, it is important to examine some of the literature discussing how a testing focus has disproportionally impacted the schooling of linguistic minority students compared to their mainstream counterparts. The studies discussed here reveal the ways that standardized assessments have undermined teacher autonomy and have had an especially negative effect on schools like Samson with high percentages of minority students.

McCarthey’s (2008) study focused on the impact of NCLB on teachers’ writing instruction in two high-income and three low-income schools and revealed that testing policies have disproportionately affected low-income schools and schools with a large number of linguistic minority students. She noted that “teachers and students in low-income schools have less power to resist the law and are monitored to a greater degree than teachers in high-income schools” (p. 464), with pressure from the superintendent on the school principals, and pressure from the principals on the teachers. “Helped” by district literacy coaches, teachers in the low-income school were often forced to teach a packaged curriculum. Moreover, they had to curtail the amount of writing instruction in their classes in order to focus on math and reading skills, and were much more limited in the amount of creativity they could exert in designing assignments. As evident by the discussion in Chapter 4, these findings are echoed in this dissertation.

Paul (2004) wrote about how NCLB has left Latina/o and African American students behind in various ways. Like Booher-Jennings (2005), he explained that the law has led to an
increased number of minority students being placed into special education programs since students enrolled in these programs do not factor into a school’s overall accountability scores. Referring to Houston’s school system, which President George W. Bush hailed as a success and referred to as a model for NCLB, Paul pointed out that this “success” went with an “abysmal dropout rate” (p. 650). Given that the high school dropout rate nationwide for Latino males is the highest for any demographic at 50% (Paul, 2004, p. 654), it follows that minority students made up much of this dropout rate, especially in a system that requires students to pass a standardized test in order to graduate. Paul (2004) took a sharply critical stance, labeling NCLB as “socially unjust educational policy,” something that must be actively resisted by teachers (p. 655).

Ambrosio (2004) focused on a particular high school and especially on English Language Learners (ELLs). He explained that in this particular case, ELL students were required to take standardized tests in English after three years even through researchers argue that students need more time to acquire academic literacy (Adamson, 2005). He acknowledged that simply allowing students to take the test in their home language is not sufficient because they are often not literate in their home languages. Also, he pointed out the stigmatizing effects of the school labels often used in testing regimes: “Having your school repeatedly labeled as ‘needing improvement’ and your teachers pilloried as ‘not highly qualified’ is humiliating and demoralizing. It provides a strong incentive for families to flee the school” (p. 711).

Abedi, Hofstetter, and Lord (2004) focused on the design of the individual assessments and how they penalize ELL students. The main concern is how tests conflate language ability and content knowledge. A student who is not fluent in academic English is not only penalized in
the English test, but in the math, science, and other content-area tests as well. This was confirmed by a study that Abedi et al. (2004) referenced:

The study findings suggest that the large performance gap between LEP and non-LEP may not be due mainly to lack of content knowledge. LEP students may possess the content knowledge but may not be at the level of English language proficiency necessary to understand the linguistic structure of assessment tools. (p. 11)²

Abedi et al. (2004) explored various solutions to this problem, explaining that the most obvious solution might be to have students take the test in their L1. However, as mentioned above, students might not have L1 academic literacy. Also, it is extremely difficult to translate test wording to its equivalent in another language. In Abedi’s et al. (2004) opinion, the most feasible option appeared to be simplifying the language of test questions so that they would easily be understood by ELL and non-ELL students alike.

Booher-Jennings’ (2005) article “Below the Bubble: ‘Educational Triage’ and the Texas Accountability System” was a disturbing exposé of how the increased pressures of testing lead schools to take extreme measures such as giving up on certain students who do not demonstrate the potential to pass required tests. Because many have disputed the negative effects of the Texas Accountability System on poor and minority students, Booher-Jennings (2005) intentionally selected a school where almost all the students were Latina/o and over 90% qualified for free or reduced-price lunches (p. 236). The author discovered that increased focus on accountability “dramatically affected” the frequency of referrals to special education so that student test scores would not be counted against the school’s aggregate rates (p. 248). As one

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² Abedi, Hofstetter, & Lord (2004) acknowledged the problems with the LEP label, referencing ELL as a more positive alternative, but chose to use LEP because it is “more common in research and practice” (p. 13). It was a term in use at the high school in this study, and one teacher even jokingly referred to students as “LEP-ers.”
might imagine, a special education placement has disastrous consequences for a student’s future academic path. Booher-Jennings (2005) described the paradoxes of a data-driven education system, in that a large improvement such as a student moving from 22% to 40% on the test is not seen as valuable as a moderate gain that pushes a student above passing rate, 70%. The author further explained how the intense data-focus determined by high-stakes testing has corrupted the educational system: “The decision to distribute resources to those most advantageous in regard to aggregate pass rates—the bubble kids—is understood not as a moral or ethical decision but as a sterile management imperative” (p. 243). Viewing students as numbers distracts from the reality that placing a student in special education or ignoring her is an ethical decision, not a simple management decision.

Given all the problems referenced by Booher-Jennings (2005) and other scholars regarding the negative impact of high-stakes testing on all students, it is unsurprising that organizations like the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) and the National Education Association (NEA) have recommended an overhaul of the testing system, making it both more teacher and student friendly. In particular, the NCTE (2006) has recommended utilizing multiple assessments, with its leadership understanding that no one assessment can determine a student’s growth and abilities. Similarly, the NEA (2010) policy statement reads that “Accountability should be based upon multiple measures of student learning and school success.” Unlike current assessments that treat reading and writing as largely mechanical, formulaic practices, NCTE recommended that “Assessments must recognize and reflect the intellectually and socially complex nature of reading and writing and the important roles of school, home, and society in literacy development.” (p. 488). The NEA (2010) urged that curriculum be aligned with assessments, but that it should include material beyond what can be
tested on a “pen and paper test.” If curriculum and tests are to be aligned, as they should, it is important to design assessments that will not reduce writing instruction to a narrow set of abilities.

**Students Transitioning to College**

Much of the work focused on students transitioning to college and college access has not specifically focused on multilingual students, so it is important to review some mainstream studies before detailing the few studies that have focused on multilingual learners making this transition. The research discussed here consistently points to a divide between K-12 and postsecondary expectations, explaining why this divide exists while exploring its implications.

Writing in an era of increased focus on K-12 school reform, Kirst and Venezia (2001) reported on a study focused on what K-16 collaborations should be developed in order to improve college-going and completion rates. According to the authors, there has been minimal connection between the K-12 and the higher education systems throughout their history, except for a brief period around 1900 where the systems’ curricula were linked through a College Board partnership. As Kirst and Venezia (2001) pointed out, one reason for the disconnect between high school and college curriculum is that high schools are subject to political forces while universities have traditionally been “untouchable” in this regard (p. 93). The authors explained that the disconnect between K-12 and higher education is particularly evident in the following areas: limited access to college-prep work in core subject areas, especially for minority students, grade inflation in high schools, increased placement of students in remedial coursework at college, conflicting assessments for exiting the K-12 system and entering the college system, lack of importance placed on senior-level work, and a lack of early and good college counseling for students (pp. 94-95).
A 2006 Department of Education report by the Spellings Commission, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, raised serious concerns about the percentage of U.S. citizens attaining higher education. The authors wrote that higher education has been one of the U.S. success stories where the country was ahead for so long, but has begun to fall behind: “We may still have more than our share of the world’s best universities. But a lot of other countries have followed our lead, and they are now educating more of their citizens to more advanced levels than we are” (p. x). The report placed the blame on the U.S.’s underperformance in higher education on both postsecondary institutions and the K-12 system. In particular, it pointed to the lack of alignment between the two systems, which has created an “expectations gap” in which the high schools are not preparing students to the level required to succeed in college (p. 1). For instance, only 17% of high school seniors were considered proficient in math while the number was 36% for reading (p. 8). The numbers of students graduating from high school (75%) as well as those starting college right after high school (60%) have been stagnant since the late 1990s after several decades of improvement (p. 8). The report authors were particularly troubled by the gaps in college access, writing that there is plenty of evidence showing that students from low-income families are less likely to go to college than their higher-income counterparts (p. 8). They attributed this gap to a “complex interplay of inadequate preparation, lack of information about college opportunities, and persistent financial barriers,” such as the declining purchasing power of Pell Grants (p. 8).

For an Education Statistics Quarterly report, Horn, Cataldi, and Sikora (2006) examined the trend of some undergraduates delaying college enrollment. They found that students who were more likely to delay enrollment were more also more likely to come from low-income backgrounds, be single parents, to have a first language other than English, to have parents who
did not have any postsecondary education, and were more likely to be Black, Hispanic, and American Indian (n.p.). Moreover, students who delayed their education were less likely than average to complete postsecondary degrees, with only 40% of this group earning some kind of postsecondary credential after six years compared to 58% of students who entered college immediately after high school. In conclusion, the authors argued that there was a significant difference between students who begin college right after high school and those who delay entry:

Early on, delayed entrants are more likely to have family and educational experiences that place them at greater risk of not completing their postsecondary education. When delayed entrants enroll in postsecondary education, they do so primarily to gain or enhance their work skills and tend to enroll in shorter term vocational programs rather than in bachelor's degree programs. (n.p.)

Responding to the call for more high school/college collaboration presented by the Department of Education (2006) report, Griffin, Falberg, and Krygier (2010) reported on a project that brought together four community college faculty with six high school teachers to see if they could create an online “interactive community” that would help bridge the gap between high school and college standards in writing. They explained that part of the disconnect stemmed from the fact that writing standards, such as judging the “quality” of one’s writing, are not clearly communicable despite attempts to create goal oriented rubrics like Olendzenski (2008) did in working with faculty from various higher education institutions. Griffin et al. (2010) also explained that standardized tests do not necessarily align with college standards and that high school teachers are rewarded for teaching to the tests, not teaching to college standards. Another problem in aligning high school and college curricula is that high school students often have different needs from college students. For instance, in the Griffin et al. (2010) study, the
high school teachers explained why the five-paragraph essay is useful to help beginning writers organize their thoughts, while the college teachers were generally critical of the five-paragraph essay, saying that it limits higher level thinking and originality (p. 300).

Unlike the research referenced above, St. John and Musoba (2011) focused specifically on expanding college opportunities for underrepresented students. Like Kirst and Venezia (2001), St. John and Musoba (2011) pointed out that institutions of higher education are not affected by state control like K-12 institutions, and, as a result, argued that any change at these institutions needs to be done at a local level. According to St. John and Musoba (2011), there was near equality in college going among minority and white students in the 1970s due to various government initiatives promoting equal access; however, with the declining buying power of Pell Grants in the 1980s and the dismantling of other support systems, the disparity between white and most minority groups has grown over the last few decades. Compared to their overall percentage in the U.S. population, Asians are actually overrepresented at the college level, African Americans and Latinas/os are underrepresented, with Latinas/os being the most underrepresented. As evident from the fact that Latinas/os are only slightly underrepresented at community colleges, minority students often begin their college career at a community college. St. John and Musoba (2011) reported that access to and completion of more challenging high school coursework led students to be more likely to enroll in four-year colleges and more likely to have higher SAT scores (pp. 123, 65). Person and Rosenbaum (2006) reported that Latinas/os were more likely to rely on family and friends to make their college decision, which is positive in the sense that first generation college students are able to learn more about college through these networks but negative in that it limits their college choices. The decision-making processes of the students in this study will be discussed more in depth in Chapter 4.
While the broader studies discussed above focused on college growing trends among students on a national level, research focused exclusively on multilingual students transitioning to college has typically focused on case studies. Lay, Carro, Tien, Niemann, and Leong (1999) interviewed a few Chinese immigrant students about how their literacy experiences in high school prepared them for university demands. Two of the students, Hua and Ping, clearly expressed that high school instruction did not prepare them for college demands. Hua explained that “the methods in college are better than in high school” and that, in high school, “students have little chance to practice English” (pp. 178-179). She explained that their high school ESL writing class focused mainly on grammar, with few chances to actually write essays (p. 179). Similarly, Ping reported that he had to write “short and easy” essays in high school compared to the “hard” and “strict” essay requirements in college (p. 179). It is evident from the comments from these students that high school instruction did not prepare them for the demands they had to face in college. While this study provided some valuable insights into the disconnect between high school and college curricula, depending solely on retrospective interviews limited the value of the findings.

Noting that research on multilingual students making the transition from high school to college was “virtually nonexistent,” Harklau (2000) conducted a year-long study that was originally focused on “how one group of U.S. immigrant students negotiate the changing academic and linguistic demands of the transition from secondary to postsecondary education” (p. 36). The focus of Harklau’s study shifted as she understood the importance of contextual factors on students’ learning. In particular, Harklau focused on how institutionally created labels for ESOL students positioned students differently in the high school and the community college where her study was conducted. As the title “From the Good Kids to the Worst” implies, these
labels had an immense impact on student success as they moved into higher education. Harklau (2000) found that the students in her study were praised by their high school teachers and depicted as hard-working, task-focused, and respectful immigrants, despite the fact that their actual coursework may not have reflected this perception. She found that students in the ESOL classes she studied were often asked to write narratives about the immigrant experience, which researchers like Blanton (1999) have pointed out as problematic for U.S.-born L2 learners.

Harklau’s (2000) students were placed into the ESOL track when starting college. Here, the students’ identities as individuals who attended high school in the U.S. came into conflict with the identities imposed on them by teachers, who made the assumption that all their students were new immigrants and needed help navigating the college system. Because of this conflict, the students who had come from U.S. high schools into the college ESOL program became resistant because they did not feel represented in a curriculum that largely appeared to be aimed at new immigrants. As a result, teachers looked down on these students, feeling that they were some of the “worst” students in their classes, having taken much of the bad from their U.S. high school experiences without the good.

In the most recent collection *Generation 1.5 in College Composition*, Allison (2009) reported on a longitudinal study examining high school literacy instruction and the transition to college writing. In this chapter, Allison discussed how high school writing classes and assignments were generally teacher centered and how little reading students actually did in their classes, only spending about 20-30 minutes a week reading outside of class, 90% less than what they would be expected to read at college (p. 81). High school writing tasks were limited as well. According to Allison (2009), high school writing tasks were guided by very specific instructions and tended to be “brief, short-answer responses,” a contrast to the more general assignment
instructions given at the college level in which students had to make their own decisions about finding and including content (p. 81). Of the four high schools in Allison’s (2009) study, one was clearly different from the others. At this school, students read more inside and outside of class, writing assignments were more complex and asked students to work with more difficult texts such as *Beowulf* and a Jane Austin novel. Students were often asked to revise their essays. Students at this school took more honors classes and were more likely to be enrolled in AP classes (p. 84). Allison (2009) did not explain why this was the case, but noted this school was more disadvantaged than the other schools, being deemed in need of improvement due to low test scores and having a higher drop rate than the other schools (p. 84).

Most recently, Kanno and Varghese (2010) examined the challenges that immigrant and refugee ESL students face in accessing college. Kanno and Varghese (2010) opened a new focus, one explored in this dissertation study, by looking beyond the classroom and considering broader societal factors in affecting a student’s chance of success. They wrote,

> Because barriers that lie between ESL students and college education are not just issues of language, a language policy narrowly focusing on remedying their “ESL problem” will have a limited impact on achieving equal college access and success for ESL students. We thus call for a more holistic educational policy that addresses the structural and economic, as well as linguistic, factors that together inhibit ESL students’ college access and participation. (p. 310)

Kanno and Varghese’s (2010) study was based on in-depth interviews with 33 immigrant and refugee students, focusing on the college application process and their academic and social experiences at a major U.S. public research university. They found that most students reported their linguistic disadvantages caused time crunches because of the extended time it took to
manage the extensive reading and writing demands of their classes. Students generally reported an “overwhelming sense of resentment” when placed in college ESL classes, which was exacerbated by the fact that the tuition for these non-credit bearing courses was higher than credit-bearing courses. The students reported that overcoming language difficulties was their first barrier to reach a four-year institution. This was especially problematic for late arrival immigrant students, who often did not meet the four years of high school English required for entrance to the university; as a result, most of these students began at the local community college before transferring to the university. The few exceptions doubled up on English courses or took summer courses at a local college during high school. After English difficulties, the second major barrier students reported were financial limitations. While many of the study’s students had been middle class students in their countries of origin before immigrating, a characteristic that made college an expectation, they faced an economic downturn upon arrival to the U.S. Because students saw their parents struggle, they often chose majors that would provide them with a more comfortable living. Because of the financial strain placed on students and families due to college attendance, college was seen as a “stepping stone to a specific career” and “The opportunity to spend four years discovering themselves and exploring various life options was a luxury that these students could not afford” (p. 321). Finally, as discussed in the next section, involvement in the college community is an important factor in determining student success. However, according to Kanno and Varghese (2010), only 5 of the 33 students in their study reported high involvement in student organizations, while 17 reported no involvement at all.
The First-Year College Experience

Over the last twenty years, colleges and universities seeking to increase retention of students beyond the first year and graduation rates have begun to pay more attention to students’ first-year experience. This section explains the importance of students’ first year experiences by contextualizing it within research on retention, details the initiatives developed to support first-year student success, explains key factors promoting student retention, and ends with a focus on retention at minority serving institutions (MSIs).

According to Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot (2005), the last few decades have brought more first year initiatives, more scholarship, and more collaborations between college departments to promote first year success. Nonetheless, as they pointed out, a number of challenges remain. These include the low first year success rates, lack of agreement on what the first year of college should focus on, and the fact that college ends up actually being less challenging than most students expect. Ishler and Upcraft (2005) wrote that the largest period of leaving for students is in the first year, with the 2001 first year persistence³ rate at 73.9% at four-year institutions and only 54.1% at two-year colleges (p. 29). According to American College Testing (2000), drop out rates vary among institution types, ranging from a low of 8.8% at highly selective colleges to highs of 47.7% at two-year public colleges and 46% at open admissions institutions (cited in Ishler and Upcraft, 2005, p. 29).

Tinto (1975, 1988, 1993, 1997) has been one of the most important researchers focusing on students’ first year experience and causes behind student dropout. In 1975, he proposed a

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³ Persistence is the term commonly used within the literature discussing the first-year college experience, so it will be utilized in the context of this discussion. However, throughout the dissertation, I prefer the word retention because it does more to imply a mutual responsibility between students and institutions for student success, instead of shifting the responsibility solely on the student.
dropout theory based on Durkheim’s model of suicide, in which he divided the college into two components, the academic and the social:

this theoretical model of dropout...argues that the process of dropout from college can be viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person's experiences in those systems...continually modify his goal and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of dropout. (p. 94)

Under Tinto’s (1975) proposed model, a student’s likelihood to persist is based in part on how well they integrate into both the social and academic spheres of the campus. If they do not connect with both of these domains, they are more likely to leave.

In 1988, Tinto expanded his dropout theory, emphasizing that the first six months are the most important time for students transitioning to college and that making it through the first year is half the battle to attaining a bachelor’s. In this article, he drew on an additional theorist, VanGennep (1960) and his work *The Rites of Passage*, to expand on the dropout model developed earlier. According to Tinto’s (1988) application of VanGennep’s theory, students pass through three stages in transitioning to college: separation from family, high school, and other previous communities, transition to a new academic environment and for many, a new geographical place, and finally, incorporation into their new community (pp. 441-6). During each of these stages, difficulties can arise. For instance, students who stay in town and have close family ties, like the students in my study, may struggle with the separation phase. During the integration phase, some students may never learn how to fully navigate the new institutional environment enough to be fully integrated. In order to make these transitions more successful, Tinto (1988) acknowledged the importance of developing public rituals such as a celebration of
students making it through the difficult and defining first year of college acknowledging this difficulty.

In later work, Tinto (1993, 1997) shifted from focusing on dropout to retention. He promoted learning communities, programs where students took multiple classes together, as one important way to reduce dropout, especially at nonresidential colleges (1993, pp. 192-3). As will be seen later, a few students in my study were involved in a learning community, an institutional support that helped them find friends in their classes. In a study focused on comparing students in a learning community with those in a traditional curriculum, Tinto (1997) found that learning community students had greater involvement in various academic and social activities, greater perceived developmental gains, and were more likely to build supportive peer groups which helped bridge social-academic domains. In conclusion, Tinto (1997) argued that institutions need to realize that “choices of curriculum structure and pedagogy invariably shape both learning and persistence on campus, because they serve to alter both the degree to which and manner in which students become involved in the academic and social life of the institution” (p. 620).

Kuh (2005) has focused extensively on student engagement in the first year of college. In one report, he discussed results from using two surveys, the College Student Expectations Questionnaire and the College Student Experiences Questionnaire, to evaluate whether or not students’ first year experiences matched their expectations. In analyzing the data for his study, Kuh (2005) came to a rather depressing conclusion: “Students’ expectations for college often surpass the academic demands they are presented. That is, students typically study less, write less, and read less than they come to college expecting to do. The gap between expectations and experiences also extends to life beyond the classroom” (p. 106). According to Kuh’s (2005) findings, students came to college with expectations that they would study significantly less than
the two to three hours per class hour often quoted, and ended up even studying less than these lowered expectations. Similarly, students come in expecting to receive fairly high grades, with two-thirds expecting B+ or higher averages. Only 44% actually achieve at this level (p. 94).

While 69% of students expect to interact at least “occasionally” with faculty outside class, only 41% actually do (p. 94). While 87% say they will use support services like writing centers, only 56% have done so by end of first year (p. 92). These numbers reveal that students often come to college with high expectations and for a variety of reasons, these expectations are consistently not met. Shilling and Shilling (2005) confirmed these findings about expectations, writing that students come to college expecting to work harder than they actually do, but work less than they initially expect. Students in this dissertation study came to college with expectations for much more work and the reading demands in particular exceeded their expectations, but rarely did they complete all the assigned reading.

In another report, Kuh joined with other researchers to analyze institutions that were outperforming their peers in important areas. Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates’ (2005) study focused on twenty institutions that were performing higher than expected with retention and graduation rates given their acceptance rates, demographics, and other factors (p. 14). The focal university in my study, UTEP, was also featured in this study. The authors detail some of the transitions at this university, explaining how faculty initially saw the shift in demographics towards a Latina/o majority as negative. However, the president, who presided over major changes in the university structure and is still the president after over twenty years in this position, viewed the changing demographics of El Paso as an advantage and, according to Kuh et al. (2005), “began to articulate an inclusive, forward-looking vision that proclaimed [El Paso’s] pride in being a Hispanic majority university” (p. 134). This shift was likely one of the factors
leading from a first to second year retention rate in the early 90s of 63% to one of 72% 10 years later in 2002.

According to the Kuh et al. (2005) report, much of this change was due to the establishment of first-year seminars called “Seminar in Critical Inquiry.” The authors wrote that “UNIV 1301 is UTEP’s signature intervention designed to facilitate students’ transition to college by luring students into discovering the rewards of deep learning. Titled ‘Seminar in Critical Inquiry,’ the core curriculum course engages students intellectually in an academic topic of their choice while acquainting students with the UTEP campus” (pp. 50-1). By bringing together students interested in a particular topic, the first year seminars attempted to create learning communities that can especially help connect commuter students with others who have similar interests (p. 255). All incoming students to UTEP, including those in my study, were required to take these seminars. The local community college, where several study students started, had a similar course, Education 1301.

The seminars referenced here were part of the University College at UTEP, a college created in 2001 to support the success of students at the university. According to Evenbeck, Smith, and Ward (2010), the University College should be a “context for student success and institutional change” (p. 157). They wrote that today’s student population is different and is more likely to move between multiple institutions during their college career (p. 160). In order to support such students, Evenbeck, Smith, and Ward (2010) believed that University Colleges can provide special orientation programs as well as supplementary programs, such as bridge programs between high school and college or between two and four-year colleges (p. 161). At UTEP, the University College contained the following programs: academic advising center,

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4 Unfortunately, the University College no longer exists at UTEP and its key programs like first-year seminars have been incorporated into the Office of Undergraduate Studies.
admissions and recruitment, developmental education, enrollment services center, entering student program, financial aid, new student orientation, registrar, student assessment and testing, and student success programs (Ward and Ritchey, 2010, p. 49). Evenbeck, Smith, and Ward (2010) also emphasized that the University College can be an active force for involving parents, explaining the importance of reaching out to parents of low-income and first-generation college students, who are often not very involved with their students’ education given their unfamiliarity with the postsecondary educational environment (p. 161). As evident by the university’s collaboration with the college and a dozen local school districts in El Paso, the University College can be a center for collaboration among P-16 educational institutions (Evenbeck, Smith, and Ward, 2010; Ward and Ritchey, 2010).

Astin’s (1997) study *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited* included data from more than 20,000 students, 25,000 faculty members, and 200 institutions to examine what factors contributed to student success in college. In examining predictors for college success, Astin (1997) explained that GPA may be “modestly” predicted from admissions information, especially high school GPA and scores on college admissions tests. Students who lived on campus, which none of the students in my study did, were also more likely to succeed. Student retention was positively influenced by majoring in business, psychology, or other social sciences, and negatively influenced by engineering. The faculty orientation towards students was also important, as more a student-oriented faculty is positively correlated with student retention. Astin (1997) also examined the effects of student involvement on retention, finding that student-student, faculty-student interactions, time spent socializing with friends, talking with faculty outside of class, and being invited to a professor’s home were all positively correlated with success (p. 195). Of some of the most negative involvement factors, working full-time as a
student, which many UTEP and EPCC students do, and working even part-time off-campus, were seen as having negative effects on student retention. From the review of these various factors, Astin (1997) concluded, “Practically all the involvement variables showing positive associations with retention suggest high involvement with faculty, with fellow students, or with academic work. Most of the involvement measures showing negative effects (working full-time, working off campus, commuting, reading for pleasure) represent involvements that take time and energy away from the academic experience” (p. 197).

Merisotis and McCarthy (2005) focused specifically on retention and success at minority serving institutions (MSIs). They pointed out that first generation status creates conflicting expectations from family members, who support their academic goals, but expect them to continue contributing to the family (p. 48). The need to contribute to their family through working or through caring for siblings became an issue for some students in my study, as will be discussed later. According to Merisotis and McCarthy (2005), revenues at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) are 42% less per student and endowments are 91% less than non-HSI counterparts. As a result, it is unsurprising that their instruction, student service, and academic support services are generally less funded (p. 49). Nonetheless, the authors explain that MSIs are likely to be more affordable, pay greater attention to mentoring and support programs, and provide a more supportive social environment for minority students, all factors that have been correlated positively with retention as demonstrated by the research reviewed here (p. 51). Nonetheless, according to Sage and Manning (1992), an important flaw of MSIs is that they often operate from a monocultural, mainstream U.S. point of view, which means students’ home cultures and languages are often ignored in the actual university curriculum. UTEP and EPCC are not an exception in this regard, as the vast majority of instruction occurs in English and, as
will be discussed later, assignments rarely build on students’ multilingual competencies. Merisotis and McCarthy (2005) also mentioned the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP), of which one of my study participants took part in. They explain that this program has been in existence for over thirty years and has provided assistance to immigrant students, helping them graduate at higher rates than peers and achieve GPAs equivalent to mainstream students (p. 55).

Hrabowski (2005) has similarly written about promoting first-year success of underrepresented minority students. He explained that these students may face other challenges and that their success cannot be predicted by high school achievement and GPA alone. These challenges include “motivational and performance vulnerability in the face of negative stereotypes and low expectations, academic and cultural isolation, peers who are not supportive of academic success, and perceived and actual discrimination” (p. 126). According to Hrabowski (2005), promoting minority success often went in line with promoting success for all students, as institutions who have focused on developing a better first-year experience for all students generally had higher minority success rates (p. 128).

The Community College Experience

Given that the majority of Latina/o college goers (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Kurlaender, 2006) and about half the college-going students in this study started at community colleges, it is important to discuss scholarship focused on promoting student success at community colleges. This is especially true given that little attention is usually given to community colleges in scholarship on higher education. This section details some of the limitations of traditional community college curriculum along with the unique challenges of its faculty, the presence of
first-year initiatives like learning communities, the number of minority students attending community colleges, and partnerships between community colleges and universities.

Richardson’s (1983) *Literacy in the Open Access College* is a dated work, but provides some important context as well as raises concerns that are still relevant today. Here, the author discussed the decline of literacy demands at some colleges in response to the shift to vocational training in the 1970s. According to Richardson (1983), “In vocational programs, traditional college literacy was downplayed in order to provide efficient, streamlined preparation in job-specific competencies” (p. 7). A three-year case study of Oakwood Community College revealed that students generally were not required to read or write extensively. For instance, this study found that students were asked to read an average of less than thirty pages a week and fewer than one third of classes required term papers or reports (p. 63). Furthermore, reading and writing were often developed separately, and writing was done without a concrete rhetorical purpose. Most classes were categorized as “information transfer” in which students were not taught to think critically, but rather placed in dependent learner roles. Richardson (1983) found that large teaching loads (five or more classes a semester) made assigning too much writing prohibitive. Also, he wrote that low expectations were self-perpetuating: “The response of faculty members to the perceived low literacy skills of their students was to reduce demands rather than to require students to improve skills” (p. 79). As will be revealed in detail in Chapters 4 and 5, the reading and writing demands at the college and university in this study differed greatly.

Cohen and Brawer’s (2008) *The American Community College* is in its fifth edition and provides a comprehensive text that covers various aspects of community colleges, such as institutional goals, the students they serve, their faculty, finances, instruction, student services,
and more. The authors explained that community colleges provide a variety of academic functions, including academic transfer, vocational-technical, developmental, continuing, and community service (p. 22). The community college in this study served various roles for the focal students as some were interested in vocational education, some in transferring, and some had developmental coursework to prepare them for college reading and writing. According to Cohen and Brawer (2008), minority students are overrepresented at community colleges, as they enroll 38% of total students in the U.S. but 46% of minority students (p. 53). The authors wrote, “In general, students who enter community colleges instead of universities have lower academic ability and aspirations and are from a lower socioeconomic class” (p. 57). There have been some debates on whether or not the presence of community colleges limits the higher education achievements of minority students, as those who begin at community college are less likely to complete four-year degrees than their counterparts who start at four-year colleges. For instance, a report by the Lumina Foundation (2007) stated that out of 20 Latina/o students who start at a community college, only 2 transfer to a four-year institution (p. 2). However, as Cohen and Brawer (2008) pointed out, for most students at community colleges, the choice is not between a community college and a four-year institution, it is between a community college or no college (p. 58). Moreover, while institutional interventions can support student retention, many reasons for dropout are beyond a college’s control (p. 68).

The earlier discussion of Tinto’s (1993, 1997) work reported that learning communities were especially important in nonresidential colleges, as they give students better chances to connect with other students and make potential study partners. Both institutions in this study would be considered nonresidential colleges, and some students at both institutions found themselves in learning communities. The importance of learning communities in community
college settings is seen in recent work in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*. Barnhouse and Smith (2006) described a serendipitous learning community that occurred as students began making connections between their American History II and American Literature II classes. This led to a more formal linking of the courses that developed over time: “courses continue in their evolution from merely being collaboratively paired in the beginning to forming a totally enmeshed environment where we all participate as a community of learners and active citizens” (p. 186).

While Barnhouse and Smith’s (2006) report was more informal and focused on the learning benefits of paring, Cargill and Kalikoff (2007) focused on the importance of learning communities in serving nontraditional student populations such as immigrant, multilingual, and nonresidential, which describes most of the students in my study. Their study compared students enrolled in linked sections of Writing Effectively and Abnormal Psychology with a control group, students enrolled in an unlinked section of the psychology course. Although they cautioned about the limited size of their study, the researchers found that students in the linked courses scored significantly higher on exams and were less likely to drop out than students in the nonlinked sections. One student recommending that others take the linked courses told the researchers, “you spend 4 hours with the same students, which inevitably leads to friendships and makes your first quarters less lonely” (p. 189). Overall, the authors felt that linked courses were especially important for students at nonresidential colleges with outside work, family, and other pressures that limited their ability to connect with the college community as well as make connections between the work they were doing in various courses.

During initial interviews, most of the students in this dissertation study reported that they wanted to go to college to have a better life than their parents, and that the whole family viewed
education as a path to a better life, narratives that reflected Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco’s findings (2001; 2010). As they appeal to immigrant students, Sullivan (2005) explained that U.S.
“cultural narratives about hard work, self-improvement, and ‘success’” (p. 142) have an especially strong appeal to community college students, who are often the most financially disadvantaged students in the higher education system. However, because community college teachers often have students who have been “damaged beyond repair by poverty” (p. 151) and live complex lives with a number of conflicting demands, “mainstream cultural narratives about ‘hard work’ unrealistically and often dangerously simplify the challenges [their] students face” (p. 152). As Sullivan (2005) pointed out, students with benefits stemming from affluence do better at all grade levels than students from lower economic classes. In response to these issues, Sullivan (2005) argued that teachers and scholars need to familiarize themselves with works complicating this narrative such as Shipler’s (2004) The Working Poor: Invisible in America or Ehrenreich’s (2001) Nickel and Dimed: On (not) Getting by in America. Also, he emphasized the importance of developing more research narratives that document the complexity of community college student lives, in that their ability to “work hard” involves a number of factors, including a “reasonable work schedule, reliable childcare, and transportation” (p. 153), factors that are documented in this dissertation study.

While an earlier discussion in this chapter focused on the disconnect between high school and college curriculum, there is also a disconnect between community college and college curriculum, an especially problematic divide when most of a community college’s students plan to transfer to a four-year institution, such as in El Paso. This divide between the community college and university was seen in El Paso in a few different ways, and will be discussed in Chapter 4. Olendzenski (2008) described an attempt to remedy these disconnects by a group of
five two and four-year institutions in southeastern Massachusetts. The meetings between these institutions, which were actually initiated by one college president, were aimed to develop a set of “desirable learning outcomes for first-year writing to be applied across the institutions” (p. 186). The committee members worked to create a grid that set goals for different levels in six different areas: writing, critical reading, audience/purpose/voice, thesis, organization, and research/documentation (p. 188). While there was some grappling over language for the grid, and some faculty were concerned about a move to standardize writing curricula, overall the committee found a great deal of common ground and the push to coordinate goals was received well among the various faculty. As the project continued, one goal was to involve high school writing teachers so that they would be informed about the expectations that teachers had in first-year college writing courses. Some linking projects have occurred in El Paso as well; however, as will be revealed in Chapters 4-7, the literacy environments of different institutions varied greatly.
Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This dissertation project began with a series of questions that arose after discovering the need for more research on multilingual students transitioning to college. As with other studies, it began with questions that were reformulated over time. Because I had the opportunity to spend a year in the focal high school before data collection, questions were developed and refined during this time. The primary research questions that have guided this study are:

• What challenges do multilingual minority students face in making the transition between high school and college?
• What resources do students draw on to support their college transitions?
• How are the writing demands different at the high school, community college, and university levels and what contributes to these differences?

Methodological Issues and Theoretical Frameworks

Longitudinal Case Study

The primary method of inquiry used in this study was longitudinal case study, which has been used by a number of L1 and L2 researchers in understanding students’ transitions through academic environments (Beaufort, 2007; Harklau, 2000; Leki, 2006; Sternglass, 1997). As Sternglass (1997) discovered, it takes a long time to know a study participant well enough to get a “complete and honest picture” of her capabilities (p. 293). Relying on interviews, as is the case with Lay et al. (1999) and Allison (2009), who also examined multilingual students’ transitions to college, is a good starting point but problematic because it provides limited data and students may retrospectively reconstruct aspects of their experience in order to provide data that the researcher desires. Harklau’s (2000) study, which combined multiple interviews with classroom observations and analysis of writing and classroom materials, provided more a more complex
understanding of the challenges students faced in transitioning as well as how their identities shifted over time; however, compared with the six years that Sternglass (1997) and three years that Leki (2006) spent collecting data, one year is a relatively short time for a longitudinal study. 

In order to explore the pervasiveness of the high school/college divide and the way it affects students’ learning, it is essential to conduct studies that go well beyond the context of one writing assignment or one classroom. Having conducted a six-year longitudinal study of writing and learning at college, Sternglass (1997) clearly understood the value of longitudinal ethnographic research:

Longitudinal research provides the time it takes to get to know students and for them to be willing to share their experiences and the factors in their lives that have contributed in the past and continue to contribute in the present to their ability to respond to the academic demands being made on them as they simultaneously deal with the other claims on their complex lives. (p. 7)

In conducting a longitudinal study, the researcher collects materials “from different perspectives over time to examine the work done by students” (Sternglass, 1997, p. 167). Such a study is essential for understanding the impact that the secondary and postsecondary division has on teachers, institutions, and most importantly, students. As Sternglass (1997) realized multiple times in her study, contextual factors play a vital role in students’ ability to learn and progress as writers.

Perhaps the lack of study on multilingual students making the transition to college is due to the logistical challenges of choosing study participants that are attending a local high school with the intention of attending a local college or university. Harklau (2000) began her study with five students; however, one decided not to go to college and another attended an out-of-town
institution. Similarly, Allison (2009) started with eight participants; however, only four immediately matriculated to college. This attrition challenge limits the possibilities for a longitudinal study of this type. Students often do not know if or where they are going to attend college until well into their senior year. Similarly, even if students indicate they might attend a local postsecondary institution, this can change at any time if they decide to go out of town or not go at all.

Because of these issues, I spent a year at the high school before the study in order to build relations with students and teachers and find students who were likely to begin college in the same town right after high school. While a longer study like Sternglass’ (1997) or Leki’s (2006) would have been desirable, this study was made as long as possible given external time constraints: a year and a half. Official data collection began the second semester of the students’ senior year of high school and continued through their first year of college. Accounting for the fact that some students would drop out of the study, decide not to attend college right away, or attend postsecondary institutions outside of El Paso, I began with more participants than expected to finish the study. Of the 10 students who began the study, eight entered college the fall following their high school graduation, one of whom later dropped out of the study (more on participants later in this chapter).

**Adopting an Active Researcher Stance**

In designing this study, I decided early on to play a more active role in the participants’ academic lives than a traditional researcher would, consciously playing the role of participant-observer rather than simply observer. In the book *Community Action and Organizational Change*, Faber (2002) criticized the traditional university/outside world, researcher/participant dichotomies, arguing that the researcher needs to play a more active, interested role in the
community they are studying in order to understand it better. Using a sports metaphor, Faber explained that traditional research often ends up in the researcher knowing the rules of the game; however, in order to know the game itself, Faber (2002) argued that the researcher needs to be immersed in the environment she is studying: “I found that in order to fully understand change, I needed to play a self-conscious, direct role in change and fully experience the consequences, successes, and risks associated with change” (p. 13).

In addition to arguing that a participant-observer is better able to understand the group being studied, Faber (2002) made the ethical argument that researchers need to work for the communities they study as opposed to simply conduct research that benefits the researcher and fellow academics. In making this argument, he cited Scheper-Hughes (1992), who wrote about a confrontation that ensued when her participants were upset by her lack of involvement in improving their lives:

When I emerged to see that the commotion was about, the women were ready to turn their anger against me. Why had I refused to work with them when they had been so willing to work with me? Didn’t I care about them personally anymore, their lives, their suffering, their struggle? Why was I so passive, so indifferent, so resigned? (cited in Faber, 2002, p. 10)

The ethical issue raised by Faber (2002) and Scheper-Hughes (1992) has been a concern of researchers situated closer to rhetoric and composition. I became more conscious about this issue upon reading Blanton (2005a, 2005b), who discussed one of her studies in an article titled “Student, Interrupted” and a book chapter “Mucking Around in the Lives of Others.” Reading how Blanton (2005a, 2005b) felt helpless while two of her participants dropped out of college bothered me. She likely told these students that her study would “benefit students like them”
when soliciting informed consent; however, she ultimately felt that she “could do nothing for
them” except to “Devise an ingenious plan for rendering results, even results potentially
damaging to your research subjects, in a way that brings about positive change,” which she
admitted she had no idea how to do (p. 156). Expressing concerns similar to Blanton’s (2005a,
2005b), Cook (1998) explored the problematic nature of objective researcher positioning in
discussing her own study, expressing qualms with the fact that she and fellow academics
benefited more than the participants in her study.

Blanton’s (2005a, 2005b) difficulty envisioning other ways to avoid her dilemma and
Cook’s (1998) unresolved questioning about how her study benefited her more than her
participants stems from the entrenched belief that researcher involvement in the community one
studies serves no purpose except to corrupt supposedly objective findings. Cook (1998) was
close to seeing the potential of participant-observer research when she discussed a moment in
which her “dream participant” Sam asked her “to step outside [her] role as an interviewing
observer and respond to the essay as a reader and teacher” (p. 110). Unfortunately, Cook (1998)
situated this incident in a discussion of researcher bias and did not explore the potential of how
stepping between observer and teacher roles could give her a broader perspective and open up
potential for new understanding.

Despite researchers’ reluctance to take a more active role in the populations or the lives
of the people they study, this is by no means an unknown phenomenon. In her classic literacy
ethnography, *Ways with Words*, Heath (1983) wrote how she worked with teachers as a teacher
aide, contributing to curriculum design: “We searched for solutions, wrote curricula, and tried
new methods, materials, and motivations to help working-class black and white children learn
more effectively than they had in the past” (p. 4). She even joined families with daily home
chores, cooking, cleaning, and chopping wood. Another ethnographer, Delgado-Gaitan (1993), studying Mexican family relations with schools in California, found herself “fighting to remain in the ‘neutral’ research role” and ultimately became an active participant in the community she was researching (p. 397).

In rhetoric and composition, Rose and Hull (1989) reported tutoring their study participants; however, this was simply mentioned as part of the study and not discussed in any way. In mentioning this, it should be noted that established scholars like Rose and Elbow (she uses these two names specifically) are given more license to experiment, tell stories, and use “I” when discussing their research (Bishop, 1992). For instance, Brueggermann (1996) reported how her dissertation committee complained about her going “native” while the already referenced Cook (1998) explained how her committee questioned her emotional involvement in her participants’ lives.

While scholars like Heath (1983) and Rose and Hull (1989) have reported taking more active roles in their studies, others have moved to theorize the role of the participant-observer. In education, Schensul and Schensul (1992) have written about what they call “collaborative research” and argued that instead of forming a dichotomy between finding what is good for the individual or the community, researchers should look for a third area where the research benefits both researcher and individual or community being studied. Delgado-Gaitan (1993) termed her involvement as a researcher “ethnography of empowerment,” acknowledging that the researcher will always be an outsider but that she can gain a better understanding of the community being studied by “encouraging and fostering the relational process between researcher and researched” (p. 407). Closer to rhetoric and composition, Bleich (1993) has described “socially generous research,” which aims to contribute “to the welfare of the community or society being
studied” (p. 178). Bruggermann (1996) argued that researchers need to work the hyphen between participant-researcher (pp. 19-20).

Rather than depicting it as merely a concession to qualms about the selfish nature of traditional research, proponents of socially generous research have argued, like Faber (2002), that this research can offer a more comprehensive picture than traditional research. Moss (1992) cited Holy (1984) to argue that the researcher needs to become involved to better understand a population being studied as observation alone is not sufficient (pp. 158-159). Schensul and Schensul (1992) wrote that socially generous research is related to action research and that it “begins with the notion that most of the social, biological, and political problems affecting contemporary communities, nations, and the global community are complex and cannot be identified or solved without better sources of information and greater interpersonal and intersectoral collaboration” (p. 196). In a similar vein, anthropologist George Marcus described the researcher and researched relationship as one of “epistemic partners” (Rabinow & Marcus 2008, p. 71). He explained that researchers have to form partnerships with the people they are researching and be sensitive to their needs; otherwise they are just collecting interviews (pp. 68-69).

As anthropologist VanMannen (1988) has written in the context of discussing “confessional ethnography,” working the hyphen, jumping between participant and observer is a challenge. He referred to it as paradoxical or even schizophrenic. Nonetheless, as explained here, jumping these roles does not only benefit the epistemic partners with whom researchers work with, it has the potential to provide a fuller picture of the people and communities being studied. As the name confessional ethnography indicates, in playing more active roles in our studies, it is important for the researcher to be honest about their role as researcher and how our
role might have affected the study. These discussions should not be reduced to footnotes or brief mentions. Researchers should not be ashamed of having gone native; rather, they need to openly discuss the possibility that they “are always partially subject, partially researcher; partially participant, partially observer; partially self, partially other—never exclusively one or the other, never wholly one or the other” (Bruggermann, 1996, p. 33) and how this is not necessarily a problem.

In taking an action researcher stance, I was an active participant at the high school level, assisting the teacher by providing feedback to all students in the observed classes. I designed and co-lead the final essay assignment of the year, which was based on an analysis of power in *Lord of the Flies*. Additionally, study participants were encouraged to seek feedback from me for scholarship essays to ask any questions they had about college.

At the college level, participants were encouraged to seek feedback from me on their various writing assignments face-to-face or via email. Three of the participants regularly met with me for feedback on their writing. One student came almost weekly, seeking help with tasks like brainstorming ideas for an introduction or conclusion, using APA style, and editing the final version of a research paper. These students all identified me as one of their most valuable sources of support their first-year in college. This involvement in their lives did not appear to make a difference between staying in college and dropping out because the students who made it through their first year were largely self-motivated and actively sought help from others as well.

However, this extra support likely helped participants receive higher grades on writing assignments than they would have otherwise. At the other end, the three EPCC students and one of the UTEP students hardly ever sought feedback. In the case of the EPCC students, it was likely a mixture of their lack of engagement in learning combined with my limited presence on
campus, although it was made clear I would come whenever they needed me. In the case of the other UTEP student, she had an extensive feedback and support system built into her first year scholarship program.

**Broadening the Picture with Bourdieu**

A number of researchers have critiqued how traditional academic research focuses too intently on the classroom, ignoring the importance of students’ lives outside the classroom in determining their success. While what occurs in the classroom is important, data consistently shows that characteristics such as family income level, parents’ educational background, employment while attending school, and social connections on campus are correlated with success. Cummins (2000) argued that too little attention is played to systemic inequalities when examining students’ academic success. This point was emphasized by Arispe and Jr. (2008), who wrote that “College readiness cannot be measured solely on the basis of academic achievement and not consider access to quality health care, poor nutrition, substandard housing, and social isolation, such as residing in colonias along the United States/Mexico border” (p. 140). As Leki (2006) progressed through her study, she found that students were generally more interested in discussing what was happening outside of school than about the writing they were (or were not) doing in their classes. More recently, Kanno and Varghese (2010) argued that researchers do not pay enough attention to the way challenges outside of school affect students’ academic success. Heeding the call of these scholars, this study looks at students’ lives both in the classroom and beyond the classroom. It considers different aspects in students’ lives in supporting or hindering their college success including family situations, the need to work, and commuting to school. Bourdieu’s theories of habitus, capital, and field along with Yosso’s (2005) theory of community cultural wealth, which is based on Bourdieu’s theory of capital,
provide a robust theoretical framework that moves data collection and analysis beyond the classroom to help me consider broader contexts in the participants’ lives.

**Applying habitus, capital, and field.**

Bourdieu developed the theories of habitus, capital, and field to be used relationally to conduct analyses of empirical data, which in his work often involved huge statistical data sets collected through surveying broad sections of society. Many researchers have applied Bourdieu’s concepts in their studies, although critiques could be made of how this has been done. Despite the fact that Bourdieu viewed the concepts of habitus, capital, and field as relational and thus meant to be used together in conducting analyses, many studies have applied Bourdieu’s concepts selectively (Maton, 2008; Thomson, 2008). As will be discussed in more depth below, Yosso (2005) has criticized researchers for taking Bourdieu’s conception of capital and using it to support a deficit perspective of minority communities, something that Bourdieu himself, a critic of social inequalities, would likely find problematic. Bourdieu (1986) depicted the relation between these different concepts with this equation: \([(\text{habitus})(\text{capital})] + \text{field} = \text{practice}\). Maton (2008) explained this, writing that it means “practice results from relations between one’s dispositions (habitus) and one’s position in a field (capital), within the current state of play of that social arena (field)” (p. 51). With “practice,” Bourdieu was working to “move towards seeking to understand agents as theory-generating agents themselves rather than the objects of interpretation of academic social philosophers” (p. 38). For the purposes of this dissertation project, Bourdieu’s conception of practice will help me examine the participants as agents constructing unique pathways from high school into college.

As evident by the above equation, habitus, capital and field, all equally important, are crucial to understanding practice. The field may be considered the social sphere in which all
interactions happen, the field in which individuals hold capital and develop their habitus. At the broadest level of analysis is the social field, which Bourdieu typically broke down into several levels: “the field of power, the broad field under consideration, the specific field, and social agents in the field as a field in themselves” (Thompson, 2008, p. 79). In any consideration of these fields, the economic field was always the most important, as Bourdieu (1993) saw it as most influential in shaping societal relations. In this study, I consider the participants’ home and educational settings as different fields and break up the educational field by institution, which results in three more subfields: high school, community college, and university. This is further broken down to the classroom level. Because this study was conducted on the border, both the U.S. and Mexico become important fields, along with the local contexts in both countries and the state and national context in the U.S. All these fields come into play in different chapters. Chapter 4 focuses on contrasting institutional fields while Chapter 8 considers all these fields together but more explicitly moves to discuss state and national fields.

Habitus and capital are two concepts that share equal importance with field, and they emerge from the fields that people inhabit and move through during their lives. According to Maton (2008), habitus is both structured and structuring, arising out of previous experiences moving through and living in different fields while shaping future actions in these fields and others. He explained that habitus “focuses on our ways of acting, feeling, thinking, and being. It captures how we carry within us our history, how we bring this history into our present circumstances, and how we then make choices to act in certain ways and not others” (p. 52). Habitus may arise out of any experience in an individual’s life, include public and private experiences. For instance, in Outliers, Gladwell (2008) reported that parents from higher socioeconomic classes tend to teach their children to be more assertive, questioning decisions
made by people in authority, while parents in lower income brackets teach their children to obey. Bourdieu (e.g. Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) focused much of his work on the educational system, arguing that education played a huge role in supporting an unequal, hierarchical society. Research has all too often shown how schools with high percentages of minority students are underfunded. They also tend to teach students restricted notions of technological literacy (Banks, 2006) and are overly constrained by restrictions on testing (McCarthey, 2008). These practices develop different habitus in students that contribute to the perpetuation of societal hierarchies. For instance, while students at well-funded private or public schools develop a habitus that promotes critical thinking or leadership, students at lower income schools are often taught to obey and merely provide correct answers instead of thinking more critically and creatively.

Capital traditionally is associated with the possession of something of economic value, and Bourdieu’s understanding maintains this while adding a new dimension, social capital. In Bourdieu’s conception of capital, economic capital is always the dominant force and plays a role in structuring and distributing social forms of capital, which may include cultural, linguistic, scientific, and others. For instance, education is a valuable source of social capital and someone without much financial capital but a doctoral degree will still be viewed positively by other members of society. However, Bourdieu describes intelligentsia as the “dominated fraction of the dominant group” as their status is raised through their level of education but they are still restricted and dominated by those possessing more economic capital, which trumps other forms of capital.

Examining a section from Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture* where they consider the role language plays in raising the status of professors helps clarify the concepts of habitus, capital, and field. In university settings,
Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) pointed out that language can develop a primary role which is to “attest and impose the pedagogic authority of the communication and the content communicated” (p. 110). They wrote,

Students are the less inclined to interrupt the professorial monologue when they do not understand it, because status resignation to approximate understanding is both the product and the condition of their adaptation to the university system: since they are supposed to understand, since they must have understood, they cannot accede to the idea that they have a right to understand and must therefore be content to lower their standards of understanding. (p. 112)

In the context of this dissertation project, this statement carries special significance because multilingual students learning English as a L2 in U.S. educational contexts are all too often placed in this subservient position, developing a conception of inferiority and habitus that makes them less likely to question those in positions of educational authority and may lower their expectations for learning as a result. Too often, the responsibility for understanding is then placed on students who are outsiders to the educational system and potentially U.S. language and culture. As a result, the blame for misunderstanding is placed on them, much as the professor blames students for misunderstanding the “allusive, elliptical discourse” in Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) account (p. 111). In such situations, linguistic outsiders possess diminished capital in comparison to “superiors” and may develop habitus that perpetuate these inequalities. This discussion will be revisited in Chapter 8, but for now I would like to turn to a reinterpretation of Bourdieu’s conception of capital that will be adapted in mapping out the participants’ networks of capital in Chapters 6 and 7.
Challenging a deficit perspective with community cultural wealth.

Another theoretical framework utilized in the collection and analysis of data has been Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital reinterpreted by Yosso (2005) and Oropeza, Varghese, and Kanno (2010) with a critical race theory (CRT) lens. Fueled by the deficit perspective, traditional research has often utilized Bourdieu’s tools to focus on how linguistic minority students lack the capital and habitus necessary to succeed in schools. Traditionally marginalized students are seen as not possessing the cultural knowledge necessary to succeed in schools that have been developed with the dominant class in mind. Immigrant students are not seen as possessing sufficient linguistic skills. African American students are seen as not possessing the desire for education and social advancement that other students have. Researchers have consistently ignored the structural inequalities that contribute to lower success rates among certain students, preferring to focus on the lack of abilities among the students and their families (Rendón, L.I., Jalomo, R.E., & Nora, A., 2000). While Berger (2000) is not necessarily guilty of supporting this deficit orientation, it may be seen in the following comment he made in discussing the role of habitus in the success of students transitioning to college: “As students encounter the subenvironments of an institution--academic, social, and organizational--their chances of persistence are affected by the extent to which their habitus and related beliefs of entitlement are congruent with the dominant organizational habitus” (p. 111). Many traditional researchers could have utilized the understanding expressed in this statement to focus on the deficiencies of linguistic minority student families and communities rather than the responsibility of social policies and educational institutions to address this misalignment of student and institutional habitus.
In contrast to researchers who have utilized Bourdieu to support a deficit perspective of linguistic minority students, Bourdieu was very cognizant of the role educational and other institutions play in perpetuating social inequalities. In *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) wrote that “All pedagogic action (PA) is, objectively, symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power” (p. 5), and argued that educational systems have traditionally perpetuated societal inequalities by excluding people from certain systems such as higher education. However, they noted this exclusionary process has become more nuanced a shift towards open admissions as there has been a shift from open exclusion to “the artfully contrived and shrewdly dissimulated gradations which run from full recognition of academic citizenship to the different shades of relegation” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, p. 231).

Understanding that Bourdieu’s theories were being used unjustly, Yosso (2005) wrote, “while Bourdieu’s work sought to provide a structural critique of social and cultural reproduction, his theory of cultural capital has been used to assert that some communities are culturally wealthy while others are culturally poor” (p. 77). In contrast to this deficit mindset, in which minority communities are perceived as lacking cultural wealth, Yosso (2005) used a CRT framework to reinterpret Bourdieu’s theories, which she said “refutes dominant ideology and White privilege while validating and centering the experiences of People of Color” (p. 74). Instead of perpetuating the deficit mindset, Yosso (2005) began with the premise that minority communities possess cultural wealth. In her study, she identified six types of community cultural wealth:

- aspirational capital—high aspirations possessed by community members for a child’s future
• linguistic capital—“the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style” (p. 78)
• familial capital—extended family network, including immediate family, extended family, and close friends
• social capital—“networks of people and community resources” (p. 79)
• navigational capital—the ability, with help of the social and familial network, to negotiate unfamiliar institutions
• resistant capital—“oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” (p. 80)

In Chapters 6 and 7, I adapt Yosso’s (2005) conception of community cultural wealth to map how students in this study benefited from a number of resources or sponsors that helped them overcome some of the structural barriers threatening their success. Throughout the case studies in these chapters, there are figures illustrating how the students constructed networks of capital by drawing on community cultural wealth and external sources of capital in overcoming challenges they faced. In readapting Yosso’s (2005) model, I pay attention to challenges that the study participants faced in making successful transitions to college, understanding that it is possible to account for these while avoiding the “deficit” mindset that Yosso (2005) criticized. Paying attention to these challenges is important, because increasing others’ awareness about them and social problems surrounding them can put researchers in a better position to advocate for societal changes. The figures presented leave out resistant capital, since this was not a common theme among the participants in this study. In general, participants felt it was their responsibility to conform to the educational institutions they inhabited and thus generally did not resist any practices or decisions that bothered them, with the exception of a few students who might have been seen as resistant in disengaging from school. In the figures, references to
linguistic capital focus more on English as opposed to multilingual literacies because this is the form of capital that is valued in the context of U.S. educational systems. As a result, because of the way they are treated by teachers, students’ multilingual literacies continue to be more of a deficit than an asset.

Methodology

Community Context

The study was conducted in a major metropolitan area on the U.S./Mexico border, El Paso, Texas. On the U.S. side, there is the city where this research was conducted, which is home to approximately 700,000 citizens. The partner city, Ciudad Juárez, is right across the border in Mexico and home to around 1.3 million people. The two cities have been closely connected throughout history, as citizens from both have regularly crossed the border to work, shop, seek educational opportunities, and enjoy the nightlife. This exchange of people has been increasingly limited over the past several years due to the construction of the U.S.-Mexico border wall right through El Paso’s metropolitan area, an action that was criticized by leaders on both sides of the border. Besides the increased militarization of the border, Ciudad Juárez has been greatly afflicted by the drug-related border violence that has risen rapidly over the last several years. As a result, most people from El Paso have stopped crossing regularly unless necessary to visit family or attend to business. On the other hand, people who live in Ciudad Juárez, including one student in this study, regularly cross into El Paso.

About 82% of El Paso is Latina/o and 61% of the businesses are Latina/o-owned, which are well above the national averages. However, the median household income is $35,637 and almost a quarter of all families are below poverty level (EPCC, 2009). 18.4% of El Paso citizens have less than a 9th grade education, a rate three times higher than the national average of 6.4%.
About 25% of citizens have some sort of degree from higher education (an associates, bachelor’s, or graduate), which again, is below the national average of 35%. In response to these low education levels, EPCC and UTEP have worked hard to serve the local community and foster educational attainment.

El Paso has a unique linguistic situation compared to non-border U.S. cities of similar size, and most inhabitants are bilingual to some extent, some Spanish dominant and some English dominant. Knowledge of both Spanish and English is commonly expected of job applicants where people work directly with customers or clients, such as in banking, law, and more service-oriented jobs. While the majority of homes are Spanish dominant, English, Spanish, and Spanglish are commonly heard in public spaces. Nonetheless, as will be discussed more below and in Chapter 4, the educational institutions are overwhelmingly monolingual spaces when it comes to content-area instruction.

**Academic Contexts**

The first part of this study was conducted at Samson High School (SHS), which was an overwhelmingly Latina/o, low-income school with about 1,300 students, including a high percentage of LEP students (see Table 3.1). In classes, students generally used Spanish to communicate with each other when they work in groups; however, as was common at this particular school, they would often switch between English and Spanish during their conversations. Teachers used English for the vast majority of instruction, only sometimes saying words in Spanish to help or connect with students. Their English teacher I primarily worked with and who taught all the mainstream senior English classes did not know any Spanish beyond a few basic words.
Table 3.1

Characteristics of Samson High School (citation omitted for anonymity)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Characteristics</th>
<th>% of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minority (overwhelmingly Latina/o)</td>
<td>99.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>93.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited English Proficiency</td>
<td>38.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At-risk(^5)</td>
<td>80.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Samson had felt extreme pressure due to state and national mandated testing, which came in the form of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), a test that every student needed to pass in order to graduate.\(^6\) Because Samson had a high number of LEP students, they faced a particularly acute challenge in preparing students to pass since the instructions and problems for the test were all in English.

\(^5\) In 1988, the Texas legislature created an official definition for at risk students, which was defined as a student meeting one or more of the following conditions: “the student had been retained one or more times in Grades 1-6 based on academic achievement and remained unable to master the Essential Elements at the current grade level; the student was two or more years below grade level in reading or mathematics; the student had failed at least two courses in one or more semesters and was not expected to graduate within four years of entering ninth grade; the student had failed one or more of the reading, writing, or mathematics sections of the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS), beginning with the seventh grade” (TEA, 2006, p. 102). Interestingly, in the report from which this information was taken, the authors repeatedly grouped “at risk” with “immigrant,” “limited English proficiency,” and “migrant” when referring to “other student characteristics” (e.g., p. 50)

\(^6\) The TAKS was the assessment used by Texas from 2003-2011. It was recently phased out and has been replaced for the 2011-2012 school year by the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR). The new test requires students to write two essays rather than one (TEA, 2011), so it may lead to better writing instruction as long as those two essays are from different genres.
UTEP, where four of the students from this study began college, was a publically funded institution with just over 21,000 students as of Fall 2009 (UTEP, 2010). Just over 17,000 are undergraduate and 3,500 are graduate students, with the latter number increasing as the university strived to be a top research university. UTEP drew mainly local students, with 83% of the student body coming from El Paso county. An additional 8% of students were from Mexico, with these students primarily coming from Ciudad Juárez, just across the border. UTEP was overwhelmingly Latina/o, with 76% of students identifying as Hispanic and an additional 6.7% as Mexican nationals. Given that UTEP drew students largely from the local area, it is unsurprising that 40% of the students were enrolled part time as they maintained full or part time jobs while attending school. Also, the average age of undergraduates was 23. For the 2010-2011 school year, tuition and fees at UTEP were about three times that of El Paso Community College (EPCC), at $2643.56 for 12 credit hours (UTEP, 2010b).

EPCC, where three students from this study began college, served approximately 25,000 students on five different campuses. None of the students in this study attended Valle Verde, which is by far the largest campus, with over 15,000 credit-enrolled students. All students attended the Rio Grande campus, which had about 4,500 credit-enrolled students. The differences between the sizes of the two campuses was very apparent, and resources such as the library at the Valle Verde campus were much more developed than at the Rio Grande campus. While students were free to use the resources from the different campuses, the study students rarely visited Valle Verde. Overall, EPCC’s credit student enrollment was over 85% Latina/o, which was a slightly higher percentage than the university’s Latina/o population. While breakdowns for individual campuses were not found, there appeared to be differences between them that were learned through faculty interviews. For instance, the Rio Grande campus served
many students from the downtown neighborhood, which was overwhelmingly Latina/o and low income. It was also the feeder area for Samson, which is why the majority of this study’s students went to Rio Grande. Due to its size and placement, Valle Verde drew a wider diversity of students. The tuition and fees at the college were much lower than at the university, at $834 for 12 credit hours in 2010 (EPCC, 2010b).

**Participant Selection**

As mentioned above, I spent two semesters volunteering at Samson before collecting any data for this study. This time was focused on learning about the school, finding a teacher sponsor for my study, and meeting potential participants. I spent the Fall 2009 semester volunteering twice a week in senior English classes that were home to this study’s students. The senior English teacher, Mr. Robertson, taught all of the senior mainstream English classes, and had over 150 students. He agreed to participate in my study, with a promise from me that I would be helping out in his English class for a year.

I waited until the end of my first semester in Mr. Robertson’s English classes to announce my project and invite participants to join my study. While utilizing Mr. Robertson’s suggestions and my own relationships with students to create a list of potential participants, I also announced the project to all the classes, inviting all students to participate in the study, explaining that I was looking for students with definite plans to attend college in town immediately after high school graduation. Following these requests for participants, 14 students submitted consent forms, which was a higher number than anticipated. This group was quickly narrowed down to ten as students missed initial interviews and one indicated she planned to enter the army after high
Letters from the principal, which I drafted, and IRB-approved consent forms, all written bilingually in English and Spanish, were sent home with all students in the four classes home to the study’s primary students.

As will be detailed in the next chapter, all but one of the focal students in this study indicated that Spanish was their first language. Some had attended the U.S. education system all their lives while others entered at various points in middle school or at the beginning of high school. Some were in the top 10% of their senior class, while others were in the bottom half. Despite the disparity in previous academic achievement, for reasons such as previous periods of truancy, all were generally regarded as some of the harder working students by their high school English teacher. See Table 3.2 for an overview of the participants, including their time in the U.S., family status, and various academic data. Note that at the beginning of the study, they were all 17 or 18 years old.

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7 It further dropped to seven as two students did not start college and one dropped out of the study soon after beginning college at EPCC.
8 To protect the privacy of student records, academic data were self-reported by the students.
Table 3.2
Overview of Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Years in U.S. (start of study)</th>
<th>Family status</th>
<th>HS Senior English</th>
<th>HS GPA</th>
<th>FYC 1</th>
<th>FYC 2</th>
<th>College GPA 1st/2nd semester</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bianca</td>
<td>Whole life</td>
<td>Guardian of 3 siblings, lives in U.S.</td>
<td>B-</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>2.57/not reported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolina</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Lived with mother and siblings in U.S.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A+</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>3.42/3.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Whole life</td>
<td>Lived with grandmother in U.S., parents separated</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B-</td>
<td>B (dev.)</td>
<td>dropped</td>
<td>0.0/0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanne</td>
<td>Whole life</td>
<td>Lived with cousin in U.S., then with parents in Mexico</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Not</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0.0/0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>reported writing writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>class class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauricio</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Lived with parents in Mexico</td>
<td>A+</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>3.0/4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paola</td>
<td>11 (always attended school in U.S.)</td>
<td>Lived with parents, later with b/f in Mexico</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Not</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>dropped</td>
<td>4.0/0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>reported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yesenia</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Lived in U.S. with mother and siblings</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B+</td>
<td>B (dev.)</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>2.66/2.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection

Interviews.

The primary and most important source of data came from interviews with the student participants in this study, which were held three times a semester. These interviews were semi-structured, guided by six questionnaires (see Appendices B-H for interview guides). Before each interview, previous interview transcripts were reviewed in order to modify questions or, if necessary, formulate follow up questions.

Student interviews provided the most personal view into the students’ lives and helped examine how they view their development and how they reacted to the numerous contextual factors influencing their progress as writers. The personal contact afforded by these interviews gave me an opportunity to build trust with participants, which was essential in order to obtain meaningful, honest, and helpful responses from them. With this trust, however, comes a great responsibility in not betraying participant trust by the way I write about them. For instance, Sternglass (1997) explained that Traub’s (1994) denigrating depiction of one of her and Traub’s participants, Joan, led Joan into a deep depression and taught her not to trust another researcher in the future. Writing from a feminist perspective, Appleman (2003) has questioned the way researchers have represented adolescent learners, especially when a White researcher is depicting minority students. She wrote that “constructing images of ‘the other’ can be a dangerous enterprise, animating cultural misunderstandings [and] completely misapprehending the subject due to racial ignorance” (p. 81). While one way of addressing this issue is becoming co-authors with participants, having them read and critique what is written about them, I chose a more conservative path. In the data analysis and in the writing of this dissertation, I always privileged student voices before institutional voices. While arguing that student success is a mutual
responsibility in Chapter 8, this discussion focuses on how institutions and teachers have failed to fully serve diverse student populations and what they can do to better serve them.

In addition to student interviews, interviews were conducted with the participants’ writing teachers and, at the college level, a few other relevant teachers and administrators. During high school, I interviewed Mr. Robertson as well as most of the English teachers at the school. At the college level, I interviewed the students’ writing instructors, or in the case that the student did not have a writing instructor, an instructor from a class where they were likely to do more writing such as a first-year seminar. Teacher interviews focused on pedagogical practices, types of assignments, hindrances to providing good writing instruction, use of technology, and opinions of the participant student in their class. All were guided by the questions in the interview guides listed in Appendices I and J. Other interviews at the college level were conducted with the head of a scholarship program one student was involved in, history professors, and administrators who had developed the University College to facilitate students’ first year experience. Interview guides for these are found in Appendices K-M.

**Observations.**

Another important source of data came from classroom observations. As mentioned in the action research section earlier in this chapter, I took a more active role in the classroom, helping students in the classes (all students, not just study participants), occasionally teaching a lesson, and teaching much of the final essay project on *Lord of the Flies*. For the Spring 2010 semester, I attended classes twice a week, alternating classes each week due to the block scheduling used at the school. Because of the nature of action research, observation notes were taken during down times in class or between classes, which led to fewer notes than normally would have been taken. However, as pointed out in the action research section, this active stance
had a number of benefits, one of which was better understanding the challenges high school teachers face in teaching.

At the college level, I took a traditional researcher stance in the classroom because of my familiarity with the perspective of a college instructor. The college level stage focused on observing participants’ writing classes and, in the case that they did not have a writing class, a related class where they did writing such as their first-year seminar. I observed three classes for each student each semester, and interviewed the teachers of these classes. These observations focused on what the teacher and my focal students said or did during the classes since the other students in the classes were not involved in this study.

**Writing samples and classroom materials.**

Writing samples were collected from students as they were willing to share them. With permission, copies were made of their senior English portfolios; however, some students had full portfolios while others had barely anything in them, preferring to keep work at home because of concerns that other students would take their work. Copies were also made of at least two major senior year assignments for their English class.

At the college level, some students actively came to me for feedback, emailing essays from not only their English classes but also their history class. This helped me collect more writing samples than initially expected from these students. In other cases, where students did not send me writing for feedback, at least one sample a semester was collected from students or their teachers, usually more.

**Class documentation.**

Because of our close relationship, the high school teacher shared much of his teaching materials and lesson plans from the semester that this study focused on as well as previous
For the college level English classes, I collected syllabi, and when students or teachers shared them, individual assignment prompts for essays. Since the UTEP FYC curriculum was standardized, information about the assignment prompts were taken from the program guide, the *UTEP Guide to First-Year Composition*. In addition to having FYC class assignments, a few UTEP students shared their history assignments as well (the EPCC students did not write in history classes).

In addition to class-related documentation, I collected materials such as school newspapers, announcements distributed in class, and other items that were relevant in better understanding the study sites.

**Data Analysis**

As is typical for longitudinal studies like this one, data were analyzed recursively throughout the collection process. Data were triangulated, with student and teacher interview data being compared with observational data. All interviews were transcribed, read multiple times, and coded as the study progressed. Codes were developed inductively from the data, and separate sets of codes were developed for the instructor and the student participants. Student codes identified attitudes towards teachers, fellow students, challenges and sources of support, reading and writing assignments, among other items. Teacher codes identified themes such as philosophies about teaching, types of assignments given, and attitudes towards multilingual students as well as students in this study. Analytical notes were taken during the coding process to help develop the case studies. Interview questions were added and refined based on these analyses. The theoretical frameworks discussed earlier in this chapter provided guidance for this analysis as well. I began to write the case studies while collecting data, and constantly revisited

72
previous data, incoming data, and the case studies, refining them through and beyond the data collection process.

One theme that emerged early from these analyses included the focus on testing at the high school level and its effect on writing instruction and in fact, every aspect of the school teaching and learning environment. As students progressed to college, it became clear that external factors, ranging from pregnancy to difficulties accessing technology or going to class, played an important role in how well they did in their college courses.
Chapter 4: Institutional Literacy Environments and Student Choices

While I was working and researching in the three different institutional contexts of this study, it became readily apparent that the experiences of students varied widely between them. In this chapter, I explore these differences and their causes, discussing how standardized testing at the high school level, resource disparities at the postsecondary level, and other factors actively shaped students’ literacy experiences as they transitioned from high school to college, helping construct a hierarchy of readiness for college and beyond.

The institutional case studies presented in this chapter and the individual case studies in Chapters 6 and 7 makes it evident that this study focused more intently on English and composition classrooms rather than writing across the curriculum (WAC). While WAC discussions are present throughout these chapters, the discussion focuses on English/composition classes largely because students consistently did the most writing in these classes.

Samson High School

Samson High School is very familiar with negative impacts from outside political forces. In the early 1990s, as the U.S.-Mexico border was increasingly militarized, the border patrol began to harass students and faculty members. According to court records, the border patrol had a “regular, consistent, and prominent presence” on and around campus (citation omitted for anonymity). The football coach testified being held at gunpoint, and students reported being subjected to unauthorized searches and forced to show evidence of citizenship.

Due to a successful legal challenge, Samson overcame the negative and intrusive presence of the border patrol on and around campus. However, with increased focus on standardized assessment at both the state and national levels, the school has had a new external challenge to contend with. In recent years, Samson has been increasingly stigmatized and in
danger of being shut down because of low test scores. Figure 4.1 is a document distributed by the principal to students when he visited their classes with a speech exhorting them to do well on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). As Figure 4.1 depicts, the school had its first year of low performance in the 1997-1998 school year and gradually progressed through stages of reform, reaching stage 5, year 1 in the 2008-2009 school year.

Figure 4.1. AYP status by year at Samson High School

According to the “Title I School Improvement: Stage 5” Document published by the Texas Education Association (n.d.), a stage 5 school is defined as “A Title I, Part A campus identified for Stage 4 School Improvement in the previous school year that subsequently misses AYP [Adequate Yearly Progress] for the same indicator for the sixth consecutive year.” Essentially, this means that a school has not had enough students passing the state-mandated test for six consecutive years. A school at this stage is required to restructure, a process that “requires major changes in a campus’ operation. The Local Education Agency (LEA) oversees
the implementation of the campus’ restructuring plan for alternative governance that was developed during Stage 4. The LEA [Local Education Agency] must continue it’s [sic] increased oversight and responsibility of the campus’ reform efforts.” The requirement for “Alternative governance” can be met in a number of ways: (1) reopening the school as a charter school, (2) replace most or all of the school staff responsible for not meeting AYP, (3) bring in a private management company to run the school, (4) turn over operations to the state educational agency, or (5) “Any other major restructuring of school governance arrangement that makes fundamental reforms.”

As discussed in Chapter 2, it is humiliating for teachers, students, and parents to have their school labeled as “failing” and demoralizing to think that it will be shut down. To maintain control over the school and ensure that teachers keep their jobs, the biggest priority within Samson was ensuring that students pass the TAKS. As a result, test preparation completely dominated the school’s culture and consequently any literacy instruction that occurred in mainstream classrooms.

Culture of Testing

“Testing has changed. Now it's testing on a statewide basis. It used to be testing on units and certain fundamentals on those units. Now it's become testing on a benchmark basis and a statewide basis and TAKS is a key word here. TAKS, TAKS, TAKS and more TAKS. We live and die by the TAKS.”

–Mr. Sanchez, sophomore English teacher

“We don't use books. We use TAKS tests. So from August until March we do these packets.”

–Ms. Padilla, junior English teacher

“This is a TAKS academy; it's not a high school.”

–Mr. Robertson, senior English teacher

9 I have only used [sic] in the context of secondary sources such as this one in order to respect student and other voices contained within this dissertation.
As the comments listed above indicate, preparing for standardized tests occupied most of the teachers’ time from freshman through junior year at Samson, with junior year being the benchmark testing year, the year in which students take the exit level exam. Test preparation materials were found everywhere in the school, occupying most of the bookshelves in classrooms to being stacked up in teacher lounges. When I was working with an ESL teacher for the Spring 2009 semester, most class days were devoted to test preparation exercises such as multiple choice sentence correction, activities that were repetitive and uninteresting for both the teacher and the students.

Because instruction focused so intently on TAKS preparation, one understands the typical literacy tasks used in Samson classrooms by understanding the structure of the TAKS. The English section of the test began with a few short readings, which totaled about seven pages. These were followed by a visual one-page text. Then students would be asked to answer multiple choice comprehension questions on the two stories, with a few questions asking them to consider both stories together in responding. After that, they answered three short answer questions, with two focusing on the readings separately and one asking students to consider them together. Finally, this was followed by an essay with a prompt that built off of a theme in the stories. The essay was followed by a revising and editing section, which asks students to correct the errors by selecting multiple-choice responses to questions (see Appendix N for sample pages from the test).

The reading students typically did in their classes were short narrative pieces, such as “My Father Sits in the Dark” by Jerome Weidman and “Going to America” by Nicholas Gage, both found in an April 2006 TAKS packet. The short answer questions required students to use
analytical skills and support their analyses with evidence from the texts, with the questions in one test packet asking the following:

1. What does darkness symbolize in “My Father Sits in the Dark”? Explain your answer and support it with evidence from the selection.

2. In “Going to America,” what is one way Nicholas is affected by moving to America? Support your answer with evidence from the selection.

3. What do the narrators learn about their fathers in “My Father Sits in the Dark” and “Going to America”? Explain your answer and support it with evidence from both selections.

In contrast to the expository type writing encouraged by the short answer questions, the essay encouraged more of a narrative, with the essay prompt on this particular test reading, “Write an essay explaining how a person can feel connected to a special place.” An essay prompt in another packet read, “Write an essay explaining the value of the small, everyday elements of life.” As Beck and Jeffery (2007) demonstrated, there existed a disconnect in Texas between prompts asking for an explanatory genre and benchmark papers consistently providing on narrative examples. This disagreement on the genre expected in the essay requirement of the TAKS existed among the nine teachers interviewed at Samson.

Ms. Carrera, who typically taught junior level students, recalled being told when she came to the high school a few years previously that she needed to focus almost exclusively on the narrative essay. Another junior teacher, Ms. Padilla, similarly felt pressure to teach the personal narrative, despite the repetitive nature of this type of writing: “Until TAKS is over it's personal narratives cause that's what they test. We do narratives until they can do them in their sleep and all the elements are in their mind.” In discussing this focus on the narrative, Ms.
Padilla lamented the fact that they would help produce a “whole generation of crappy writers” because they would not know the other types of writing out there.

However, other teachers felt that the TAKS allowed for other types of writing, and that it was the teachers’ fault for not teaching them. For instance, the sophomore year teacher Ms. Morgan, who often worked with ESL students, said she taught the narrative essay because that was the easiest type of essay for students to write. Over the course of the year, she brought students up to a passing score, a two, and expected junior level teachers to take them beyond this level by teaching a different type of writing. During the interview, she commented, “The junior teacher should not be doing narratives. The junior teacher should be doing expositories.”

Another teacher, Mr. Cordero, who taught senior-level AP and dual credit classes and thus did not share the testing pressures of other teachers, argued that the TAKS did allow for the expository mode, and recalled a conflict he had with another teacher at the school over what mode he could teach:

I did have an occasion the first year that I was here to speak to someone who was well respected, who confronted me, confronted a student first, in my class in front of the students. Telling the student that what he had written was an analysis. It was very objective because that's the kind of student, this person is. He's not someone who's going to write a personal narrative. He just doesn't do things like that. His paper, it was two pages but it was very convoluted, it was very complex. It was a well-done paper on a particular topic. This well respected individual confronted the student and told him it's a zero, it doesn't address the topic, it's not a personal narrative. It must be a personal
narrative, you must have dialogue and it must be all these things…The student went on to write a three that year.¹⁰

Despite the debate over whether or not one could write an expository essay for the TAKS, the focus on narrative writing dominated the school, as students in the study recalled writing this type of essay throughout their time at Samson. The potentially more valuable type of writing for future academic endeavors, expository, was limited to short answer questions. As a result, students would generally do expository writing in two to three sentence increments and were not required to develop a more complex and sustained piece of this type of writing.

Multiple teachers mentioned that the state had set certain curriculum standards, but that the TAKS test did not align with these standards. For instance, the English III curriculum expected students to read various literary, persuasive, and procedural texts (TEA, 2008). Similarly, students were expected to do different types of writing. The standards specified that students do at least two types of literary writing such as a narrative or a poem. Additionally, students should also write expository and procedural texts such as an analytical or interpretative essay, along with a persuasive text designed “to influence the attitudes or actions of a specific audience on specific issues” (TEA, 2008, section 110.31, para. b.16). In some ways, the TAKS assessment goals were coordinated with the curriculum standards, with Objective 4 of the TAKS goals stating that “The student will, within a given context, produce an effective composition for a specific purpose…The student writes in a variety of forms, including business, personal, literary, and persuasive texts, for various audiences and purposes” (TEA, 2004, p. 45). However, this objective was only in name, as the test did not require these different types of writing. A

¹⁰TAKS essays were rated holistically on a five-point scale, with three being passing. Fives were received by only a few students in the district.
sophomore level teacher, Ms. Ortega, described the lack of alignment between the test and the curriculum:

the focus is on TAKS…No one asks us for our lesson plans or asks us what we're doing to meet curriculum requirements. Because the curriculum is aligned to college writing. But no one is asking us to be accountable or responsible for that curriculum. But I know the curriculum. I am a curriculum writer and I know that by certain dates we should have done certain things and taught certain writing strategies. Not just writing strategies, but writing modes. And reading different genres. But I know that as a department, collectively, that we’re not doing that.

As Ms. Ortega indicated, there is some understanding of the expectations of college-level writing at the state level, but the goals set by the curriculum are negated by the design of the TAKS and the pressures associated with passing this test.

**AP Classes: Oases of Freedom**

“With my regular English that's all we focus on, on the actual strategies for the TAKS, the writing. Everything they're gonna see on the test. On the other hand, with my AP students I'm preparing them for that AP exam and most kids that are in my AP class, most of them were commended and have very high scores. So I never, I didn’t really focus on the test. We do practice a little of course just to refresh them right before but basically I'm following an AP syllabus. So it's very different. We focus a lot on rhetorical devices, strategies, all of the rhetorical terms they're going to see on the test and we focus on the writing. Which is a literary analysis, it's an argumentative essay, the persuasive essay, and a synthesis.”

– Ms. Carrera, junior level teacher

As Ms. Carrera’s comment above indicates, not all English classes at Samson were created equal. While students in the mainstream classes through junior year focused mainly on test preparation, students in pre-AP and AP classes had much more freedom. Students in these
classes were not considered at risk for passing the TAKS, so outside of a few review sessions, they were able to enjoy a much greater variety of literacy experiences.

Most students in this study reported never reading a complete novel while at Samson, and the comments of teachers like Ms. Carrera and Ms. Padilla revealed why. During interviews, they discussed how they were required by the state curriculum to teach Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* in their non-AP courses, but were not able to finish the book because of testing pressures. Ms. Padilla explained,

we start out with *The Crucible*, we start out with the curriculum, while doing the TAKS packets with it so maybe Monday, Wednesday, Friday, we do *The Crucible*. Tuesday, Thursday we do TAKS packet stuff…Some of the teachers have gotten savvy enough to write questions and study guides that are stemmed from the TAKS packet so we've gotten away with that but come October, late October we need to be in full TAKS mode. They don't even want us reading that.

At first, it appeared teachers had some freedom to teach beyond the test, but after a month or two, they were required to drop whatever they are having students do to focus solely on TAKS preparation. This preparation continued until the test in March, after which they could teach what they wanted again. Given the pressure to teach the narrative and short analytical responses, this meant that students in mainstream classes were getting their instruction in other genres in a few months if at all.

On the other hand, AP classroom experiences differed greatly from the mainstream ones, and Ms. Carrera reported teaching her AP classes multiple novels a year in addition to having students read a lot of short stories and news articles. Ms. Ortega explained that AP classes at Samson stayed closer to the actual state curriculum, which was designed to prepare students for
college. As a result, AP students would write persuasive essays, analyses, syntheses, and other
types of writing that mainstream students would likely not experience until college. Ms. Ortega
explained that the AP exam expected students to do different types of writing tasks, including a
color or setting analysis in one year and a rhetorical analysis in another year.

Mr. Cordero, who exclusively taught senior dual credit and AP classes, explained that he
did not feel pressure by the administration to teach a certain way: “As far as the pressure that's
placed on me and the pressure I feel from administration, there's virtually none. I feel very
confident in what I do and the students I have.” This comment contrasted sharply with that of a
mainstream teacher like Ms. Padilla, who explained that she was repeatedly disciplined and told
to teach a certain way, even though it did not align with what she had learned in her teaching
certification program: “I came in with such passion and desire and energy and that was just
stomped out the first year. The next year you would try it again and it would be stomped out
again.”

Mr. Cordero was known by his students to push them hard, and students told stories of
having to write twenty-five page essays. Visits to his classes found his students regularly
researching and writing, and Mr. Cordero encouraged them to apply at and attend some of the
top colleges in the country. He saw himself as an “extreme exception” in El Paso by the way he
emphasized writing, saying that students he taught at EPCC were not prepared in the way he
prepared his students:

I also teach at the college and I've taught remedial classes at the college, a lot of the
students will fall into the traps of writing a personal narrative, which is what TAKS
generally requests or requires and a lot of teachers will teach but they don't teach them
any other form of writing. You know they don't teach them any sort of technical writing. They don't teach them research writing.

Unfortunately, for these other teachers that Mr. Cordero mentioned, they often had minimal or no opportunity to teach students different types of writing, as the few months a year that they had freedom to teach beyond the TAKS were not enough to develop students’ writing abilities in new areas.

**Senior Year: Free from the TAKS**

Outside of AP courses, the other context in which English teachers had relative freedom in teaching was senior year. This is the year I am most familiar with, having spent a year with Mr. Robertson in his classes, which included all of the mainstream senior English students. As will be detailed in the case studies in Chapters 5 and 6, students in Mr. Robertson’s English 4 classes wrote multiple essays and a personal statement in addition to completing shorter writing tasks.

The two major essays during the year of this study were on *Beowulf* and *Lord of the Flies*. Additionally, students read *Macbeth*, but did not have time to write an essay on it. Despite freedom from the TAKS, it was still a struggle to complete the readings in the class, and students were not able to finish *Lord of the Flies* or *Macbeth*. This resulted from a number of factors, including a culture of no homework and the lack of books for students to take home, even if attempts were made to assign homework. Besides these problems, there were constant interruptions to class schedules, which was problematic because the school followed a block schedule in which some classes had English only twice a week. These interruptions included visits from college recruiters, visits to the computer lab to work on applications and financial aid, absences for basketball games, and shortened schedules for pep rallies. While understanding the
importance of college-related activities, Mr. Robertson felt the interruptions were excessive and firsthand I witnessed how difficult it became to set teaching goals and meet them because of the unpredictable schedule. Because of unplanned interruptions, students were unable to finish *Lord of the Flies* nor had sufficient time to write an analytical essay. As a result, the three to four page essay we had students write after reading *Lord of the Flies*, the longest most students had ever written in high school, was not as strong as it could have been.

Outside of these major writing assignments, senior mainstream students did have a few in-class writing assignments that were reminiscent of the TAKS. These writing assignments were for the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS), an assessment mechanism used to test students out of the Limited English Proficiency (LEP) classification. Like the TAKS, they encouraged personal narratives, albeit more explicitly. For this assessment, most teachers, including Mr. Robertson, had all students write essays to avoid singling anyone out. Students responded to the following three prompts:

1. Write about a time you learned a powerful lesson about trust or loyalty, either because you were betrayed or supported.

2. Write about a time you made up your mind about something and swore to yourself it would never change, no matter what.

3. Write about a time you did a lot of thinking about doing something you knew was wrong, and then you did it, and then you wished you hadn’t. When were you “guilty?” During your thinking? Or only after you acted?

Interviewed students generally had no idea why they were writing these assignments, consistently reported learning nothing through completing them, and did not receive any feedback. It appeared that they were simply one of the many assessment hoops students were
required to complete while at Samson, hoops that were designed without real consideration of student learning.

**Developing Technological Literacy**¹¹

With a majority minority and low-income population, Samson had extensive access to federal and state grants supporting education. As a result, all the classrooms had Smartboards, most had projectors, and many students received netbooks as part of a special grant. Most of the interviewed teachers did not see the amount of technology as a problem, but questioned the ways it was distributed and used in the school.

Visible inequality existed in the way resources were distributed. For instance, Mr. Cordero, the senior dual credit and AP teacher, had laptops for all his students as well as multiple laser printers. He reported using these frequently, having students type and research on them:

> What I have the students do is a multitude of research. It's just that the research that they're going to do in this day and age is gonna be computer technology based. They're going to research the colleges and careers that they're interested in. They will research the different topics that they're interested in as whether it be automobiles or fashion or music. On average, each class will use the laptops no less than once a week.

In contrast, Mr. Robertson, the senior mainstream English teacher, had a class computer, Smartboard, and projector, but no permanent bank of laptops in his room. As a result, he had to schedule the computer lab in the library well in advance if he wanted students to work on the

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¹¹ My conception of technological literacy is based on Selfe’s (1999) definition, who defined it as “a complex set of socially and culturally situated values, practices, and skills involved in operating linguistically within the context of electronic environments, including reading, writing, and communicating” (p. 11). This definition includes the traditional definition of technological literacy, which refers generally to the ability to use computers. However, it also acknowledges that computer use is situated in a larger social context and that communication via technology involves much more than transferring traditional methods of effective communication to a technological setting.
computers. Since lab time was limited, the amount of computer-based research students could do was also limited so this time was generally devoted to typing. At one point, Mr. Robertson and I were able to secure a wheeled cart with about thirty laptops from a teacher who had left. However, we quickly found out that roughly half of them did not work, and the working half had relatively short-lived batteries, causing some groups to lose their work mid-task. Even more problematic was the way the computers were heavily restricted, as they were designed for computer-based tutoring. Students were able to use Microsoft Word, but when we had them email their work to an email account we created, we had to teach them a convoluted way for them to access the Internet on the computers, which was largely blocked.

Restrictions on access, whether by the campus filtering software or by the administration, stymied creative used of technology by the school English faculty. For instance, social media sites like YouTube and Google Images were blocked, which frustrated teachers like Ms. Padilla who taught a visual media course. During the interview, Ms. Padilla described how a visual analysis project went very wrong:

Our last project we had to come up with some sort of clip of something. They had the opportunity...it either had to be an illustration or photo or comic strip or like a clip of a film or a commercial, and they had to analyze it and interpret it and do all this stuff. Then, when they came in, the first time we did it, there was all those filter things and it was crazy.

Although Ms. Padilla quickly developed a workaround where students downloaded the videos on their flash drives at home or in other locations, she said it ended up being a disaster as the computer got a virus from all the file sharing.
Mr. Molina was one of the younger teachers at the school, and one of the “go to” people when it came to technology. He expressed frustration at sites like YouTube being restricted even for teachers. According to Mr. Molina, the many restrictions on the Internet at school served to limit teachers’ ability to teach and ultimately to connect with students, who spent much of their literate lives in this space: “the Internet is part of who these kids are and it's just, they've never been in an environment where it's not been available to them. The more we meet them on their ground the easier it's going to be.”

Mr. Molina clearly valued the rise of social networking, explaining that it gave students a new way to communicate that was an improvement on the didactic one-way communication of older technologies like movies. He argued that teachers should harness technologies like Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace as tools to support education, rather than actively blocking them from students. He attempted to put this belief in practice, creating an assignment in which students created MySpace profiles based on characters in the novel they were reading for class, *Animal Farm*. He described this experience in depth:

When we talked about *Animal Farm* I had them create *Animal Farm* characters within MySpace and they created MySpace pages for the characters. We commented on the story as it was going on, in character, throughout the book. And we had quotes that we said throughout if you had that character. They had music that that character would listen to, the reasons why they would listen to that type of music. How that music related to that personality. Pictures. I mean they just went all out. And they understood these characters on such a deeper level. And what I came to understand the more native it is, the more authentic it is to their environment and what the do everyday, the more they can
run with it and the more they can connect with different types of intelligences and creativity out there.

The administration took a different perspective from Mr. Molina, deeming the technology dangerous to students as it exposed them to peer-to-peer networking. They quickly shut down his MySpace learning environment.

Technological literacy within the school appeared to be connected with academic success, and more indirectly, financial well-being, as teachers consistently noted that AP students were more tech-savvy. For instance, Ms. Carrera noted that AP students were much more likely to have flash drives than non-AP students. Through surveying students, Ms. Ortega found that her AP students were much more likely to have computers at home, and that when she took students to the computer lab, she often felt she had to instruct her mainstream students on how to use the computers.

**L2 Writers and English Classes**

While scholars like Canagarajah (2006a, 2006b) and Horner and Trimbur (2001) have advocated for creating a multilingual space in the traditionally monolingual English writing classroom, the reality is that most classrooms remain overwhelmingly monolingual. Even in a multilingual city like El Paso, a strong English-only sentiment pervades education institutions, with the exception of a few two-way bilingual education programs. Spanglish is often seen negatively by those who speak it, and discouraged in any form of classroom writing.

At Samson high school, the English only belief was strongly shared by the vast majority of interviewed teachers, most of whom were multilingual speakers but reported avoiding Spanish as much as possible in their classrooms. For instance, Ms. Morgan, who reported knowing Spanish, English, and Italian, explained that she thought a monolingual teacher would be best for
the students. She discussed her rationale for this: “the problem with [Samson] is there's too much Spanish…kids are so comfortable speaking Spanish here. Here they don't view it as part of the U.S. It's part of Mexico. They don't need English to survive so there's not an urgency to learn English.” The infamously strict Mr. Sanchez shared a similar belief, advocating more of a sink or swim model in order to push students to learn:

    When I was a young kid, my primary language was Spanish and it was either sink or swim, I had to swim. Right here they're having to float for 10 years before anything goes down. Before any serious teaching goes on, they got them floating till 8th grade. Until they get up to high school, they're asking them to dog paddle. They really haven't taken a real swimming stroke until I guess sophomore year and then by that time it's only two more years and they graduate.

These teachers, most of those interviewed, avoided Spanish as much as possible, admitting that they would use it occasionally to provide a translation or a cognate to make classroom learning more efficient.

    On the other hand, a few teachers took a different attitude towards Spanish, but would not necessarily share their views with the wider high school community, for fears of being criticized. Ms. Padilla had an opinion piece titled “Spanish Part of a Student’s Voice” posted behind her desk, something she had written as part of her summer experience in the West Texas Writing Project, a victim of some of the more recent federal budget cuts. In this piece, Ms. Padilla noted how native Spanish speaking students have been shamed out of their language in U.S. classrooms in a push to teach them English, with the very personal result being that she did not begin learning any Spanish until college. Echoing the words of scholars like Canagarajah (2006a, 2006b) who recommend code switching, Ms. Padilla wrote, “Imagine the possibilities for our
bicultral children if they were able to weave a precise selection of words from Spanish into their writing.” In the interview, she reiterated some of these points, explaining how a word like *la migra* (border patrol) has very different (and in some ways, much richer) meanings in Spanish than English. When asked if she planned to implement her ideas in her classroom, she said that she was considering doing it later in the year, but that it would not go on any lesson plan because of likely backlash from other faculty members or administration. She recalled already catching some criticism for the attitudes expressed in her piece, saying that “people have told me that I'm sending mixed messages or this is English class, they need to learn English. There's that mainstream idea that, get them in, traumatize them, they internalize English and then they leave and they can do whatever they want later on…” Although an interviewed ESL teacher who later left the school, Mr. Dura, did not necessarily share Ms. Padilla’s “radical” views, he did find Spanish important, explaining that it helped him connect with the students, teachers, and especially parents, few of whom spoke any English.

**El Paso Community College**

As will be demonstrated in this section, students at EPCC generally engaged in very different types of writing than at Samson or UTEP. While much more traditional than the UTEP curriculum detailed in the following section, EPCC’s FYC curriculum had students writing well beyond the personal narratives that students did at Samson.

**First-Year Composition**

The FYC program at EPCC was a two-semester sequence, 1301 and 1302, with the first-semester class taking an EDNA-style (expository, descriptive, narrative, and analytical) modes-based approach and the second-semester course being a combination of research and literature. While not necessarily representative of every instructor’s view, the official 1301 syllabus
revealed a traditional writing pedagogy, mentioning the usage of “modes of expression for writing assignments,” understanding “Standard Written English in terms of grammatical sentence structure, spelling, punctuation, mechanics, and usage.” Students were expected to “Draft [at least 5 major] essays of approximately 700-1000 words that focus on a thesis statement, with introduction, multiple body paragraphs which develop the major points indicated in the organizational plan of each essay, and an appropriate conclusion.”

The EDNA modes dominated throughout the 1301 classes at the college, with all four writing teachers interviewed for this study referencing this model when mentioning their 1301 classes. For instance, Paola’s professor Dr. Thompson had taught at the college for 35 years and had received his Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition from Arizona State University in the early 1990s. He explained his adherence to the modes approach, albeit with clear ambivalence: “I generally take…a rhetorical mode approach to the class, I’m not sure it’s the best one, but when they write essays they tend to write classification, definition, comparison contrast, those kind of old chestnuts…” As Dr. Thompson explained, and this was echoed by others, his desire to innovate was limited by the amount of time. With a full-time teaching load at five courses a semester, which typically involved a minimum of three different class preparations, it is unsurprising that he described the papers as a “millstone” around his neck at times. While Dr. Thompson had the knowledge from his doctoral work and exposure to various composition journals, he simply did not have the time to implement new ideas unless he wanted to give up any semblance of a personal life.

A look at Dr. Thompson’s syllabus revealed a more specific implementation of the standard college syllabus, with four major essays, a personal narrative, definition, comparison/contrast, and cause/effect argumentative essay. Additionally, he would have
students complete an in-class mini essay responding to an art museum exhibit and a final in-class essay, as a final exam was required by the department. From my observations, it became clear that Dr. Thompson required his students to do a lot of freewriting, even more so than other teachers observed at the college. His syllabus described three types of freewriting, which were:

- **Type A**: responses to class readings: “In these freewritings you will give your opinion about some aspect of the reading, provide some personal experience or observation related to the reading, and include one quotation from the reading that connects to what you have to say.”

- **Type B**: based on essay topic: “These are exploratory in nature, without all the formal features of an essay. Such freewritings might occasionally evolve into the rough draft of the essay but are not the same as the rough draft (they’re more like the rough draft of the rough draft).”

- **Type C**: personal topic “of your choice.”

While other teachers did not necessarily use freewriting to the extent that Dr. Thompson did, those interviewed used it in various ways in their classes, especially to help students begin major writing assignments.

Typical textbooks for 1301 included a reader and the latest edition of Diana Hacker’s *A Writer’s Reference*. With another EPCC faculty member, Dr. Thompson authored a grammar book which was repeatedly mentioned by faculty members, and required on Dr. Thompson’s syllabus if a student demonstrated a the need for more grammar help on their first writing assignment.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, more community colleges are utilizing learning communities in order to build relations among students and to connect writing classes with disciplinary
content. A student who dropped out of this study was enrolled in a learning community course, which paired ENG 1301 with an introductory sociology course and was taught by Ms. Warner, who had master’s degrees in both creative writing and sociology. As evident by observations and Ms. Warner’s comments, it was a bit difficult at times to balance sociology and English. For instance, the observed classes were largely devoted to sociology while Ms. Warner said another observer complained that there was not enough sociology; however, this was her first time teaching the course and she felt she became better over the course of the semester, in part because she stopped having students keep separate notebooks, since the writing and sociology portions became relatively integrated.

While students in the learning community course tended to follow the modes taught in other courses, they were more fully integrated with sociology. For instance, on the process essay, Ms. Warner had students write about food while including concepts about family and culture that they learned in the sociology part of the class. The major essay of the semester, which counted towards the final grade in both classes, built on the process essay and had students research about the culture surrounding the food, with students encouraged to conduct some kind of primary research, such as an interview. Outside of these essays, Ms. Warner had students write daily in classes in their portfolio, responding to sociological discussions they had in class, such as stereotypes surrounding men and women. They were then required to expand and revise ten of these portfolio entries, each about a page each, in addition to completing the other five essays. Scholars like Beaufort (2007) and Wardle (2009) might argue that students in this learning community gained more valuable experience for future college writing then their counterparts in mainstream FYC classes because they were required to incorporate disciplinary knowledge into their essays, something that did not typically occur in FYC classes at EPCC or UTEP.
EPCC’s second semester FYC class, ENG 1302, focused half on writing a major research paper and half on analyzing and writing about literature. According to the course syllabus, some of the course objectives including expanding the knowledge learned in 1301, having students “Follow an objective, logical, step-by-step process of research but demonstrate enough flexibility to revise plans as new insights emerge,” and write one long or two shorter research papers. For the literary part of the class, students were expected to “use literary terminology,” “Demonstrate analytical insight and appreciation of two literary types (short stories, poetry, drama, or film),” and write at least two essays with an interpretive/analytical emphasis.

Instructors typically went with the longer version of the research paper, and according to one interviewed teacher, Ms. Flores, this was typically in the 8-10 page range. However, Ms. Flores had students write 15 pages, from which she caught some grief from colleagues. During one observed class, she detailed exactly what she expected of students for their notes, requiring them to have 45 pages of handwritten notes as well. Ms. Flores said 1302 one of the most dropped courses at EPCC, and attributed this to the difficulty of the research paper:

Everyone has to take 1302. Like you cannot graduate, you cannot go on to UTEP or wherever until you take 1302. So, so many people get overwhelmed. I mean, not just my class. This is across the board, you know, with the paper. Like they get overwhelmed that they can’t do it and they drop or they stop coming. But there’s -- it’s like Dante getting out of hell. I mean, they still have to do it at one point in their life or else they’re not going to finish.

In particular, Ms. Flores attributed students’ challenge with the research paper to the emphasis on testing in high school. As detailed in the Samson section, El Paso high schools often focus on the personal narrative, so students have little practice writing a research essay, something that Ms.
Flores recalled having a whole course on when she attended high school. Ms. Flores failed to note another problem in that writing at the high school level often focused on literary analysis, a practice that also did not prepare students to write research essays at college.

After the research essay, students at EPCC would spend the latter half of the semester reading and commenting on literature, ranging from poems to short stories, as the teachers usually did not have students read novels. Interviewed EPCC instructors generally valued and defended the literature portion. For instance, Ms. Flores said it was difficult to focus on research the whole semester, and that students are generally relieved to turn to literature after the drier research essay. A developmental writing instructor that one EPCC student had, Ms. Mariscal, explained that she would look at literature in a different way in college, so that it was not just re-teaching students what they learned in high school: “I tell them you have probably read these stories in high school already, but very superficially because that’s what was required of you, but now we’re gonna read them very analytically.” During the last 1302 class session I observed, Ms. Flores led her students in analyses of sonnets by Shakespeare, Steve Smith, and ee cummings. As a creative writer, it was clear that she took great pleasure from teaching students how to analyze and write about literature. In an interview, a developmental teacher at UTEP criticized this focus on literature, explaining how high school teachers and college instructors loved teaching literature and felt that they earned it. As a result, they would be reluctant to remove literature components from their class, even if they were limiting students from practicing research writing and other types of writing that would better prepare them for future college writing.
Developmental Writing\textsuperscript{12} 

Based on interviews and observations with two different teachers at EPCC, it was clear that the developmental courses were taught differently based on who was teaching them. As will be discussed in his Chapter 6 case study, Daniel was placed into 0309, which was the first developmental class, a paragraph-based writing class. According to the catalog description, this course “Provides intensive development in basic writing skills, including work in sentence structure, vocabulary, punctuation, and paragraph development.” Daniel’s teacher Ms. Mariscal described this as a paragraph-level writing course and explained that the course was based on the 1301 essay modes but focused more on learning the differences between the styles of writing than 1301 was. Ms. Mariscal valued this mode-based approach because, as she said, it is pretty much “standard written English” because “you’re either comparing or contrasting something, or cause and effect, or persuading…” In the semester I observed her class, Ms. Mariscal found that there were a number of stronger writers like Daniel, so she encouraged them to write longer compositions.

In contrast to Ms. Mariscal, Mr. Madison, who taught Daniel’s second-semester developmental course, seemed to emphasize much more the grammar component when teaching 0309, teaching students basic English grammar and preparing them for the department’s end of semester grammar quiz. While Ms. Mariscal did teach grammar to some extent, it appeared limited in comparison to the class Mr. Madison described. Regardless, grammar instruction was an integral part of the course, as students were required to complete a certain amount of hours on the PLATO software also used by Samson, and Ms. Mariscal had her class go to the computer lab once a week to complete this individualized instruction software.

\textsuperscript{12} Commonly referred to as Basic Writing (e.g., \textit{The Journal of Basic Writing}), Developmental Writing is the preferred term used in Texas.
The second semester developmental writing class aimed at bringing students up to writing short essays, requiring three in-class essays and three take home essays. In part because this was his first time teaching the course, Daniel’s spring teacher found these goals difficult. He compared the writing done by students in 0310 to high school level standardized test writing: “What I’ve noticed about this class is it’s basically, it’s almost like TAKS writing, except it’s not personal narrative… If I can get them to write paragraphs about one thing with some support…we’ve succeeded.” He initially planned to have students write topics based on readings in the course textbook, having them write an essay on food for instance; however, he found this was not working and soon moved to more extended short answer responses, showing them short videos or quotes and having them write about it. For instance, in one class, he projected a quote from Gandhi on the board, discussed it with the class, and then had students write in response to the following prompt: “According to Gandhi, why may you have to stand alone against the world?” Assignments like this appeared to be an improvement on TAKS writing because, as Mr. Madison noted, it required students to think more analytically and consider an external source, albeit in a limited sense.

**L2 Writers and First-Year Composition**

The instructors interviewed at EPCC generally seemed confident and trained in working with L2 writers. For instance, Dr. Thompson had almost completed a master’s in linguistics and spent 10 years teaching ESL in Mexico. Ms. Mariscal taught MA level courses for teachers in the bilingual program at UTEP. Both these teachers had decades of experiences working with El Paso’s multilingual student population. Even the less experienced Mr. Madison had reported taking linguistics classes during his undergraduate and graduate work and was actively learning Spanish.
In contrast with the generally more ambivalent or negative attitudes towards Spanish at Samson, instructors at EPCC generally saw value in knowing the language. Dr. Thompson felt his proficiency in Spanish supported him when reading students’ writing: “It helps me read their papers better because sometimes there are sentences that if I didn’t know that they were direct translating from the Spanish, and I couldn’t kind of reconstruct the original Spanish sentence, I honestly would not know what they’re trying to say.” Ms. Flores had lived abroad in Argentina for several years, improving her Spanish and teaching English at a university there. She said this experience helped her relate to her students, as she knew the difficulty of learning another language and living in a different country. She clearly saw students’ bilingual knowledge as an asset, saying “The fact that, you know, you can think and write in two languages, that’s a good, you know, instead of a negative thing, that that’s a positive thing. And, you know, if they can learn English as well as they know Spanish, you know, when you’re bilingual, that just opens up so many more doors.” The perspectives of these instructors differed substantially from most of the high school teachers’ perspectives in that they acknowledged the benefit of knowing multiple languages rather than adopting a purely deficit view of Spanish.

**EPCC Challenges: Time and Technology**

Whereas universities often depend on graduate student labor to teach many of their FYC courses, community colleges have the advantage of typically having instructors with MAs or Ph.Ds. Some of the instructors observed at EPCC were very experienced, having taught for 10 or more years, and this experience was evident in their teaching. They were very organized, provided excellent scaffolding for assignments, and developed some interesting and engaging activities for their students. This being said, FYC instruction at the college was limited in a few
major ways: an outdated curriculum, which has already been discussed, high teaching loads, and a lack of technology.

The most common limit that teachers at EPCC identified in interviews was time. For instance, Dr. Thompson knew that he could be more innovative in the ways he taught, and had a Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition to support him, but felt that his busy schedule left him no time to innovate. While the standard teaching load for full-time faculty at EPCC was five classes a semester, with typically three or more class preparations, it did not seem uncommon for instructors to have course loads of six or even seven. This contrasted sharply with UTEP, where full-time faculty or instructors taught three or four classes at the most, and graduate students would teach one or two classes a semester. Moreover, adjunct teachers like Mr. Madison, who taught different courses on different campuses including an online course at the University of Phoenix, had to spend time travelling around town and navigating different academic environments. Along with time, teachers frequently said that classes were too large, so when they had several sections of 1302 with 30 students each, that could mean 1500 or more pages of research papers to read.

Another challenge in the writing program at EPCC was access to technology. Only two of the six classes observed as part of this study were held in what the college called smart classrooms, which would have a projector and a computer for the instructor to use. Technology in most classrooms was limited to a chalkboard and overhead projector. Dr. Thompson pointed out the problem with the lack of technology in classrooms: “I think it adds an extra dimension because our students are, many of them, not all of them, cause many of our students are more impoverished, they do have their own computers and they play video games and they come to a class that’s totally old school.”
At EPCC, students were required to type essays and would use library computers to conduct online research, but overall the use of technology in classes was limited. In the sociology/English learning community course referenced earlier, the instructor would use the projection system to show movies. Mr. Madison would request a projection cart for every class, and connect his laptop to display sentences for students to correct or quotes in Microsoft Word. He also mentioned using YouTube videos occasionally for students to respond to, as it would take a while for them to read short stories in the developmental class.

All the instructors found value in integrating more technology in the writing classroom, and one noted that there was a faculty technology resource center on campus; however, they consistently said it was difficult because of time and class placement. When having to prep for several different classes in different types of classrooms (for instance, some were smart classrooms while others only had an overhead projector), it was difficult for instructors to begin thinking about integrating technology in their classes. While I did not observe such classes, instructors referred to a few colleagues who used technology in more innovative ways, and expressed a desire to learn more from them.

**Writing Across the Curriculum**

Students at EPCC were unlikely to engage in writing across the curriculum and, when they did, these assignments were generally fairly simple. None of the students reported doing much writing outside of their English and first-year seminars, with the exception of short answers on exams in government and psychology classes. Exams in students’ history courses were generally multiple choice and no research essays were required during the course.

One exception to limited writing outside FYC classes were the first-year seminars at EPCC, where students generally had a major writing assignment for the semester. Joanne had to
research and write a 10 page career portfolio, which her teacher described to me as a rather simplistic “cut-and-paste” affair. Nonetheless, Joanne was required to draw on a number of online and traditional sources to write this, and include an MLA or APA-style bibliography. In another seminar, Daniel wrote a two to three page career essay. Paola had quite a different assignment in which she was required to write three short opinion based essays; however, as discussed in her Chapter 6 case study, the assignment was problematic and she received minimal feedback on her writing.

While EPCC’s small class sizes (around 25-30 students across the disciplines compared to lecture classes of up to a few hundred students at UTEP) would at first glance seem more conducive to writing assignments, it is important to consider the community college context. As mentioned earlier, instructors at the college typically taught five or more classes a semester, and many had full time jobs in addition to their work at the college. They did not have graduate teaching assistants (TAs) to assist with grading. Nonetheless, it seems that one well-designed writing assignment per class would have helped provide students with more diverse and disciplinary-based writing experiences.

**The University of Texas at El Paso**

The literacy experiences of students at UTEP were very different from what they had done in high school, and also very different from what students were experiencing at EPCC. As will be discussed in this section, writing instruction at UTEP, especially in the FYC program, had been affected in part by strong graduate programs in rhetoric and composition and their associated faculty. Over a period of a few years before this study, the FYC program was radically redesigned, shifting from a traditional modes-based model to one that focused on
disciplinary concepts such as discourse communities and a much greater integration of technology in instruction.

**First-Year Composition**

Until a few years before this study, the FYC curriculum at UTEP had remained relatively unchanged for a few decades. In the first semester course, students wrote essays based on the EDNA model. Students generally began their college writing career by writing a personal narrative, which, for the students in this study, would have not been anything new given their focus on personal narratives in high school. Other essays in the course included an observational essay based on a location on campus or in the community, a rhetorical analysis, and some kind of argumentative essay. The second semester course focused on teaching the research essay, an essay in which students wrote from sources to argue a particular point. The program did have a book called the *UTEP Guide to First-Year Composition* which gave generic descriptions of assignments, a few exercises, and some information about researching. Within these courses, students were taught MLA style and readings would typically come from the textbooks.

Scholars have critiqued this traditional FYC curriculum in various ways, with some like Lynch, George and Cooper (1997) and Kroll (2005) questioning the simplistic one-sided nature of the expository arguments that the course led students to produce and Wardle (2009) labeling genres within this curriculum as “mutt genres” because of their lack of connection to a specific type of disciplinary discourse outside of FYC.

With the arrival of an ambitious new director and a $55,000 redesign grant from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the program underwent a broad transformation. The new director aligned the FYC curriculum with the recently revised Writing Program Administrator’s Outcomes statement, which described “the common knowledge, skills, and
attitudes sought by first-year composition programs in American postsecondary education” (WPA, 2008). Among other things, the statement recommended teaching students a more complex understanding of rhetorical situation and knowledge of discourse conventions of different types of genres and in different contexts. The program design was also influenced by Beaufort’s (2007) work on situated literacies, in which she critiqued traditional FYC classrooms for not creating a rhetorical context beyond the classroom. Here, Beaufort (2007) developed a theory of discourse communities, in which she placed knowledge about discourse communities as the overarching domain of knowledge supported by writing process, subject matter, rhetorical, and genre knowledge. Finally, another influential component of the WPA Outcomes Statement was its emphasis on composing in electronic environments, encouraging instructors to have students “Use electronic environments for drafting, reviewing, revising, editing, and sharing texts” and “Understand and exploit the differences in the rhetorical strategies and in the affordances available for both print and electronic composing processes and texts” (p. 3).

The influence of the Outcomes Statement and Beaufort’s (2007) work was evident in the revised UTEP Guide to First-Year Composition, which explained that the goals of the first semester course, ENG 1311, included asking students to “Understand a theory of discourse communities,” “Address the specific, immediate rhetorical situations of individual communicative acts,” and “Develop technological literacies as they pertain to researching and composting in the 21st century” (p. 143). ENG 1311 began by introducing students to the concept of discourse communities by having them create discourse community maps. The course took a community orientation, as students then wrote an agency discourse observation memo, a rhetorical/visual analysis paper, which often focused on analyzing a website, an annotated bibliography, and a community problem report. Towards the end of the semester,
students would compose opinion pieces and a multimedia project, which could be a video public service announcement, a brochure, or poster. An ongoing semester project was a personal website or blog where students would post their own work and interact with peers.

The second semester course, ENG 1312, was a hybrid course in which students had one face-to-face (F2F) day a week, with the other class day being conducted online. This decision was made in part to ensure that all FYC classes could be in computer classrooms, since technology was an integral part of the classes. 1312 aimed to deepen students’ researching skills while also expanding their rhetorical knowledge. As the assignments tended to be more complex, there were fewer major assignments than in 1311. For 1312, students began by writing a genre analysis in which they chose two texts, videos, pictures from different genres but on the same topic, and analyzed how the genres communicate in different ways. The next assignment was the largest assignment of the semester, a literature review and primary research report. For this assignment, students conducted both primary and secondary research to write a report that had some similarities to the IMRAD (introduction, methods, results, and discussion) genre common in scientific disciplines. In the latter part of the course, students composed extensively in digital environments, advocating policy change through a video documentary, an online opinion piece, and a website.

As evident by this discussion, the revised FYC curriculum was different in many ways from the previous one and the curriculum taught at EPCC. For instance, the only citation style taught in the program was APA, with the rationale that this style is more common across the disciplines and would better serve students as they transfer their knowledge to new writing tasks in college. The UTEP curriculum was also situated much more strongly in contemporary rhetoric and composition scholarship, which has focused in part on the importance of increasing
awareness of discourse communities and genre conventions in order to teach writing in a way that the knowledge is transferrable to other tasks and situations. Finally, it heeded the calls of scholars like Yancey (2004, 2009) and Selfe (1999) as well as the WPA Outcomes Statement (2008) by developing students technological literacies. As these scholars have pointed out, writing teachers risk becoming, in Yancey’s (2004) words, “anachronistic” if they fail to play an important role in developing students’ technological literacies.

**Developmental Writing**

One of the students in this study, Yesenia, began in a developmental writing course at UTEP. According to the instructor of that course, who was also the director of the program, the class had been recently redesigned so that it would better prepare students for literacy experiences in ENG 1311. For instance, students in the developmental course learned about discourse communities, wrote a memo on a discourse community along with constructing an application for a study abroad program, and wrote a review of a restaurant, movie, or other entertainment venue. Like the FYC classes, the developmental courses were held in computer classrooms, so that students would have ready access to computers for researching and writing. However, the semester Yesenia was in a developmental writing course, the program was piloting a McGraw Hill program called Connect Writing, which consisted mainly of online grammar exercises. As mentioned in the previous section, EPCC similarly required its developmental students to complete online exercises via another program, PLATO, which was also used by Samson.

**L2 Writers and First-Year Composition**

In general, instructors at UTEP seemed less prepared to work with L2 writers than their counterparts at EPCC. Many of the instructors were graduate students teaching for the first time,
and the full-time teaching staff did not have the level of Spanish knowledge found among the community college instructors interviewed and observed for this study. Teachers generally did not make systematic accommodations for the L2 writers in their classes, instead commonly referring them to the writing center or telling them to come to them for individual help, which students usually did not do. There were few exceptions to this, as Carolina’s instructor was a native Spanish speaker who worked with her individually, providing her with more resources to develop her English grammar. The next section will include more discussion on L2 writers in UTEP’s FYC program.

**UTEP Challenges: Standardized Assignments, Working with L2 Writers, and Inexperienced Instructors**

While the redesigned FYC curriculum is clearly an improvement over the traditional model, it did have limitations which will be addressed here before being qualified in the concluding comments to this section. In particular, it became apparent through observation and interviewing a small group of program instructors that it was limited in a few different ways: the amount of assignments, a standardized grading system in ENG 1312, and the impact of these issues on L2 writers. As detailed in the 1311 description above, there were eight major assignments in the redesigned curriculum. My observation of the 1311 classes found teachers spending a lot of class time introducing assignments and detailing their requirements, which naturally took away from other activities that instructors might like to have in the class. For instance, a long time instructor and teacher of 1311, Ms. Perry, expressed frustration with this during the interview, commenting, “I feel like I have just spent way too much time just giving instructions. And my feeling has always been that it’s a workshop oriented class, an interactive class.” Ms. Perry felt that constantly having to give instructions limited the amount of activities
she could do during class, which she had traditionally used to engage students and build a stronger classroom community. The 1312 class had fewer assignments, but even an experienced instructor felt the amount of assignments could take away from some traditional elements of the course: “Sometimes I think that the curriculum may be a little too assignment-heavy in terms of the major assignments. And where we could have some more time where we spent just on the art of writing kind of thing.” This focus on assignments was exacerbated in part because they were graded by an outside committee and had specific requirements that had to be taught in detail.

The focus on assignments was noted by a relatively new graduate TA, Ms. Forrest, who had been required to observe classes as part of her training. In the context of a discussion on why she decided to develop a writing-about-writing (WAW) approach in her classroom (see more on this below), Ms. Forrest explained she found that many instructors just taught the assignments. She explained the problem, saying, “I felt like, from a theoretical standpoint, if you’re just teaching the assignments, then writing comes off as having little utility in the real world. It only has utility in the classroom for these specific assignments you’re learning.” While an important program goal was to create authentic rhetorical situations for writing and have students write for an audience beyond the classroom by publishing work online, this goal was hindered by instructors failing to give fuller theoretical context for writing tasks. It is important to note that the 1311 curriculum had just been redesigned at this point and that in subsequent years the amount of required assignments were reduced as some were made optional or converted to in-class ones.

Scholars like Downs and Wardle (2007) have criticized the traditional FYC class because of its lack of connection to an academic discipline. While the development of the FYC curriculum at UTEP was informed by disciplinary knowledge, the intellectual complexity of the
course was limited. For instance, rhetorical knowledge was largely limited to discussions on
discourse communities, genre conventions, and ethos, pathos, and logos. Students generally did
not read primary sources on rhetorical and writing knowledge, but rather learned about these
concepts through diluted textbook discussions. Course themes such as peace studies and pop
culture were introduced by some teachers to ground the course in some area of knowledge, but
discussions on these topics risk repeating the superficial topical nature of traditional FYC
curricula.

In response to a workshop I conducted that discussed the implementation of a WAW
model (based on Ruecker, 2011b), a few graduate TAs, including the one quoted above, worked
to situate their courses within the discipline of rhetoric and composition. In Ms. Forrest’s class,
students read academic articles such as Sommers’ (1980) “Revision Strategies of Student Writers
and Experienced Adult Writers” when approaching peer review and an article by DeVoss and
Rosati (2002) on plagiarism. She introduced students to more complex rhetorical concepts such
as the Rogerian argument, making the point to students that recognizing identity as changeable
leaves space for all parties in a communicative act to change. Since students were being graded
by rubrics, Ms. Forrest had students read an article by Otoshi and Heffernan (2008), which
discussed a pedagogical strategy in which students constructed rubrics to evaluate class
presentations. Following this, she worked with students to construct a rubric for their
presentation assignment.

Of particular concern for this study was the impact that the amount of assignments and
distributed assessment had on L2 learners, which are the majority at UTEP. When asked how
she worked with L2 writers in her class, Ms. Perry again came back to her problem with the
assignments:
I feel like I used to be able to spend a lot more time on assignments and I knew what kind of issues a lot of them were working with and I could work with them. Whereas now I feel like, instructions, do it…I remember when they were going to switch over to this, and I don't remember who it was, someone said that they have to be able to perform at a university level, and if they can't, they can't and if they flunk they have to take it over. That's what I was told. But that's just not my philosophy that's just never been my personal philosophy so it makes it a little hard for me...

According to Ms. Perry, she used to have more time to identify common errors in student papers and develop class activities focused on improving them. She also suggested that not all involved in the redesign were overly conscious of students who would struggle more than others in the classes.

In 1312, L2 students faced a different challenge as the standardized grading system led some experienced instructors and graduate TAs to become disconnected from student writing, as they often did not read and comment on major assignments, since this was done by outside graders. While this feeling of disconnect stemmed in part from instructors making the choice not to read drafts, it limited their to identify and address patterns of errors in student writing, a common strategy recommended in improving L2 students’ writing (Ferris, 2008). In the grading system, students depended on feedback provided by anonymous graders for major assignments, graders that would not necessarily grade the same student multiple times throughout the semester. Thus, like the instructors, the graders would be less likely to identify reoccurring patterns of error in student writing.

While the focus on technology in FYC courses at UTEP provides students with a great advantage in the technologically driven 21st century, teacher interviews revealed a potential
technology-related issue for L2 students in particular. Most every assignment was submitted in an electronic version. However, multiple instructors felt that providing localized comments on electronic documents or postings, especially on grammatical issues, was a cumbersome process. As a result, they were more likely to give summative comments instead of the localized comments they used to provide when commenting on actual papers. Because of this, students in this study often did not receive the localized feedback they needed to improve their fluency in academic English.\(^\text{13}\)

Having raised these limitations regarding FYC at UTEP, it is important to note that the criticisms here were shared by a minority of program instructors and that the redesigned curriculum was a dramatic step in the right direction. Many of the faults discussed here were not solely programmatic issues, but shortcomings of instructors as well. For instance, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, the majority of FYC courses at UTEP, like many colleges and universities, were taught by graduate TAs and adjunct labor, instructors who were not only new to teaching but often had backgrounds in literature and creative writing instead of rhetoric and composition. Thus, while some felt comfortable situating their classes with a WAW model, others did not. While somewhat critical of rhetorical knowledge being somewhat superficially limited to concepts like ethos, pathos, and logos, many FYC instructors do not have the knowledge to teach more complex theories such as epistemic rhetoric. While some instructors felt disconnected from student writing with the new grading model, others valued being released

\(^\text{13}\) It should be acknowledged that there has been some controversy regarding the value of providing feedback to L2 writers. For instance, Frodesen and Holten (2003) wrote that “individualizing feedback on grammatical and lexical choices is by no means uncontroversial” (p. 146) and point to Truscott (1996) for starting a debate on this issue by arguing that “Grammar correction has no place in writing classes and should be abandoned” (p. 361). In contrast, Ferris (1995, 1997, 2003, 2008) has reported on the benefits of localized feedback, emphasizing the importance of ensuring that students read, respond, and revise in response to comments.
from the burden of grading and utilized the extra time to read student drafts for major assignments, thus being able to provide students with feedback from someone who is familiar with their writing while maintaining the benefit of a more objective grading system.

**Developing Technological Literacy**

As noted in the “First-Year Composition” section above, developing technological literacy was an important part of the FYC curriculum at UTEP. This was due largely in part to the initiative of the current director, but also to UTEP’s increased focus on creating technology enabled classrooms and support labs for students. Students in FYC classes at UTEP constantly had access to computers in their classrooms. My observations found them researching online, analyzing websites and YouTube videos in class, using classroom management tools like Blackboard and Web 2.0 tools like wikis, and designing their own blogs and websites. Students often used iMovie and MovieMaker to create documentaries and other types of videos in both classes.

This focus on technological literacy has immensely benefited from the resources available to students at UTEP, as universities like UTEP generally have more financial resources to purchase technology and the expertise to support it than their community college counterparts like EPCC (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). For instance, through a grant, the FYC director was able to purchase a few dozen Flip cameras for students to borrow. There were multiple computer labs with large screen iMacs and full time staff trained to work with students as they learned the essentials of composing websites and videos. These staff members also regularly gave workshops in classes, and, in one of Bianca’s observed classes, students were given an introduction to the features of MovieMaker and Photostory. For instructors new to using technology, the FYC program regularly provided workshops on topics such as using wikis to
enhance instruction, teaching the documentary, and facilitating collaboration online.

Additionally, there was a resource center and staff devoted to helping the university faculty learn technology and utilize it in their classrooms.

**Writing Across the Curriculum**

As will be revealed in more detail in the student case studies, students at UTEP wrote much more and had more complex assignments across the curriculum than their counterparts at EPCC. By far, students did the most writing outside FYC for their history classes, where they had to write multiple two to three page essays each semester in addition to having shorter response essays and written responses on exams. While the history courses tended to be large, with 100-200 students or more, the professors of these courses benefited from having graduate TAs who read, graded, and provided feedback on the students’ writing. Essays for history involved summarizing a text, comparing and contrasting accounts of historical events, and expository essays in which students developed a thesis and made an argument about a book they read or a reading in the textbook.

Interviews with two first year history professors helped reveal why writing was an important part of their classes. First, both felt that writing had an inherent value, with one commenting that it is “something that can be used in every other class that they take in college and in their careers” and the other explaining that “I think it forces them to kind of think -- I’m not sure if it’s working anymore, but the reason why I still like have them write essays and exams is because I want them to think broadly.” This value of writing was connected with the centrality of writing to the discipline of history, noted by the first professor quoted above: “as we get into history majors, upper division students, graduate students, writing is just essential to the way historians convey their research, so writing is key on all kinds of different levels.”
Writing was also common in the first-year seminars, titled University 101. For instance, one student had her first-year seminar paired with her history course, and was required to download and read history journal articles from the databases and write weekly responses. Final research papers were common in these classes as well, and they ranged from 7-10 pages, focused on a topic related to the course. For instance, Yesenia wrote a 10 page research paper on Mexican folklore and dance, and had to submit multiple drafts as well as a working bibliography in preparation for the final.

Within other courses such as sociology and art history, students typically did less writing, but regularly had essay exams and often an essay or two for the semester. Feedback provided in classes outside FYC was generally pretty limited, however. For the graded history essays students shared with me, they were evaluated via rubrics with very little written commentary on their writing.

Conclusion

As evident by the discussions in this chapter, students at Samson generally focused on a type of writing that was not present in their first year at college. Moreover, students at the community college and university were also asked to write in very different ways, with the students at UTEP generally doing much more writing overall, especially multimodal composition, as well as writing across the curriculum. The next chapter explores how the participants made decisions to attend college, decisions that led them to the very different literacy experiences detailed in this chapter.
Chapter 5: Making Decisions About College

As discussed in the beginning of Chapter 2, more and more linguistic minority students are attending U.S. colleges and universities. This is in large part to the drive of immigrants to enable their children to have a better life. As Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) have written, “Hope is at the heart of every immigrant. Possibilities for the future—especially for their children—appear obvious” (p. 87). Several students in this study reported their families making sacrifices for them to be educated in the U.S. In some cases, this was the primary reason for migrating to the U.S. and in others, such as Joanne’s, families separated so that their children could have better access to U.S. educational institutions.

Researchers like Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) and Perez (2008) have pointed out that with the decline of the well-paying manufacturing jobs and inexpensive agricultural lands previous immigrants took advantage of, education is the new form of entry into U.S. society. In fact, Apodaca (2008) has claimed that education is the single most important asset to “ensure personal and professional growth and to become a more productive member of the community” (p. 59). This chapter turns to the participants’ voices and examine how they made decisions related to college. It becomes evident that these students did not need to hear from these researchers to recognize the importance of attending college. The desire for a more successful future is strong among all the voices presented here, and it is clear they know education is the key to a better future.

Why College?

At the beginning of the study, students were surveyed for background information, and one of the most revealing and important questions asked participants why they wanted to attend college. While each response was unique, there were some unifying patterns among the different
responses: desire for a better life, achieving personal goals, and a feeling of obligation. Here are the original responses.  

Desire for a better life

• Yesenia: “I want to go to college because I want to have a good life.”
• Daniel: “I would go to college to get a degree in something so I can not have to worry about financial and other problems.”
• Mauricio: “Day to day life gets harder and harder, and the only way of having a little chance of succeeding its by having a college education.”
• Carolina: “I want to go to college because I know that that’s the only way I can have a better future.”

Desire for a better life + family

• Bianca: “well I want to attend collage because I want to be a successful person in life and I want to buy a house for my mother and little brothers...”
• Mercedes (did not complete study): “I would like a better future for my future family and I.”

Achieving personal goals

• Cecilia (did not complete study): “I want to go to college because I want to be a better person, more trained and skilled.”
• Andrea (did not complete study): “I would like to go to college because i want to do something with my life.”
• Joanne “to study what i want to be”

14 Note that I included responses from students who have since dropped out of the study or did not start college. While most student quotes in this study are from interviews, these were typed on a beginning of study survey and are presented in their original form.
Feeling of obligation

- Paola: “I am trying to figure out if I want college but I think I need it in order to survive but I don’t want to go I dislike this feeling of obligation.”

As mentioned earlier, most of the students, with the exception of Mauricio, came from families who sometimes struggled to make ends meet, whether this meant having enough food on the table or paying for medicine or medical care when a family member became ill. Expanding on her survey statement in an interview, Yesenia stated that she wanted a better life than her mom (who worked in Mexico but lived in the U.S.) had been able to provide: “I don’t want to live like my mom, like the day and day, I want to have good money, a good house, and a good car. And for that I need education and stuff.” Some might be critical of Yesenia’s materialistic rationale for pursuing a higher education, but it is an attitude that is prevalent among all types of college-going students. In a society where wealth and employment status are divided along lines of educational attainment, it is a very relevant reason for attending college. As Carolina astutely noted, a college degree is the most certain way to guarantee a better future for students like these who lived difficult lives in large part because none of their immediate family members had college degrees.

While not explicitly mentioned by the first several students listed, it is likely that these students share the same concern for family as the other students. Carolina was very close to her family throughout the study and Bianca, as will be discussed in her case study, had custody over her siblings so was always very conscious about providing for her family. As the first in her family to hopefully graduate from college, she wanted to give back to her family who supported her college goals but could only provide limited financial support. As will be seen below, her family situation played intimately into all her college-related decisions.
The second category listed above contains students who did not explicitly reference a better financial situation, but the desire to be a “better person,” to achieve personal career goals, and to do something valuable with their life. As will be discussed later, Joanne’s idea of what she wants to be was still unformulated by this time, and constantly changed throughout her first year at college. Andrea’s story, while unfinished, is particularly saddening. When explaining the above comment, she shared some details about her family:

My sister was gonna go to college but she didn’t. She had a baby to 16, 2 years before she graduated from high school. And she graduated and she was living with her boyfriend and they separated and now she went with her current boyfriend to Atlanta and she’s living over there, but she’s not going to college, she’s working. And then my mother never went, my dad didn’t went my, nobody from my family went.

Andrea kept repeating a desire to get out of town as quickly as possible, and had aspirations to go to UT-Austin and finally settled on another state college several hundred miles away. However, over the summer before college, she ended up becoming pregnant and became too overwhelmed with working out ways to provide for her future child to think about college. However, despite taking some time off school, she planned to return to college in a year or two.

Finally, Paola gave a different response from the other students, saying that she was going to college because she felt obligated to by society. As will be discussed in more depth later, Paola shifted her attitude dramatically over the course of the semester because of those around her preparing for college and, interestingly, became one of the study students most engaged in learning during her first semester at college.
In Town or Out of Town?

After deciding whether or not to go to college, students have to decide whether they are going to attend a local institution or conduct a more statewide or national search and application process. For the so-called traditional middle or upper class college student, staying in town is often not considered. College is considered a time to become independent by living away from family and old friends to explore oneself and plans for the future. However, for many of the students in this study, financing an out-of-town education was ultimately out of the question, and, for those better situated to leave town, leaving their families was simply too difficult.

For several of the students, like Mauricio and Andrea, UT-Austin was one of the major out of town options, being the state’s flagship university. Thanks to a law in which the top 10% of high school graduates have to be admitted to any school in the UT system, Mauricio and Carolina would not have had a problem getting admitted. Since she was not in the top 10%, Andrea initially planned to start locally, prove herself, and then transfer. Mauricio applied and was admitted to UT-Austin, but he ultimately decided to stay in town and attend UTEP with the rationale being his family: “My family. I'm really attached to them. It's not real good, right but I am attached to my parents and brothers and everything here. I think that leaving would make things way hard. Harder than it would be here.”

Carolina and Bianca also considered out of town colleges, and actually applied to them, but ultimately decided to stay in town for their families. Carolina had gone on a campus visit to Our Lady of the Lake in San Antonio, applied, and was accepted. However, not only because of family connections but because of a family situation that specific year which she did not want to discuss, she felt it would be hard to move away. Additionally, she felt compelled to stay back and help the family with finances.
Bianca had thought about going out of town as well, albeit to New Mexico State University, which was only 45 miles from El Paso. She planned to apply for a scholarship program for children of migrant workers, the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP), which would help cover the costs there. However, because she had custody over her siblings, this was first on her mind in making a college decision. She explained, “Yes, I have [thought about leaving town] but it’s really in my family. My brothers [siblings]. I don’t want to leave them…There’s nobody that can take care of them like me.” As a result, by mid-spring semester her senior year, she had made a decision to stay in town.

Yesenia was another student who demonstrated serious interest in leaving El Paso, albeit for different reasons than the others. She had planned to attend UT-San Antonio or the local community college there because her boyfriend was in San Antonio. Outside of going for her boyfriend, she gave other reasons such as there were more fun things to do there and that people would stay in El Paso their whole lives and not experience the broader world. The traditional idea of becoming more independent of her family also played into her mind:

Well, I think it’s good because I can become more independent and try to do stuff by myself. Because here like your mom is gonna be like oh mi hija do you want help or something and I don’t want to be like that, I want to be independent.

Ultimately, however, like the others who considered going out of town, Yesenia decided to stay in El Paso. She realized that living with her boyfriend would put her under more financial hardships, and this was compounded by the fact that her mom promised to help buy her a car if she stayed: “I was like if I stay here I’m going to have a new car and have more money to spend, clothes and everything. If I move I’m not going to have a lot of money.”
EPCC or UTEP?

Given the propensity for the study students to stay in town, the biggest choice they had to make was whether to start at the local community college or the university. This choice was by no means simple for many of the students, who went back and forth and considered factors ranging from class size, confidence, and cost in their decision-making processes. Interestingly, however, as noted in Table 5.1 an initial preference for a university, whether in town or out of town, generally translated to a student ultimately beginning at UTEP. Similarly, if a student was set on EPCC or wavering between the two at the beginning, they typically ended up at the community college. This supports Hossler, Schmit and Vesper’s (1999) findings, as their study of thousands of students in Indiana found that most high school students who planned to attend two-year or vocational schools their sophomore year maintained these plans their senior year while those who had plans to attend a four-year school similarly stayed consistent.

Table 5.1

Student College Preferences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Initial preference</th>
<th>Final choice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bianca</td>
<td>NMSU</td>
<td>UTEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolina</td>
<td>UTEP</td>
<td>UTEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>EPCC</td>
<td>EPCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanne</td>
<td>UTEP/EPCC</td>
<td>EPCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauricio</td>
<td>UTEP</td>
<td>UTEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paola</td>
<td>UTEP/EPCC</td>
<td>EPCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yesenia</td>
<td>UTSA</td>
<td>UTEP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Of the students, Daniel was set on EPCC from the beginning, while the highest achieving students Mauricio and Carolina were strongly committed to UTEP. Daniel was a continual advocate for the community college first, describing it as a “step stool” and preferring it because he knew the classes would be smaller. In one interview, he even commented that it would be “just like high school.” As indicated in the following exchange, Daniel was largely following family members, and his parents’ preferences, even though they would not be contributing financially to his education:

Interviewer: Why did you decide Community over UTEP or going out of town?
Daniel: Well, it's kind a late to go out of town. UTEP I got accepted and everything but I'm just following my family, how they went to Community first and then make up my mind, what I want to do and my career and just go from there.
Interviewer: So your family members also started at Community? Did they tell you why or did they make that recommendation for you?
Daniel: Cause that's what our parents wanted. They wanted us to go to Community first. Or if we had the chance to go out of town to go but like...my family's not that smart so it's kind a hard to do that.

Unfortunately, even though Daniel had a precedent at EPCC as his sisters were attending when this study began, they soon either dropped out or were suspended. Another consideration that was common among the students who chose the community college was cost. As Daniel noted, doing the “basics” at EPCC was much cheaper, about a quarter the cost of UTEP. Unlike UTEP, the entire tuition at EPCC could be covered by Pell Grants.

For a time, Bianca was leaning towards EPCC because, even though UTEP had a CAMP scholarship program too, she understood that she would have to live on campus her whole first
year at college, something that would be impossible with her siblings. In rationalizing her decision to go to EPCC, Bianca echoed EPCC’s advertising slogan “The best place to start,” saying, “I know UTEP is a better quality college but EPCC is the best place to start.” Similarly, Paola commented, “Because I think it's a good way to start. You can just move up to UTEP.” Like with Daniel, finances were an important concern for these students, and Bianca recalled a friend telling her why EPCC was a better place to start:

Well this friend of mine told me it's better to go to EPCC first and then transfer to UTEP because she went straight to UTEP and she told me it was harder and she had to pay a lot. She already finished. She already has her bachelor’s degree but she has lots of loans and stuff like that. And I don't think she had any scholarships and stuff so she told me no, it's better to start at EPCC because it's the same, the basics.

Without scholarship help, UTEP is more expensive and many UTEP students will go to school on and off to avoid student loans, working when not attending school in order to save money for tuition. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, just because both schools provide the “basics” does not mean that they are “the same.”

Of note, Paola was the only student I am aware of who considered attending a for-profit technical college after a college admissions representative approached her. She was considering it because she just wanted to go to college, and was impatient to start, and it appeared that she could have fallen prey for the desire for a quick and easy enrollment process and degree plan. However, as an active researcher, I intervened, called the college and went through multiple representatives to learn that they charged over $20000 for an 18-month program and that none of the credits would transfer to local educational institutions. With this knowledge, I quickly steered her away from this option.

123
Both Mauricio and Carolina were determined to go to UTEP from the beginning, and, graduating in the top 10% of their high school class, were the only students besides Bianca who secured scholarships. Despite her high achievements, Carolina lacked confidence at the end of high school, largely because of her English, since she had only been learning English three years at the beginning of the study. Thus, she did consider the “step stool” of EPCC, saying, “I’m undecided because I don’t feel comfortable with myself. I think that it will be more difficult in UTEP, so I don’t know.” However, citing the advice of teachers and people who had graduated from college at the community center she frequented, she said that they told her it would be better to start at the university, as opposed to transfer. Because she felt that the four-year path would be more continuous and provide less chance for problems, she told herself “I can do it” and went with UTEP.

**Conclusion**

As detailed in this section, this group of mostly first-generation college students engaged in a complex college decision making process, even if they did not consider the variety of geographical and institutional options that higher income students often do. The complexity of the students’ decision making processes is mapped out in Figure 5.1, which depicts the primary questions facing them as well as the multitude of factors affecting the answers. For most of these students, it was not a question of whether or not to go to college, but where, and that is where the complexity began.
A few students seriously did consider going out of town and had the means to secure the scholarships in order to do so. In these cases and others, family consistently played an important role in these students’ decision processes. Bianca wanted to provide for her siblings, Daniel wished to follow his family’s footsteps, and Mauricio, accepted to UT-Austin and recipient of multiple scholarships, did not want to leave his family. Ortiz and Santos (2009), Kurlaender (2006) and others have noted the importance of family in Latina/o students’ lives and the common desire among Latina/o students to be close to their families while at college. Person and Rosenbaum (2006) have also pointed out, as is apparent in Daniel’s case, that Latinas/os may be more likely to rely on families and friends to make decisions about college. While this can be helpful when a first-generation college student is unfamiliar with institutions of higher education, it can also be limiting in that a student like Daniel may not consider other options that could serve him better.
Even though all ultimately stayed in town, they had to decide between the various local institutions, often taking dependents like children or siblings into consideration. For instance, Mercedes and Andrea, who did not start college right away, did so in one case because she was waiting for residency papers and in another because she became pregnant before school started. For Bianca, the decisions surrounding college were made with her siblings constantly in mind. Out of no fault of her own, she was an eighteen year old taking care of three younger children, making sure they got to school, to the doctor, and got fed everyday. She almost turned down an invaluable scholarship opportunity because her desire to make sure they were well cared for until I intervened and repeatedly encouraged her to work out a deal with the scholarship program, which she ultimately did. For students like Mauricio and Carolina, the decisions were simpler. Being in the top of their class, they had access to knowledge and scholarships that the other students did not.
Chapter 6: Detailed Portraits of the Community College Students’ Curricular and Extracurricular Lives

Daniel: A Question of Motivation

“I put that off like crazy. Like, I’d go home and I’d be like, ‘Eh, I don’t wanna do it.’ And then just time passed and you needed to study for a test, and you didn’t do good in it”
—Daniel on studying

“When he was there, he was present. But he seemed like one of those kind of when I’m not here, I’m not thinking about this. I’m not going to do anything more than what’s bare minimum kind of. What I’ll do, I’ll try to do well. But I’m not going to break my back necessarily to do it.”
—Daniel’s second semester developmental writing teacher

Background and Defining Characteristics and Experiences

At first glance, one might expect Daniel to be one of the more successful students as he possessed a number of beneficial background characteristics that other students in the study did not have. Unlike all the other students, English was his first language, something that resulted from his immigrant grandparents’ push to teach his father English and his parents’ decision to raise him in an English-speaking household. Daniel always spoke English with his parents, grandparents, siblings, and teachers, and did not really learn Spanish until high school, where he had Spanish classes and saw knowing Spanish as a way to integrate himself into the school’s Spanish-dominant student community. While Daniel’s mother dropped out of college when she became pregnant, his father was a teacher who had recently gotten a Master’s in Education. Daniel felt pressure to attend college from his parents, his uncle, his sisters, and cousin, who had either graduated from college or were currently attending college when I first met Daniel. Daniel had been in advanced classes in middle school and took pre-AP courses his first two years of high school. Nonetheless, Daniel struggled more than most of the students in this study and
graduated high school with a low-B average. While growing to know the reticent Daniel more closely, I learned about some of the challenges that may have limited his success.

Daniel attended a different middle school from most of the study students, which had a high percentage of minority students, but about half (8.6% vs. 14.1%) the immigrant students that the other students’ school did. Similarly, while the school where most study participants attended had 51.6% of students labeled as LEP, only 29% of the students at Daniel’s middle school were LEP (citation omitted for anonymity). Due to these differences, it is perhaps unsurprising that Daniel reported speaking English “all the time” in middle school. Home to his favorite writing teacher, Daniel’s middle school appeared to serve him well. He described her as one of the few teachers who made him work: “we’d have to write in her class, that was the only time I had to write when I went to school…and then she’d check it and write like notes and stuff and then she’ll give you a chance to fix it and then we’d eventually just pick up the habits.” In comparison to that class and other writing he had to do in middle school, Daniel reported that his high school was very different: “it’s mostly about book work and TAKS until I guess my senior year…”

The impact of minimal high school demands particularly affected Daniel because he was a student who would complete his work diligently, but not go beyond what was asked of him. Moreover, he would be inclined to take the path of least resistance because he was adverse to stressful situations. When asked why he was no longer in the AP or dual-credit track, he explained that he did not take the test to place into AP because he was stressed at the thought of writing long essays: “I think it would have been too much ‘cause they had to turn in a twenty-five page essay and if they didn't turn it in they would have failed the semester. I guess it's really stressful. I was like, I don't need that yet.” Thus, after the more advanced literacy demands of
his middle school and early high school years, Daniel chose a less stressful option that never required him to write more than a two or three page essay. By the time he entered college, he was placed into the developmental writing track, and did nothing to resist that placement, despite the fact that he felt his writing abilities were beyond the class. At college, his path of least resistance mentality led to him missing class when his car would not start or there was construction work blocking his normal path to campus. When his printer cable broke, he handwrote all his essays for the semester instead of seeking out a replacement cable or printing his work at the school library.

The perceived family support mentioned in the introduction diminished as I learned more about Daniel’s story. While his father was a teacher with a MAE, he was largely absent from Daniel’s life since he had separated from his mother and become part of another family. He did not have much of an interest in supporting Daniel as he pursued a college degree, telling Daniel that he needed to work as he was not going to support him financially in any way. During high school, Daniel was taken to court and required to pay a $1000 fine for excessive absences, and he explained he began skipping school because his mom left for work at 6 a.m. and did not return until 6 p.m.; thus, it became very easy to miss. The two older sisters who were in college when Daniel began this study dropped out by the time he started college, one saying that she simply did not like school and the other having failed out.

Nonetheless, Daniel did seem to have some supportive family members helping him succeed in school. After the attendance incident, his uncle began taking him to school to make sure he attended and he began living with his grandmother, who was around more often to take care of him. He had a cousin at the community college as well, who helped him navigate the registration process and occasionally helped him with homework. However, the benefits of
living with his grandmother dissipated during his first semester at college when he began missing a number of classes in order to take her to doctor appointments. Like other study students, Daniel placed great importance on family even if it would interfere with his schooling, saying, “I’d rather deal with my grandma than go to school and have her sick at home, you know what I mean?”

Another factor that seemed to negatively influence Daniel’s success was his quiet personality, which resulted in him being less social than many of his peers. At the high school this may have resulted from his limited knowledge of Spanish in comparison with his peers, as the vast majority of students outside of AP classes used Spanish for their interactions. During his first semester at college, his writing teacher saw him as a “loner” who did not seem to have many friends in the class, much less at the college. She expressed her concerns in an interview:

He doesn’t have a support group outside of the classroom and I’m not really sure how many students he knows in the classroom, he doesn’t seem to speak to other people in the class so, when I do see him on the outside, I see him by himself, so that worries me, that might be a deterring factor that may not allow him to persist if he doesn’t have a support system.

On the other side, Daniel explained why he found it difficult to find friends at college: “Yeah, cause I mean, they’re focused on school, they’d rather get that done than make new friends. I mean you still have a lot of time to make friends after college...” Daniel seemed to value independence, finding that the responsibility to learn was on the individual and that if one did not do well or failed in some way, it was their fault.

Despite these challenges, Daniel had high aspirations for college, and said he hoped to get a degree so he would not have to deal with the financial uncertainty his parents did. Early in
the study, he expressed an interest in being an engineer or, if that did not work out because of the
difficulty of the curriculum, to be an elementary school teacher. As he transitioned to college,
his major interest switched to biomedical engineering, as he found the science/healing
connection interesting.

**High School Literacy Experiences**

Daniel had a variety of literacy experiences during high school. As mentioned above, he
was in a pre-AP class his sophomore year where he did more reading and writing than students
in mainstream classes. For instance, students in the sophomore year pre-AP class read *Lord of
the Flies*, something that Daniel’s senior English class read. However, his sophomore year was
interrupted as he transferred to another high school where his attendance problems started. He
did not like the new high school too much but recalled that when he went, there was a lot more
learning going on than at Samson: “they give you a little bit of work [here] but over there,
everyday there was something new. And if you didn't show up for one day it's like missing a
whole week. So I guess that helped them a lot. They made us like fall behind [at Samson]. You
know what I mean?” In contrast to more demanding literacy experiences at the other high school
and at his middle school, Daniel recalled his high school English classes at Samson focusing
mainly on TAKS preparation and “book work.” When asked to explain what he meant by “book
work,” Daniel said involved reading a book or a story and answering questions about it, without
having any real discussions or having to write an essay about it. In short, work that did not make
him think very much.

In contrast to the first three years of high school, Daniel felt that senior year was doing
more to prepare him for college as the writing demands were increased. In addition to writing
more in English, Daniel reported writing papers for his government, economics, and theatre
classes. His theatre essay was one of his favorites, as it asked him to read a play and write a summary report on it, and he found the play interesting and the assignment overall “pretty cool.” In government and economics, he was often required to write short answer responses, but reported doing a few essays as well.

Like the other students in this study, Daniel’s major senior year writing projects were the personal statement, the *Beowulf* essay, and the *Lord of the Flies* essay. He found the *Beowulf* essay different from most of the previous high school writing he did, with the exception of a *Lord of the Flies* essay he completed sophomore year. In writing the *Beowulf* essay, he explained he learned how to develop a thesis and how to “to add examples from the text…into your writing to make it better,” skills that were previously unfamiliar to him. In contrast to much of his previous high school writing, the *Beowulf* essay required him to read a book and write about it, instead of writing on a generic topic assigned for test preparation. In talking about his essay, Daniel said his thesis was his favorite part. It read, “By demolishing Grendel, a demon that tortured the Danes, Beowulf shows that the Anglo-Saxons were the type that don’t run away, but would fight vigorously until the end.” While the thesis was fairly complex and well developed, the essay did not develop the thesis as it could have. The three short body paragraphs were overwhelmed by textual evidence, without much contextual information or explanation of how they supported the thesis. It appeared that Daniel’s limited practice in writing this type of essay hindered his success on this assignment.

For the final senior essay on *Lord of the Flies*, Daniel wrote about the different desires for power between the two main characters of the novel, Ralph and Jack. While more awkward than the previous thesis, the thesis for this essay still made an important point: “Power is a thing that separates Ralph, a person that is for the better of the rest of the kids and Jack only wants
power to be supreme.” For the first several paragraphs, Daniel focused relatively well on his thesis, making points such as Jack losing two elections and then seeking other ways to steal power from Ralph. In another paragraph, he explained how Jack bribed the others to leave with him. Despite these early successes, the latter half of the essay lost steam and focus, possibly due to the required length of three to four pages, which was longer than the one to two page essays previously required of Daniel. His essay ultimately ended up at two and a half pages, indicating that he had trouble finding enough evidence to meet the page requirement.

In contrast to the difficulties in writing these two essays, Daniel had no problem writing a TELPAS essay (described in Chapter 4), which was an assessment designed to evaluate the English proficiency of students designated LEP, but something that Mr. Robertson had all the students write. For this assignment, Daniel had to write personal narratives, with one prompt being “Write about a time you did something you know was wrong.” For this, he wrote a short, focused essay on the time he had attendance problems at high school. Daniel clearly felt more comfortable with this type of writing, and indicated multiple times in interviews that he did not even like to be hindered by a prompt, but wanted to be more free to write about what he wanted to.

On the TELPAS essay, like on other essays during his senior year and throughout high school, Daniel did not receive any feedback. He felt ambivalent about this, saying that “If you write a certain way and somebody tells you to not write that way it's gonna be harder for you to write.” However, he also recognized that if you do not receive feedback you do not know what to fix. Daniel understood that Mr. Robertson could not give too much feedback because he had so many students (about 150, which was all of the senior mainstream English classes). Even if Daniel’s teachers had taken time to give him feedback, it appeared that it would not have been
overly useful unless Daniel was required to revise. Otherwise, he said, “I'd probably just throw it away. I got a grade for it already so...” While Daniel did not get much written feedback on his essays senior year, his teacher was always moving around the class while students were drafting to give them advice and suggestions, and gave them feedback on the various steps of the process, such as their theses. During most of the year, I supported Mr. Robertson in this effort as well.

In sum, Daniel’s high school literacy experiences were relatively limited. He read no more than a few books during his high school years and did not write an essay longer than a few pages, with the vast majority of his essays focused on test preparation. Due to different factors, including a lack of self-motivation and the transferring between schools and the attendance issue, Daniel fell out of the AP track and into the mainstream English track. He recognized a huge difference between these paths: “I have friends who had dual credit and they had to do twenty page essays and I was like okay. The most I've done is like two page essay.” Daniel wished there was something in between, a track that was not as stressful as the AP classes but more demanding than writing simple two-page essays. At the end of senior year, many of Daniel’s friends in the higher tracks, or in his words, “way up there,” were going out of town to various colleges and universities and Daniel was going to the local community college, where he would begin in a paragraph-level developmental writing course.

**Literacy and Learning in the First Year of College**

**First semester.**

In the first interview with Daniel after he started college, he had already recognized that he was one of the better writers in his developmental writing class. When asked if the course was helpful, he explained, “It’s like half and half. Cause like, they’re trying to get students to write paragraphs, but I already know how to write essays. And so I mean, with the grammar and
stuff like that, I still have to learn that cause I really mess up, other than that, it’s really boring.” Fortunately for Daniel, his instructor Ms. Mariscal recognized that students in her class came with different abilities and so she pushed the more advanced writers to write short essays, while understanding that some students were not at that stage yet.

For this first semester writing course, Daniel was required to write extensively, producing eight essays, four personal reflections on selected textbook stories, and a final exam paragraph/essay written during class time (see Daniel’s first year writing experiences detailed in Table 6.1). The course did have a technology element, which involved completing a number of hours in the PLATO tutoring lab, a drill-based grammar program that had also been used in remedial education at Samson high school. Essays in this course were largely modeled after those in the regular college writing class and included process, classification, and narrative essays, among others. For the process essay, which Daniel turned in late, he wrote about making chocolate covered strawberries. For the definition essay, Daniel was asked to define one of the following topics: a miracle, a spoiled child, a (insert adjective) police, bling bling, mind games, a slacker, a fashionista, a hacker, or a groupie. Ironically, Daniel chose slackers, writing that they usually learn their behavior from family members and that they avoid work by “any means necessary.” He was particularly critical of welfare recipients in this essay, writing, “But one of the biggest things is that the government should make people work and not give out free stuff. Because, I sure know of families that don’t do nothing which are slackers and the government makes sure they are housed and feed.” This excerpt shows that Daniel has a strong authorial voice and the opinion he presents clearly connects to his belief regarding school that each person is responsible for their own success. For this essay and others, Daniel was required to give examples, such as the one cited here, but was not required to give any sort of textual evidence.
As a result, it appears that the type of writing asked of him was a step back from the type of writing he was doing at the end of high school, at least in regards to preparation for later college source-based writing. Daniel himself seemed to notice this, explaining that the writing he was doing at college did not seem any more difficult than high school, but he soon expected it to be worse.

Table 6.1
Daniel’s First-Year Writing Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fall semester</th>
<th>Spring semester</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Writing (Developmental)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Art Appreciation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eight paragraph/essay length</td>
<td>No writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>compositions under a page</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narration, description, process,</td>
<td>Three take home essays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>definition, classification,</td>
<td>Three in-class essays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comparison and contrast, cause and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>effect, and argument</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four short reflections on textbook stories</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>History</strong></td>
<td><strong>History</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No writing</td>
<td>No writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading (Developmental)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3 page career essay with sources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Daniel was the only study student who was not typing his essay assignments his first semester of college as Ms. Mariscal recommended this but allowed for handwritten essays if the handwriting was clear. Overall, Ms. Mariscal was more attentive to the diverse needs and complex family situations of her students than other interviewed instructors at both EPCC and UTEP, making accommodations such as allowing handwritten essays and going out of her way to ask Daniel what was going on when he missed class, which he frequently did. This appeared
to help Daniel and harm him at the same time, and he noted that he was surprised how little most of his college instructors cared about him coming to class or completing the work. Daniel ended up receiving a B for the class despite the fact that, according to Ms. Mariscal at one point, he “was not doing very much at all.” In another course, he may have failed or dropped out, and Ms. Mariscal thought that a higher writing placement could have done this to him: “had he been put, placed into a higher level English, I don’t think probably he would persist, so I think that Daniel is doing the best he can and he’s doing a good job in this class...” On the other hand, this supportiveness caused laziness, which Daniel admitted. As he pointed out, it made it easier to miss class and allowed him to handwrite his papers, which he found more comfortable, even though he would be required to type all his later work at college.

Outside of the writing class, Daniel’s writing experiences his first semester were limited. For his first-year seminar, which he ultimately dropped because he was going to fail, he wrote an essay about a career he was interested in. For this essay, he ended up writing about archaeology even though he never mentioned it to me as a career interest. For this essay, Daniel was required to create a bibliography stating where he got his various sources. Outside of that essay, Daniel wrote short answer responses to readings in his history class and did not write at all in his developmental reading class, where he mostly read short pieces and answered multiple-choice questions. His reading class was his favorite, because he liked the teacher and because it was the easiest class.

In contrast to writing, which was not much more difficult than high school, Daniel generally found his first semester reading demands “much worse” than high school. Like other students in the study, he was expected to read the most in his history class; however, like the others, he did not do much of the reading. When asked how much time he spent reading per
class, he replied, “It just depends, I have to really want to read, when I do that, I could sit for like two or three hours but other than that, maybe a half an hour, an hour.” Also, like other students, he developed strategies to complete the reading more quickly: “Yeah, like you read what it’s mainly about and then you go like to the end of the chapter and you have like a review. And you look at that, and you just read the main topics basically.” Daniel’s lack of reading did not seem to be a question of time, as he reported being bored regularly, but lack of interest in completing the readings. One class where the reading load was easy was, ironically, his reading class. Daniel said “it was just like high school” and that “they’d give me a little paragraph to read and answer 10 questions, that was it.”

Overall, Daniel felt mixed emotions about his first semester at college. He regretted failing his first-year seminar, which he planned to retake in the summer with his reading teacher, but was confident that he could learn from each mistake. He also regretted not going away for school, saying “I know I could have gone somewhere else, you know what I mean, like, if I really would have pushed instead of messing up in high school, I could have been somewhere like UT [Austin] right now.” While he acknowledged he was not as challenged as much as he could have been in the developmental writing course, he was receiving more feedback on his writing than he ever did in high school and felt he was growing as a writer. As he did in high school, he appreciated that he was being pushed forward little by little, as it was not causing him too much stress. On the social and family fronts, things were looking up, as Daniel reported meeting more friends and his grandmother was feeling better, so he would not have to miss class to take her to the doctor anymore.
Second semester.

As Daniel began his second semester of college, two of his four classes, history and math, were online. Thinking back to his first semester teacher Ms. Mariscal’s comments about him being kind of a “loner” without a support network, I was concerned about this setup because of this reason and because Daniel seemed to do best with a supportive teacher pushing him to do well. My concern was sparked further when Daniel did not even remember what one of his online courses when interviewed about a month into the semester, as he had not logged into the class for a week since he had been sick. The decision to take online courses stemmed from problems with lateness the previous semester, and Daniel felt that having online courses would limit his troubles getting to school and also allow him to do work on his own time, so that he could postpone things when he did not feel like working.

Another surprising piece of news that came out of the first second semester interview was that Daniel had a major shift in his future educational plans, saying,

I don’t want to be a biomedical engineer anymore. I want to be more of a car mechanic, ‘cause I don’t know, I like cars a lot. My cousin work on cars like on the weekend, like just something that always happens to one of the family’s cars, and they always bring it to us, we’ll figure out how to fix it. I think it’s fun, and I think that’s what I want to do, it’s pretty cool.

This decision appeared to stem from Daniel’s disappointing first semester, as he failed his two non-developmental courses, although he got an A and a B respectively in his non-credit developmental reading and writing classes. He explained that he did not want to go to school for the amount of time it would take to be a biomedical engineer and that he preferred a more fulfilling path even if it meant a minimum wage job. As we discussed this further, he hinted that
he would like to return to school later for a degree in biomedical engineering, as he would like to have multiple careers to choose from, especially if he had difficulty finding a job as other family members have had.

As the semester progressed, my premonitions about the online courses came true and Daniel fell further and further behind. By early April, he had decided to drop all his classes, with his struggles in the online classes being the primary reason:

I had already failed two last semester. So--and now with the math, I didn’t understand it at all. So I was gonna fail that one and that was gonna put me on probation. And then I knew I was failing history. So that was gonna put me on suspension. So I dropped them all because I was like, “Well if I’m on suspension, why am I gonna work my butt off to get nothing?” You know what I mean?

Daniel’s rationale for dropping appeared to be a combination of pragmatism and his inclination to take the least difficult path. As the counselor advised him, it was smart to drop the online classes before he received Fs for them on his transcript; however, he did not necessarily need to drop the art history and developmental writing classes where he was receiving passing grades.

As we discussed the situation that led up to the decision to drop, Daniel admitted that taking the online classes was a mistake for two reasons. First, he never got in a habit of studying at home, and once outside the class, generally forgot about schoolwork. In a first semester interview, he recalled forgetting what was due because he did not take his backpack out of the car. Thus, he was not spending the time doing the online coursework that he needed to. Second, and this was particularly a problem in math, when he needed help with something he would go online, but there was no one to whom he could ask questions. Thus, he failed to make it past chapter three in his math book and did not have anyone checking his comprehension.
Despite the fact that he ended up dropping it with the other classes, Daniel said his second semester writing class was his favorite of the year, largely because he had a few friends there from a high school he attended his sophomore year. He explained the value of this, saying, “Instead of gettin’ in the class where you know nobody and I mean you have to start knowing people. But I mean, it’s better to know somebody than start all over, you know what I mean?”

Outside of his writing class, Daniel reported having no writing assignments for his other classes. For history and art appreciation, his homework was mainly reading, which he tried to do at first, but it was simply too boring for him with the art history book “just talking about paintings and things like that.” According to Daniel’s writing teachers, he would generally turn in all the required essays, although sometimes late. However, as indicated by his comments here, Daniel found it particularly difficult to sit down and read, and his reluctance to read and study seemed to be his ultimate downfall. He identified studying as his biggest challenge in succeeding, saying, “I put that off like crazy. Like, I’d go home and I’d be like, ‘Eh, I don’t wanna do it.’ And then just time passed and you needed to study for a test, and you didn’t do good in it.”

Conclusion

Figure 6.1 depicts some of the challenges Daniel faced in transitioning to college as well as the network of capital he developed to overcome or protect himself against these challenges. On first glance, it appears that he had a fairly developed network; however, a closer look reveals gaps.
As indicated in the beginning, Daniel had positive indicators for success on the surface: English as his L1, a father with an advanced degree in education, an uncle who was a teacher at his high school, and two sisters in college. However, upon learning more about his life, it became apparent that his father was pretty distant and, over the course of his study his sisters dropped out or got suspended from college. He lived with his grandmother, who did not really know anything about college nor ever pushed him to study. While the writing classes at UTEP and EPCC tend to be the most troublesome for a lot of students because of the requirement to produce essays rather than passively read and take tests, it seemed the opposite for Daniel.
While he completed his writing tasks, he never developed a habit of reading or studying and thus did not do well on the tests and quizzes in most of his classes.

To be successful, he knew he had to “Actually put time into studying and do my work” and felt that this was solely his responsibility and not that of his teachers or school. While Daniel’s lack of motivation to work was part of the blame, there were other factors at work. For instance, Daniel’s high school preparation was lacking in some important areas. He explained that he was not required to write source-based essays in high school, but this was not his primary reason for dropping. Rather, his high school failed him because, as he explained, “it didn’t teach me, like, how to do things by a certain date and all that. And like how important it is to do good and study, you know what I mean.” Teachers at Daniel’s high school were actually discouraged from giving homework given the “unique” background of the school’s students. While this policy may have helped the students in the short term, it appears that, in Daniel’s case, to have harmed him in the long term by not preparing him for the more independent work required at college.

Another way that Daniel’s success could have been promoted at the college level was by teachers who reached out and supported him. As discussed earlier, Daniel had some expectations of college being more independent, but was surprised about how little the instructors cared about him as a student. The only two teachers he interacted with outside of class were his first semester reading and writing teachers. For instance, his writing teacher Ms. Mariscal checked up on him when he was missing class to take his grandmother to the hospital. Most other teachers interviewed at both EPCC and UTEP said they expected the students to contact them if there was a problem, and not the other way around. Either due to his own fault, his instructors, or a combination, Daniel had difficulties communicating with instructors in his
online courses, which limited his success especially when he struggled in understanding the content.

Finally, Daniel could have benefited from a stronger network of friends at the college. As indicated above, he liked his second semester writing class because he knew some people there, and did not have that feeling of going into it alone. With a friend to study with, share notes in the case of a missed class, or ask they are absent, a student like Daniel may be more likely to succeed.

In what could be considered a positive development, Daniel changed his mind about switching to a mechanics program and, as of this writing, set a goal to finish his basics even though he would have to pay for his classes because of financial aid suspension. While he certainly would have liked his first year to go better, he felt that he could graduate from college, albeit at a slower pace. In discussing this, he referenced his father, saying, “my dad, like, he did the same thing. Like, he stopped for a while and it took him forever but he got to where he wanted to be. And I don’t know, I guess that’s how it is with us.” While off to a rough start, Daniel was interested in continuing school, encouraged by upset family members who wanted him to achieve his initial goals of finishing college and being an engineer.
Joanne: Balancing Life as a Mother and a Student

“…in school, it probably would be like studying because I don’t study much… I just think, ‘Oh I have to study,’ and I get the book or the notes, and I try to start to study, but then…I don’t like to study. It gets real boring.”
—Joanne on her biggest challenge in college

“At this point she won't do well, she will not be successful but if she is willing to get busy, get back on track, and realize what she needs to do, she'll do okay. In my class if she would attend and do the best she could she would pass. That will happen, so far no one has ever failed this class just because of low grades because I give them so many opportunities to make good grades.”
—Joanne’s first-year seminar teacher

Background and Defining Characteristics and Experiences

When I first met Joanne at Samson High School, she struck me as a quiet, hard-working student who had fairly strong English skills compared to her classmates. She always sat next to Paola in her classes, and they worked together, helping each other out with various assignments, although Joanne said Paola generally helped her more than she helped Paola. Like Paola at times, Joanne was never particularly enthusiastic about going to college. This may have stemmed from various challenges that Joanne faced throughout her life, which were not readily apparent.

Unlike some of the other study members, Joanne said she had attended U.S. schools all her life, attending a bilingual program until sixth grade and ESL classes in seventh. Like others in this study, Joanne was disappointed with the bilingual program, saying that it was mostly in Spanish and that she could not understand anything upon transitioning to mainstream English classes, which resulted in low grades. However, these difficulties may have stemmed from other factors, as Joanne reported moving schools every year during middle school, attending various schools around town before starting high school at Samson.
In addition to moving schools, Joanne’s living situation appears to have changed a lot as well. When growing up, she lived with her aunt in El Paso so that she could attend U.S. schools more easily while her parents continued to live in Juárez. Midway through high school, she moved into an apartment with her boyfriend, presumably so that she could get to school easier. At the beginning of this study, she was living with her cousin, as she and her boyfriend having split up because he had been cheating on her. While living with her boyfriend, she became pregnant and had a child her first semester senior year. Despite the challenges that this event certainty brought her, Joanne did not mention it too openly as a problem during high school, just casually mentioning that she had to take a month off of school when she had her daughter.

The difficulties in raising a child and attending school were not as visible during high school as Joanne, like other students at Samson, rarely had homework. However, once Joanne started college, with shorter class hours and higher homework loads, the difficulties started. Her first semester, Joanne dropped three of her four classes because of fear of giving speeches in speech class and failing grades in the others. She failed her first-year seminar, the only class that she kept. Joanne talked about the difficulties of raising a child and completing homework during her first semester at college: “It’s hard cause like I have to take care of her and then like I said I have to read or do like homework, I don’t know, like something about school, and at the same time I have to be with her, you know.” Because of these difficulties, and the limited amount of support her cousin could provide, Joanne moved back in with her parents in Juárez at the end of her first semester, with hopes that they would help her more fully in taking care of her daughter and going to school.

Despite the limited support Joanne’s cousin could provide in caring for Joanne’s daughter, she seemed to be an important source of information and support as Joanne started college, as
she had been attending community college herself. She helped Joanne navigate the registration process, encouraged her to find a work-study job, and in general encouraged her to pursue a college education. Despite this support, Joanne fell behind in her coursework her first semester, and, after a realistic assessment of her possibilities, she decided to change to a shorter program of study to be an assistant physical therapist. This decision was framed in context of being able to be close to her daughter, as Joanne said, “if I go study more, I’m not gonna be, like have time to be with her.” Moreover, given that she struggled so much with her first semester of traditional college work, Joanne felt that four or more years of that kind of work would be too much for her.

**High School Literacy Experiences**

Throughout the study, it was difficult to get many details from Joanne, as she was a quiet person who did not talk much during interviews, responding to my questions with a one-word response or a sentence or so at most. This was compounded by the fact that she was never particularly engaged with school, reporting that art and lunch were her favorite classes. She did recall a favorite English teacher, and said she liked all her classes adequately, describing English class in the following way: “Sometimes it's interesting and sometimes I don't like it.”

Joanne clearly struggled as she made the transition from a bilingual program to ESL to mainstream English, and she ended up failing the TAKS her sophomore year. Although she said others put a lot of negative pressure on her for failing, she explained that she did not feel too badly about this, as she knew her junior TAKS, which she passed, was the one that counted. After failing, she spent junior year in tutoring, for which she was pulled out of various content classes. She said that most of her writing for the first three years focused on the exam, and that she did not like it largely because she was required to read a lot and did not like reading.
After a bit of coaxing, Joanne admitted to having one stand out English teacher, the strict Mr. Sanchez referenced by other students. She described him as “mean,” but valued the fact that he was demanding of them, and, especially as she started college, wished that she had been pushed more by other high school teachers. In contrast, she never felt especially pushed by her other English teachers, including Mr. Robertson, her senior English teacher.

During senior year, Joanne reported writing a little for science and history, which consisted of short responses to questions. Unfortunately, she said she did not receive feedback on how to improve her responses or her writing, but just marks if her answers were right or wrong. However, she similarly reported that she did not receive feedback from her English teachers as well, with the exception of Mr. Sanchez.

Mr. Robertson worried a bit about the struggles that Joanne would face as a mother; however, he felt her writing ability was high in comparison to other students in the class. An examination of Joanne’s major senior essays does reveal a fairly strong writing ability.

In interviews, Joanne felt that the Beowulf essay was more difficult than the Lord of the Flies one because it required her to focus on analyzing one character, Beowulf, instead of comparing two characters, like in the other essay. Joanne, like other students, clearly struggled with the Beowulf essay, as it was likely an unfamiliar genre for her, very different than the TAKS essays that dominated her first three years at Samson. Guided by the teacher, Joanne created a strong thesis which read, “Beowulf manifests his aggressive nature that benefits the Danes by killing Grendel, which reveals that Anglo-Saxon strongly believes in protesting themselves with the use of force.” Unfortunately, the rest of the essay, while grammatically strong, is largely a summary of the book, with only one quote included. The conclusion is short and undeveloped, and did not connect the story with a larger societal issue, as the teacher requested.
The *Lord of the Flies* essay ultimately ends up being more successful, albeit with its share of problems. The thesis in the short opening paragraph appears somewhat confused, focusing on both how power shifts in the novel and the different types of power used by the characters. In the first two body paragraphs, Joanne goes a bit too far into the story, telling the ending before analyzing much of the book. Nonetheless, there are some strong points of analysis, such as Ralph and Jack want the power for many different reasons. Ralph wants to have the power so everybody can be together and to fight together so they can be rescued. And on my opinion the reasons of Ralph are for good of them. On the other side, Jack wants power only to kill and hunt.

Unlike in the *Beowulf* essay, Joanne uses quotations as evidence throughout, and even draws fairly successfully from an outside source (which is admittedly *SparkNotes*) in supporting her analysis, which she thankfully cites.

Like most students, Joanne finished high school without feeling fully prepared for college. Her cousin had warned her that the writing demands at college would be much greater. From teachers, Joanne got the impression that she would need to use bigger, more complex words in college writings. When asked how she would cope with moving from writing one page essays to writing three pages or longer, Joanne simply said that she would add more details.

**Literacy and Learning in the First Year of College**

**First Semester.**

As discussed earlier, students at the community college did not do much writing outside of their English classes and, as evident by the above below, Joanne was no exception. As Joanne did not have an English class her first semester, it is unsurprising that she did not have much writing, with the exception of a career portfolio in her first-year seminar and some short answers
on history and government exams (see Table 6.2 for a list of Joanne’s limited first year writing experiences). Her first semester at college can hardly be considered successful, with Joanne dropping or failing all her classes. She dropped her speech class first because she was nervous about presenting in front of others.

Table 6.2

Joanne’s First-Year Writing Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fall semester</th>
<th>Spring semester</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Speech</strong></td>
<td><strong>Speech</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech outlines</td>
<td>Speech outlines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Government</strong></td>
<td><strong>Government</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No writing</td>
<td>4 exams with essay component (choice of 3 questions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>History</strong></td>
<td><strong>History</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No writing</td>
<td>No writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td><strong>Psychology</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approx. 10 page career portfolio</td>
<td>5 one paragraph profiles on famous psychologists (make up for missing exams)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the first-year seminar, Joanne was required to create a career portfolio, and she chose photography, one of multiple career interests for her over the course of the study (a psychologist, assistant physical therapist, border patrol officer were some others). For the portfolio, students were asked to provide the following components, enclosed in a three-ring binder: title page, table of contents, introduction, contents, conclusion, and a bibliography. They were required to have at least six sources, including a book, an Internet source, and an article, that they needed to cite in APA or MLA style. The instructor required students to turn in a draft, an opportunity that
Joanne, starting this project late, did not take advantage of. As a result, she lost points on the final assignment grade.

Despite the promising nature of this writing assignment, it was limited in that the teacher told me multiple times that she was not the English teacher, and as such, was not responsible for teaching students writing. She once referred to the project as a “cut and paste affair” when talking with me and told the students during an observed class that she would not be able to tell the difference if they mixed up APA and MLA style. Despite her slow start, Joanne quickly stepped up to work harder on this project, meeting with me to get some feedback since she was unable to submit a draft to her teacher. In providing feedback, I focused on content issues such as repetition of ideas and unclear statements as well as minor grammar issues.

The only other writing Joanne reported being required to do her first semester was short answer questions on her government exams. She failed all the exams, getting a 16/100 on one of them. She explained that she could not answer these questions because she did not complete the reading as it was boring. On the other hand, Joanne was doing the reading in history, as she found the subject and the reading more interesting; however, she similarly reported failing reading quizzes there, and ultimately dropped this class as well.

During these various struggles her first semester, Joanne said none of her instructors reached out to her to inquire about her difficulties, unlike how Ms. Mariscal reached out to Daniel. Joanne’s first-year seminar instructor noticed that Joanne was having attendance problems, but did not approach Joanne to find out what was going on. This instructor did allow students to make up missed tests, and Joanne went up to her after one observed class to make arrangements to do so. However, because she did not study before the make-up date, Joanne
skipped the make-up appointment, further solidifying her bad reputation with her instructor and helping further lower the chances of passing any class her first semester.

**Second semester.**

Joanne’s struggles and limited writing experiences continued into the second semester. She began with the same classes she had in the fall, history, government, speech, and psychology, but stopped going to two of them, history and speech, in early April without formally dropping them. Her primary reason for not attending speech centered on her nervousness speaking in front of others. While her friend and study participant Paola had been in the class with her at the beginning of the semester, Paola stopped attending class, possibly removing the little support Joanne had in this environment. In dropping history, Joanne explained that the instructor made this potentially interesting topic boring. Beyond the speech outlines, Joanne reported no writing tasks in history or speech.

As indicated in Table 6.2, Joanne did some writing in her psychology and government class, albeit in limited amounts. For instance, the government exams, like the previous semester, were half multiple choice and half essay. Joanne explained that they were given three questions, and had to answer one of them. A look at three responses showed her writing about the House of Representatives and the Senate, constitutional amendments connected to civil liberties, and the U.S. news media. Joanne’s essays were about one half to one unlined handwritten page, and consisted mainly of descriptive commentary such as, “The congress is organized by two groups, those of Representative and Senate. The members that participate in the Congress have specific rules to follow.” However, the news media response ended with a more analytical comment that read, “Public Opinion can be very important to public/governers/politics because they can know what the people think and say about things around/what is happening to the government.”
Joanne’s grades for the three essays ranged from a 32 to a 36 out of 50, and the instructor’s comments were generally brief and difficult to read (Joanne could not make them out), and included a few positive words along with a request for more specifics.

The only other writing Joanne did her second semester was for her psychology class, as she was given the opportunity to make up missed exams by writing profiles on the famous psychologists B.F. Skinner, Ivan Pavlov, Solomon Ash, as well as on theories of classical conditioning. Joanne found this writing interesting, as she did her psychology class in general. While she did use one entry from Wikipedia for writing these profiles, she based the rest of her writing on class notes and the textbook. They were standard profiles, with comments on why a particular figure was important to psychology and a description of their famous experiment or experiments. For instance, her description of Pavlov began, “Ivan Pavlov is a Russian psychologist of digestion. The most famous and original example of his experiments is the one of the classical conditioning which involved the salivary conditioning of dogs.” A quick Google search shows that Joanne took the second sentence almost word for word from Wikipedia; however, given her lack of experience with source based writing, this is not particularly surprising.

One other writing opportunity that Joanne had, but did not participate in despite showing strong interest, was to write a two-page extra credit essay for her history class for Black History Month. For this essay, students were requested to write an essay “discussing an African American who has had a positive influence in your life” that would be entered in the Black History Month essay contest.
Conclusion

Figure 6.2 depicts Joanne’s network of capital as well as the challenges surrounding her. Note that her network has limited development in comparison to those of students featured in the next chapter.

Figure 6.2. Joanne’s sources of capital and challenge.

When asked at the end of her first year how she would describe the difference between high school and college to seniors at her high school, Joanne replied:

That in college, you are more independent by yourself, that it’s based on you if you want to do your work or not. And then in high school...the teachers are like there and there and there, telling you what to do or what not to do.
Like most of the other study students, she noticed the increased independence at college, something that most students anticipated going into college. However, unlike most of the UTEP-bound students, Joanne struggled with this independence and, as a result, had a disappointing first year, dropping or failing most of her classes.

Joanne’s difficulty adjusting to college appeared to stem from two areas. First, she had the challenge of being a mother with no support from her child’s father, which limited the time she could devote to studying outside school. Drawing on her family capital, she returned to living with her parents so that they could help out more, allowing for her to focus on school tasks. Nonetheless, living in Juárez would bring its own set of challenges, as it would take much longer to get to school everyday and living on the other side of the border could further distance Joanne from the college community. Joanne’s second challenge concerned her lack of interest in studying, which she failed to do more of even with the time that living with her parents gave her to focus on schoolwork. She saw this as a problem, labeling studying as her biggest challenge in succeeding at college. She reported limited interest in studying, and said she rarely completed her reading for school or studied because she found it “boring” and difficult to motivate herself to do it. As she failed or dropped classes, Joanne reported that no teacher reached out to her and asked about why she was not doing well. However, like Daniel she did not expect them to, saying, “Because like I know that what I’m doing, I know what I'm missing and all that, so I think it depends on me, more on me than the teachers.” However, as seen in the case with Ms. Mariscal and Daniel, a teacher reaching out can make a huge difference.

Like both Daniel and her friend Paola who is featured in the next case study, Joanne’s attitudes towards college shifted over time. At the beginning of the second semester, she indicated a clear desire to drop out and pursue a career in border patrol or another career where
she could finish more quickly and have more time to spend with her daughter in her formative years. As she stopped going to two of her four classes, she seemed destined for this path, but indicated in the final interview that she wanted to finish her basics and then decide what career/degree path to pursue from there. Given that she was planning to work full time while pursuing this goal and now in the position of paying for the classes herself, this path would likely take more than two years that the basic college requirements typically take (she had lost her financial aid from dropping and failing too many classes). From the high school senior only slightly interested in college, to the first semester college student excited about possibilities, to one resigned to a more vocational path, to an end of first year college student with a goal to finish her basics and go from there, Joanne’s path, like others in this study, is unique, unpredictable, and yet unfinished.

**Paola: The Unpredictability of Students’ Paths to and Through College**

“Well I feel like obligated but I don’t want to.”
—Paola on going to college

“She works hard, she tries hard, she rewrites her paper, she does her work on time. She participates in class. I think she’s bright and also she’s more culturally exposed to life in the United States. She writes papers about taking yoga classes and stuff.”
—Paola’s first semester college writing teacher

**Background and Defining Characteristics and Experiences**

Like parents of other students in this study, Paola’s parents came to the U.S. so she would have a better future due to increased education and job opportunities. She arrived in the U.S. in 1st grade and was in a bilingual program until 5th grade; however, echoing other participant complaints, she said the subsequent transition to mainstream classes was difficult because the bilingual program was mostly Spanish. Before transitioning to Samson, she attended the same
middle school that most of the other study students attended. Spanish was the dominant language in her household, and while her father knew some English, her mother did not.

Upon meeting Paola, I noticed she was a hard-working student who seemed different from most of the others at the high school. Paola typically dressed like a hippie, carrying around a hemp bag and never wearing make-up like many of the other girls in the class. She always sat with her friend, Joanne, and they often worked together on various projects in their English class. Paola’s senior English teacher Mr. Robertson felt she always went out of her way to improve and was a “deep thinker” who was different from most of the other students.

Paola possessed an intellectual curiosity that most of the other students I interacted with did not have. When asked how she used the computer, she explained she would read whatever she was interested in, which at the time was ancient civilizations. I shared with her some of my experiences studying the classics, and pointed out she could study different styles of Greek and Roman art at college and she thought that would be “awesome.” Throughout her first semester at college, she said reading was not a problem for her because she liked doing it, which was a different attitude from most students in this study. Moreover, she found time to read outside school, and excitedly shared a story with me how she found a book she had heard about at the used bookstore at the downtown library. She wished that she had been required to read more in high school, because she said, “The only thing that people tell me that’s different about college and high school doesn't prepare you for is how to read.”

Paola’s “difference” was also seen in the ways she took issues with aspects of mainstream society, explaining in one interview that she did not like money, but needed it to survive. She also dropped in and out of cell phone ownership, partially because of the cost, but largely because she did not want to be in contact all the time. These counter-culture attitudes
initially led her to question going to college. In the first interview, she gave the following explanation for why she wanted to attend college: “Well I feel like obligated [by society] but I don’t want to.” Between the first and second interview, Paola continued to express doubts about college, saying that she might be a flight attendant instead or something like that.

During her final semester of high school, a dramatic shift occurred in Paola’s attitude towards college. By the second interview, she knew she wanted to go to college, but was still somewhat wary. A few weeks later, however, she surprised me by emailing me a scholarship essay that she wanted feedback on, the first time she had contacted me voluntarily showing a desire to work seriously towards the college application process. By the end of the semester, she explained this shift, saying, “I wasn't sure about what I wanted in life but now I'm sure I want to get my higher education so I can succeed or have something.” When asked what prompted the shift, she replied, “I think what got me encouraged was everyone going to college and getting their stuff ready. I think like the financial aid and everything. That's what probably made me think about college too.” These shifts in behavior did not seem new to Paola, as she had previously been a rebellious student who regularly skipped school, very different from the diligent Paola who was always present in class.

Paola was so serious about college that she and two friends, including Joanne, planned to go to a summer college prep program at the community college, for which they were to receive $200. Unfortunately, due to confusion with the registration process, none of them ended up going. Despite this small setback, Paola’s transformation continued through her first semester at college. Over the summer she found a boyfriend and she began to dress very differently, wearing more formal clothes as well as make-up. She eventually got a cell phone again, letting me know I could text her. At the end of her first semester at college, we discussed these changes.
She described her previous self as “weird” and kind of rebellious, noting that she took out the huge ear piercings she had at the beginning of this study. Nonetheless, her college teacher still saw her as different from her peers, saying that she seemed more culturally exposed to life in the U.S. than the other students even though she still lived in an immigrant dominant neighborhood: “She writes papers about taking yoga classes and stuff. She, she doesn’t live in a Spanish-speaking, um, enclave, where everything is Mexican culture. She’s kind of, she’s talking about…things that are weird.”

Paola’s family generally seemed to provide her more with more challenges than support. Unlike some other participants’ parents, Paola’s parents seemed largely absent from her educational life, with their role limited to the following: “Just tell me that I need to go to college and to go to my classes, pay attention. That's it.” While they encouraged her to do her “best,” their support did not seem to go beyond verbal encouragement. This being said, they appeared to have their own concerns, as Paola said they were constantly struggling to find jobs to support the family. Paola had two younger brothers, and they were generally a source of concern for her rather than a source of support. One brother was married and living in Juárez, struggling to make ends meet, and became ill, which was a drain on the family’s limited finances. The other brother, who was still in high school, disappeared and did not return to their house for a few months at one point. Like Paola had done previously, he was skipping school regularly.

**High School Literacy Experiences**

As she was fond of reading, it is unsurprising that Paola generally liked her high school English classes. When asked who her favorite writing teacher had been, she joined Joanne in saying it was her freshman English teacher, Mr. Sanchez, who had a reputation for strictness among the students. In her first semester at college, Paola actually wrote her narrative essay
about her first harrowing days of school with Mr. Sanchez. After a failed attempt to get out of the class, Paola recalled an early day of class when she forgot her essay, but lied and said she left it in her locker as she furtively tried to finish it in the class. However, she got caught and recalled him yelling at her, “Do you think I’m stupid? Did you think you could fool me?” and proceeding to call her dad in front of the whole class. Despite this early experience, Paola looked back on Mr. Sanchez positively, saying he taught her all the things that she needed to know at that time and made students work harder than in other classes: “We did a lot of work unlike other teachers. And he like made us, made us do the work. So instead of slacking off or doing whatever, we actually learned because we were doing our work.”

With the exception of Mr. Sanchez’s class and her senior English class with Mr. Robertson, Paola explained that she generally wrote short and simple essays at Samson, about 300 words long. These included answers to questions that inspired personal narratives, such as “Have you ever helped someone? Why did this [event] change your life?” When asked if she wrote many essays that required her to analyze a text like she did in a few senior English essays, she replied that she had not. In fact, she explained that her senior Beowulf essay was the first time since perhaps freshmen year that she was required to integrate quotes into an essay, a skill she felt was important.

Paola’s least favorite English class was a PLATO remedial class, which consisted of computer-mediated instruction and described by Paola as “unhelpful.” She said that she would prefer an actual teacher as the program would explain the answers but could not respond to her questions. Because the teacher monitoring the room was not necessarily an English teacher, they were not always very helpful. Paola’s disdain for the PLATO class is probably partially
connected to her negative attitude towards technology, with an uneasy cell phone relationship throughout part of this study and an ambivalent attitude towards computers.

I collected several samples of Paola’s writing in her senior English class, including an essay on *Beowulf*, a personal statement, a few narratives written in-class, and an essay on *Lord of the Flies*. Paola’s reputation as a deep thinker is evident in a few of her more personal senior year writings, which also revealed a bit of her cynicism towards life. In her personal statement, she wrote about her parents fighting and separating, a story she later admitted embellishing as they did not actually separate. While the other students in the class would likely focus on the action and the fighting between the parents, and include extensive dialogue, something they were encouraged to do to score highly on the TAKS, Paola focused on her inner feelings throughout the page-long statement. She began, “Daily battles of rage and overflowing sadness fill my body and I feel I can’t handle all the pressure, but I know deep in me, that I am strong and that I can continue, that it’s necessary to have obstacles in life…”

For another in-class personal writing they did for the TELPAS, Paola wrote about her isolation from others and her closeness to a puppy that was killed by friends, another story that seemed fabricated. She began this essay by saying she was “Full with cynicism, a misanthrope, that’s what I was. I felt insecure of everyone, especially those evil talking creatures. All my trust had been spit in my face with no mercy.” When asked why she created stories, Paola explained that she was sometimes reluctant to share too many personal details about her life, but often had trouble remembering and was asked to write so many personal narratives during high school, that she felt she could make them more interesting by making many of the details up.

In addition to these more personal pieces, Paola wrote a few analytical essays her senior year, on *Beowulf* and *Lord of the Flies*. Her *Beowulf* essay was rather short, less than one single-
spaced page, and very dry in comparison to her more personal writing. Her opening paragraph clearly came from the form that her teacher gave to the class, focusing on standard historical background of the story and failing to put forth a thesis. Nonetheless, she did manage some interesting analysis in the one paragraph where she included quotes. For instance, she introduced a quote with “He reveals his brave character when he says,” indicating that she was developing knowledge about incorporating textual evidence, a skill that was very underutilized in her high school writing experiences.

Paola took her final senior essay on *Lord of the Flies* very seriously and, according to Mr. Robertson, ended up writing one of the best essays in her class. Unlike many of the students, she actually read the whole book, asking Mr. Robertson to let her take it home so she could finish. I noted the following observation in field notes after interacting with Paola as she prepared this essay: “She seemed like she had the ability to think more abstractly and connect the topic to the real world than other students. From what I’ve seen, students who have tried to connect their writing to real-world examples have done it simplistically and it has seemed forced.” Unlike in the *Beowulf* essay, Paola developed a clear thesis: “[Ralph and Jack] both are born leaders, and both have initiative when controlling the British boys; however, the way they gain, use, and maintain their power differs greatly.” Every paragraph was grounded in textual evidence and, with some help from me and her teacher, she learned how to introduce quotes more effectively and analyze their significance. Nonetheless, Paola’s negative attitudes towards society still appeared in this essay. In the final paragraph, she wrote, “*Lord of the Flies* presents us with two governments often manifested in reality, and with the clear recognition of the evil capacity humans are capable of.”
While Paola wrote fairly extensively in her senior English class, she said she did not do much writing in other classes that year except in her Spanish class.

**Literacy and Learning in the First Year of College**

**First semester.**

Like the other students at EPCC, most of Paola’s first-year writing experiences were in her FYC course, ENG 1301 (see Table 6.3 for a list of Paola’s first-year writing experiences). Her professor, Dr. Thomson, spoke Spanish fluently from having lived in Mexico and had a doctorate in rhetoric and composition from a major university in the Southwest. He had a high opinion of Paola, telling me in an interview that she was a “delightful young lady” and described her as a bright, hard-working student who did her work on time and rewrote her essays to make them better.

Table 6.3

Paola’s First-Year Writing Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fall semester</th>
<th>Spring semester</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td>FYC (stopped attending all classes in February, so none of the major assignments were completed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 page article critique</td>
<td>In-class writing assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two 3 page opinion essays on popular topics</td>
<td>Annotated bibliography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FYC</strong></td>
<td>15 page research paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent freewriting assignments</td>
<td>Two literary analysis essays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four 3-4 page essays: Personal narrative, definition/exemplification, and comparison/contrast classification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-class mini essay on an art exhibit</td>
<td><strong>History</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final exam essay</td>
<td>Copied the Declaration of Independence with a quill pen (group project)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Math (Developmental)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Math</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No writing</td>
<td>No writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Psychology</strong></td>
<td><strong>Speech</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short answers on exams</td>
<td>Speech outlines</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dr. Thomson was especially fond of freewriting, and seemed to have students freewrite for almost every class. In the freewriting assignments, students often responded to a story, and Paola recalled having to give her opinion or something personal that relates to the story in these assignments. Dr. Thomson regularly encouraged students to include personal elements in writing. For instance, when he was teaching the descriptive essay during an observed class, he emphasized that it needed to be informative but explained that it could have some personal elements and personal viewpoints, and could also be persuasive in some way.

Paola appeared to embrace this personal element in the essays she wrote for the course. She wrote five essays that were typically three-pages long. While her first essay, the aforementioned narrative about her first year high school English teacher, was naturally personal, she introduced personal elements in essays that could have been more formal. Her second essay was a definition essay focused on the word texting, which she described as her favorite essay of the semester, because it required it to give some past and current history on the term. For instance, she cited a piece of Internet research about the first text message being sent in 1992. She also included a personal narrative of her friend who fell down stairs while texting and details about an overheard conversation of a woman waiting in the financial office talking about her sexual exploits the previous weekend. In another essay, Paola was required to classify different attitudes: optimist, pessimist, and realist. In this essay, she described herself as an optimist and said she could not spend much time around pessimists.

Dr. Thomson was a detail-oriented professor who required outlines with each essay and required students to revise every essay, a time-consuming requirement but one he felt was important. On each paper, Paola received two grades, one on content and one on
grammar/mechanics, which were averaged into one final grade. Dr. Thomson had been doing this for about ten years, explaining he wanted students to see that their content was strong even if their grammar and mechanics were not. In general, Paola received high Bs or As on her papers, with her content grade typically being 5-10 points higher than her grammar grade. A look at the comments he put on her papers included a mixture of content and grammar-based feedback. Content feedback included things such as “You need more details,” “What are the advantages [of texting]?” and, for her narrative about her freshmen English class, “I think you need to indicate if the year got better and if you actually learned something in his class.” Grammar commentary focused extensively on commas, with a “CS” for comma splice, along with other codes that Dr. Thomson shared with students on a correction code list.

Like most FYC courses, Paola’s 1301 course was very participatory, and regularly included a mixture of group and whole-class activities. For the first observed class, Paola had a completed peer review sheet, but did not seem overly enthusiastic about the process, saying that one peer did not even seem to read her essay. The completed sheet Paola shared with me included a checklist of key elements with room for commentary, but it seemed that the students just completed the checklists without adding commentary. In this class, an essay was due, and Dr. Thomson had three students volunteer to read their papers to the class. While Paola did not do this for this particular class, she read her paper in a future class, saying it felt good reading in front of others and gave her increased confidence in her writing. Other activities included peer feedback on their outlines and grammar exercises, which Dr. Thomson said were a larger part of his class than most of the other FYC classes at the college. Class interactions were generally dynamic and free-flowing, indicating that students were used to a participatory classroom.
The only other class where Paola did writing her first semester was her first-year seminar, where she sometimes had short answers on exams. She also had to write three essays, which initially caused her a bit of nervousness as she waited until two days before they were due to start them. One reason she waited to start these essays was because her teacher made her nervous, initially sounding very strict about the essays. According to Paola, her instructor never explained how to write the essays, but repeatedly went through the assignment sheet she created. A look at the assignment sheet for this triple essay assignment revealed typos such as “through-out” and confusing instructions such as a required font of “14 inches Roman style.” The assignments were to be graded on three categories, appearance/grade, ethics, and critical thinking. Under appearance/grade, the instructor wrote, “In addition to the instructor having full reign on grading paper subjectively, appearance is also included.” One of the three papers was to be a critique of an article, while the other two were considered “personal opinion” essays. The sheet specified a number of topics, including the ones Paola wrote about: Legal Medical Marijuana, Violence in Mexico, and Immigration. Despite starting the essays just a few days in advance, Paola got 100% on the assignment and told me that she did not even think the instructor really read them. The instructor commentary consisted of “Yes” on the first essay, “Fascinating!” a few check marks, and “Where did you hear this?” on the second essay, and nothing on the third essay. A sentence that read, “Now marijuana is classified as a Schedule I drug, why in the hell is that if we know if does have medicinal value!” got no comment from the instructor.

As mentioned earlier, Paola was an enthusiastic reader, regularly checking out books on her own from the library. While she said she was reading a lot for her classes, she said it was not a big deal because she liked reading. As a result, she was one of the few students who said she consistently did all the reading for her classes. Her reading experiences differed depending on
the class, but included short stories in her English class and readings out of her psychology textbook. She was clearly interested in learning, expressing an interest in majoring in psychology or social work. She enjoyed learning critical thinking skills in her first-year experience course and liked the psychology narratives her psychology instructor shared.

Overall, Paola had an excellent first semester, appeared engaged in school, and received three As and one B in her classes.

**Second semester.**

Paola began the second semester with speech, English, history, and math, but during our first interview seemed a bit less engaged in school than previously, noting that she was having trouble motivating herself this semester. She was absent from my first observation of her English class and stopped coming to school after mid-February, eventually dropping all her classes.

Over winter break, Paola reported moving in with her boyfriend in Juárez and spending the whole break there with him. As her second semester began, she returned for school, but would go from Friday after classes to Sunday at midnight to Juárez, staying with her boyfriend, who was working 12 hours a day, six days a week as a security guard. Balancing these two lives was difficult, as Paola had limited Internet access when in Juárez. This made it difficult for her to do math homework, and she reported struggling to stay up in her history class one day because she spent all Sunday night doing her math homework. Explaining why she waited so long, she said, “cause I do it at Juárez, but it’s – the Internet, it’s too slow, and sometimes for the math program it needs to have program downloaded and you can’t download it, so I got stuck with that, and I was really behind.” Similarly, Paola quickly grew behind in her other homework.
assignments, noting: “I haven’t even read. For the history, I need to read, and I haven’t read – and I haven’t even bought the book over the literature, so, no, I’m not even reading.”

The Paola interviewed in early February was clearly a different student from the one who got mostly As in her classes the previous semester and who delayed an interview for several weeks because she was intently focused on schoolwork. Nonetheless, Paola had been doing some work in her classes. We talked about her major research paper for her English class, for which she was supposed to have 15 sources and write 15 pages. She had already done some of the research for the paper, as she said she wanted to write about Mayan mythology and noted that she would have to go to other libraries because the college library only had one book on Mayan mythology and 12 on Greek mythology. She noted that the type of writing expected of her in this second semester class would be more difficult, saying, “Oh, that was really easy, free-writings and reading and just it was – this is harder, the research.”

Paola had been thinking more about her major as well, saying she was really confused. While she had indicated a strong interest in psychology the previous semester, she stepped back from this, nothing that “it’s too many years for that.” She had considered being a registered nurse, but thought it would be too much work. She also considered her passion for Egypt and thought about being an archaeologist. However, whereas she previously talked about graduate school, she now moderated her expectations, saying she wanted to complete four years of school and then possibly continue on while working.

After the first interview, I largely lost touch with Paola and Joanne had not heard from her as well. She did not post any updates on her Facebook page for over a month. Later in the semester, we had a few sporadic points of contact via Facebook when she was in the U.S. She explained that she did not want to leave her boyfriend in Juárez, who also quit his job, and was
spending time with him instead of going to class. She dropped her classes and admitted to me that she made a big mistake, as she would likely lose her financial aid for the following semester and have to potentially pay back money for the classes she dropped. We talked about strategies for her to get back in school, and she definitely seemed interested in doing so, but she missed another interview scheduled with me and dropped out of contact once again.

From the classes that Paola was enrolled in at the beginning of the semester, it appeared her only serious writing would be done in her English class, with the 15 page research paper, which was longer than most teachers required, as the typical length was 8-10 pages. She would have also been expected to write two literary analyses in the latter half of the semester, which would be around three to four pages long. The latter two observed classes had the writing center director discussing how to write a literary analysis and the course instructor analyzing sonnets with the students.

Otherwise, Paola had anticipated no major writing assignments. In her history class, they were required to copy the Declaration of Independence and a few other documents using a quill pen. They would also be reading Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative in the Life of a Slave Girl* like the UTEP students did. However, as the syllabus noted, “the exams will be primarily multiple choice, matching, and true/false. The assignments will include short answers and perhaps one essay.” While there may have been some short answer responses, it seemed unlikely that students would be writing an essay as its inclusion was qualified by a “perhaps.”

**Conclusion**

Paola’s network depicted in Figure 6.3 is more developed than Joanne’s, but less developed than those in the following case studies.
Paola’s story indicates the unpredictable nature of students’ paths to and through college. While always a diligent student in her senior English class, she was hesitant about college, feeling it was pushed on her by society. However, she soon embraced the idea of college and grew impatient and excited to start, an energy and motivation that carried her through a highly successful fall semester. However, a turn of events in which she grew closer to her boyfriend and quickly withdrew from school was something that would not have expected had this study been only a year long. During the latter part of the Spring semester, she indicated a strong desire to go back to school, but her friend Joanne questioned this a bit, and I began to wonder as well,
as she indicated a strong interest to complete school and then subsequently withdrew from
contact.

Although Paola has since informed me that she does not plan to return to school this year,
I imagine that she will go back to school at some point. At the beginning of the second semester
of college, she felt her decision to attend college was the right decision, citing the experience of a
friend: “I did talk to [one student], and he – well, he didn’t go to college. He’s now working,
cleaning carpets, and he said he really wants to get in school, so yeah, I think I did a good
decision.” She saw her boyfriend work in Mexico long hours for just over one dollar an hour,
and he had wanted to attend college as well. While she may need time to grow into it, and
increase her understanding of college’s value, I think that Paola will do so.

Her writing teacher explained that she seemed engaged at the beginning of the semester,
and that she clearly had the ability to succeed:

…she is one of those tragedies because if she were having a hard time from the beginning,
you know, because there’s some students -- like there was this one student who he was
having a really hard time…But then you have students like [Paola] and several of the
others that were doing fine, had A or B averages, and then just disappeared. And that’s
just tragic, I think, because like she might have -- you know, they usually regret it
because, you know, they lose money and they get the bad grade.

While Paola’s teacher described her story as a “tragedy” because she dropped out of classes
despite her academic potential, her story is not over. With her first semester successes, she
proved she has the ability to be very successful in college. While it wavers and has been affected
by factors such as wanting to spend more time with her boyfriend and the difficulty of crossing
borders, Paola clearly values the importance of college and has demonstrated an interest in learning for learning’s sake that will help to support her when she returns to school.

**Chapter Conclusion**

The three students profiled in this chapter all had first years of college below their expectations, as Daniel and Joanne consistently struggled through the year while Paola started out really strong but unpredictably dropped out the second semester. One characteristic that stood out among these students was that they struggled in school when they found life outside of school more fulfilling. For instance, Daniel liked the idea of being a mechanic because he found it interesting to work with cars, an attribute he did not assign to his classes like art history. Joanne found it difficult to focus on school because being present in her daughter’s formative years was more important than learning about government. While Paola had an intrinsic interest in topics that Daniel and Joanne may have found boring, she found a better offer in her mind as she grew closer to her boyfriend. Especially given the complications of crossing the border, she found her life in Juárez with her boyfriend more fulfilling than her life in school, and rapidly distanced herself from college.

Community colleges are often criticized for low retention rates; however, assigning a simple one-sided blame is not the answer. The students who chose to attend community college in this study questioned the idea of college more than the students who attended university. Their uncertainty translated into less willingness to accept loans or actively pursue scholarships, risks that the university students were willing to take. On the other hand, the college probably could have done more to engage students like these through revised curricula, more personal connections between instructors and students, and more learning communities. These issues will be discussed in more detail in the final chapter.
Chapter 7: Detailed Portraits of the University Students’ Curricular and Extracurricular Lives

Carolina: A Supportive Family and Constant Motivation

…my mom just lets me focus on school. And many parents don’t do that. And like during -- I can say that they’re not my support that much. I’m their support. Because they -- my brother and my sister they see me as an example. So I have to be -- I know that I have to succeed on college because of them…

—Carolina on family support

Carolina’s awesome. She’s the kinda student that I think any teacher would wanna have, and, yes, she’s still getting better with her English skills. Carolina does in one-one-hundredth of the time what a lot of other students do as far as work, as far as improvement, so I don’t know exactly where she was, say, a couple or three years ago, but I have the feeling she’s come a really long way fast and I think she’s gonna go a really long way fast still. So, yeah, if teachers had pets, she would definitely be one of my teacher’s pets, so, yeah, I just loved having her.

—Carolina’s senior English teacher

Background and Defining Characteristics and Experiences

During my year volunteering and researching in Carolina’s senior English class, I saw her as a diligent but soft-spoken and shy girl who lacked confidence in her abilities, which were quite impressive. As quoted in the epigraph, her high school English teacher described her as “awesome” and “the kinda student that I think any teacher would wanna have.” Having spent most of her life living in Ciudad Juárez just across the border from El Paso, Carolina came to the U.S. at the beginning of eighth grade with her mother and younger siblings when her parents separated and her mother decided to take the family to the U.S.

Carolina did not know any English except some basic vocabulary before immigrating. Making the transition was difficult because her ESL classes were all in English and she did not understand anything in school. She attended the downtown middle school that most of the
students in this study attended for one year before transitioning to Samson High School. At Samson, she spent another year in ESL before moving into all mainstream classes her second year there. Nonetheless, she graduated from high school in three years and was ranked in the top 10% of her class. When asked how she learned English so quickly, Carolina explained that she saw others who had been here for more years but with less English, and felt that the difference was that she went out of her way to practice speaking and writing more.

Over the course of the study, Carolina’s motivation became a defining characteristic in her English development and general success at school. For instance, in an early interview, she mentioned feeling that she lacked vocabulary, to which I suggested that she read more in English. By the next interview, she had checked out *Twilight* from the library, and later moved on to read the whole series. When her senior English teacher and I co-designed an essay for *Lord of the Flies* for their final senior essay, we asked for a three to four page essay, which was the longest essay most of the class had ever written and a point of contention with most students. Instead of complaining, Carolina insisted on writing a 10 page essay.

A defining characteristic of Carolina early in this study was her soft-spokenness and lack of confidence in English. In the beginning of study survey, she ranked her spoken and written English abilities “Not Good” but her Spanish abilities as “Very Good.” While she had taken a pre-AP English class previously and started out her senior year in a dual-credit English class, she quickly became nervous and transferred into a mainstream one the first week. As mentioned in Chapter 5, she initially expressed some doubt about her ability to handle university-level work, asking me if she should consider community college instead. However, as her final high school semester progressed, she increasingly grew more confident in her choice to attend UTEP.
Because Carolina was the oldest in the family, there was pressure on her to graduate from high school earlier and to finish college, in order that she could help support her family upon graduation. Whereas other study students had to bear a number of family responsibilities, Carolina’s mother made school the first priority. While Carolina worked during the summer before she started college, she never worked during the school year, with the exception of some volunteer work. As she started college, she explained that her mom spoiled her like a baby and that she was given the time she needed to study at home, with household chores delegated to her younger siblings. While money was limited in her family, Carolina explained that she had her own laptop and Internet at home, which helped her accomplish some of her college-level work more easily than if she lacked this type of home computer access.

In addition to strong family support, Carolina clearly benefited from a local Catholic community center, which she regularly attended since her arrival in the U.S. During high school, she went there as much as an hour or two everyday for homework and reading tutoring along with computer classes. During her senior year, Carolina began to give back to the center via volunteering with the GED and citizenship classes in addition to helping special education children use the computers. During the summer before college, Carolina got a job at the center teaching GED and citizenship classes. In addition to benefiting from the classes and tutoring they offered, Carolina appeared to receive college-related advice as well, as she reported people at the center urging her to start at UTEP instead of EPCC.

Upon starting college, Carolina appeared to be a very different person from the earlier person I knew. She appeared more confident and spoke much louder, so it was no longer difficult to capture her voice in the interview recordings. When asked about her summer, she described two important experiences that appeared to contribute to this transformation. First, the
above-mentioned job at the community center taught her to be more independent because she was away from her family more than normal and required her to communicate effectively with her supervisors and in the classes she taught. Second, she went to Washington DC with her school’s chapter of DECA, an organization that aims to promote future leaders for careers in “marketing, finance, hospitality, and management.” In DC, Carolina explained that she learned in a week what she did not learn in two to three years of history classes. More importantly for her personal growth, she met with people from all over the world at the conference, including members of Congress. These two experiences combined to help transform Carolina from the shy, quiet girl in high school to someone who was more confident to handle the pressures of college and make connections that would support her success.

**High School Literacy Experiences**

As mentioned above, Carolina was clearly interested in doing extra work to improve her English, such as writing a longer essay than the rest of the class. Early in the study, she asked me for a college-level prompt that she could practice responding to. However, despite her dedication to improving her writing, Carolina said math was her favorite subject and intended to major in engineering. When asked where English was on her list of favorite classes, she explained that she did not know because of a lack of confidence: “I think that maybe I can be better in English or language because when I was in Mexico in school the best class was Spanish because I know it and here it would be the worse class because I’m not confident in there.” For Carolina, her newness to English did not pose a barrier in her math classes, at least at the high school level.

Carolina desired improvement in all areas, including her English. She regretted avoiding a dual-credit class her senior year, saying that she felt behind compared to her friend in a dual-
credit class because students there extensively practiced writing, while she did comparatively little writing (three 2-4 page essays in her mainstream senior English class). She wished her senior English teacher, Mr. Robertson, would have been stricter as the students messing around in her English class were very distracting and prevented the class from learning as much as she could. As a result, Carolina felt she learned more English from her personal reading her senior year.

Although she did not do as much writing as she would like in her English class, Carolina felt the type of writing she did valuable. In her personal statement for college, she wrote about growing up, focusing particularly on her parents’ separation and her subsequent move to the U.S. with her mother and siblings. Here, she recalled her early struggles learning English in vivid detail:

I confronted another obstacle. I didn’t know the language. During the first weeks I used to cry everyday when I came back from school. It was frustrating being in the classroom surrounded by many people talking and can not understand a word. Everything was new to me the school, the teachers, my classmates but most important the language in which I was supposed to learned all the lessons. Together the school and my family seen to attacked me.

Despite the powerful story Carolina told in her personal statement, she said her *Beowulf* essay was her most important piece of writing senior year because it required more from her than previous assignments. Instead of writing about a personal experience, Carolina had to, in her words, “read a book and then break it...to find the true meaning of the book, the true meaning of the passage. Why is the author saying that? Then you can explain it?” According to her, this would be more in line with college-level writing than the previous work she had completed for
testing like TAKS and TELPAS. For this essay, Carolina wrote about how “Anglo-Saxon society is a united community that fights to defend the security of all members.” Her strong writing abilities were clear throughout the essay, as she demonstrated impressive skill in making insightful analytical comments and integrating quotes with high level signal phrases like “Courageously Beowulf accepts the risk and declares…” In the final paragraph, Carolina revealed her understanding of Mexican American movements for civil rights when looking for a broader meaning to the poem. She wrote that “This poem as a whole presents a lesson to its readers, the importance of a united community” and discussed Cesar Chavez and the Chicano movement, emphasizing that their solidarity is what helped them receive the rights they demanded.

In order to gain more writing practice before college, Carolina pushed to make her final essay, based on *Lord of the Flies*, about 8-10 pages long, even though much less was required. The topic she developed focused on “The evil part that wakes up and you want power” was complex and required stronger analytical skills than most of the previous work she had done. Carolina chose this topic because she felt that it would allow her to make connections throughout the whole story and between all the characters in her essay rather than just focusing on a tiny aspect. Unfortunately, her final essay was not as successful as expected, largely because Carolina lost her flash drive on the bus and had to rewrite the latter half of the essay last minute. In the essay, she provided too much background information in the first several pages, information that did not necessarily support the final point she was building. The inclusion of this information was likely connected to a desire to make the essay longer, without an idea of exactly how to do that. However, the strength of Carolina’s analytical skills came out during the essay, with statements like this, which described the situation following the death of Piggy:
“There was nothing to save. All reason, morality, civilization, everything was lost. The boys had actually started killing each other without any regret. Finally the savage part had dominated the civilized part.”

**Literacy and Learning in the First Year of College**

**First semester.**

Early in her first semester at college, Carolina knew that the writing demands would be different at college:

Like they expect us to tell what do we learn from, in writing. Everything is going to be in writing, that’s what my teachers have told me…it’s going to get like more…extended. More complicated the writing, they’re going to expect more from us. Like in the history class, this paper was just a paragraph and we have to turn in one on next Thursday that’s going to be two or three, no one to two pages. So it’s longer.

Whereas writing played a minimal role in Carolina’s high school outside of her English classes, Carolina anticipated having to write more often and in more classes at the college level. Instead of taking weeks to do an essay, Carolina found that she would be expected to write one in a few days.

Not only would Carolina be expected to write much more than in high school, she was expected to read more as well. Unlike students who found their first-year seminar easy compared to other classes, Carolina said her first year seminar was one of the hardest, with the highest reading load of any of her classes. It was a learning community connected with her history class, which also had a lot of reading. For the first year seminar, Carolina was often expected to read a few academic journal articles weekly, articles that students were expected to download themselves from the databases. Carolina and her friend, also her study partner, were
the only two who did this the first time around. At first, Carolina reported spending three to four hours a day just reading for her courses, but quickly learned that she did not have to read everything, as her professors generally summarized the readings via in-class lectures.

In her FYC class, Carolina had almost weekly writing assignments including an analysis of a website, discourse community map, and a memo (see Table 7.1 for a list of Carolina’s first-year writing experiences). While the course theme was supposed to be community oriented as directed by the official syllabus, her instructor took a pop culture focus, and Carolina, building on the knowledge she had gained from her extracurricular *Twilight* reading, focused much of her work on the *Twilight* phenomenon. In an early assignment structured as a memo, she wrote informing the audience about the *Twilight* phenomenon, giving details about the beginning of the series, and its subsequent success as it was translated into movies. One of the most valuable assignments in her English class was her APA-style annotated bibliography, which taught her the basics of APA style and creating an annotated bibliography, both of which helped her complete a similar assignment in her first-year seminar. Not all of the assignments for the course were focused on *Twilight*, however, as she chose a very different topic for her visual analysis. Here, she focused on a Bill O’Reilly interview with the author Jacob Sullum who wrote a book titled *Saying Yes: In Defense of Drugs*. Interestingly, a focus on drug legalization became her focal topic in her second semester FYC course, which is discussed in the next section.
In her first-year seminar course, Carolina had to write a final research paper in addition to the article analyses she wrote throughout the semester. The topic of the final paper, which she chose, was “The Virgin of Guadalupe and the Influence in Europeans in New Spain.” According to Carolina, her instructor explained that she could do research in Spanish, as long as she translated to English for the final paper, since much of the work on this topic was written in Spanish.

In her history class, Carolina wrote several essays during the semester, each one progressively longer. For instance, the first essay asked her to compare and contrast the perspectives of two texts, the biography of a former slave and another text written by a surgeon.
on slave ships. Her mid-term exam was an essay exam, in which she was given two questions in advance that she could prepare outlines for. The topics were complex, asking students to synthesize information from multiple sources and perspectives. For instance, the second question cited Omi and Winant’s (1993) *Racial Formation* to argue that there is “no biological basis to race” and proceeded to ask students to “write an essay that discusses how Spain and England construct ideas of race and systems that are based on these racial categories by doing the following.”

While Carolina said the writing she did for her English class was the most interesting because of the focus on *Twilight*, she felt her history writing was the most important writing she did her first semester. Of this, she viewed her final essay, in which she was asked to choose four from a list of eight themes to write about how the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* “open[s] a window into the institution of slavery,” as the most important. The value Carolina attributed to this essay was in part because it was worth 20% of her final grade, but also because it was the longest essay she had written (six to seven pages), with the exception of the *Lord of the Flies* essay discussed earlier. One of the big challenges with this essay Carolina had was to choose the four themes and write about them in a way that they would be connected, as requested by her professor. In helping her on this essay, I provided ideas for making the connections between different themes, as the first draft she brought to me was largely disconnected.

Despite her earlier concerns about not being prepared for college as well as failing the first section of math for the semester because she was bored and did not take it seriously, Carolina was clearly excelling by the end of the first semester. She explained she felt she was meeting the challenges of college because she was consistently getting some of the highest grades in her classes and expected all As and Bs for the semester, higher grades than she
originally expected. It also appeared that all the writing she was doing in her classes was paying off, in that she was finally getting the practiced she desired to improve her writing. While some students in this study did not notice a change in their knowledge of academic English over their first semester, Carolina felt differently: “I go back to my first essay that I did at the beginning of the semester and this, this one that I missed, like way better. Like I connect in my sentences, I feel that I can express more easily than the beginning. Like my sentences were, I couldn’t express what I wanted. Now it’s getting more, I think.”

**Second semester.**

Carolina continued to excel her second semester of college and felt that the level of work was lighter than the first semester. She continued to write extensively in her English class, but the writing demands were much less in history and largely nonexistent in her political science and psychology classes. In general, she found her English class the most difficult, saying, “In the other ones, it’s just read and then the exam is…each month. So I don’t have to worry until the day of the exam.”

In comparison with her inexperienced first semester FYC teacher, Carolina’s second semester teacher was one of the most experienced instructors in the program, something that was readily apparent to Carolina:

We can tell from the very beginning that she knows what she's doing, what she's teaching. And then, she has all things all over the place with good information to make the assignment what she wants and she keeps a lot of information. I think I found like three papers that she wrote, aside from the guide, to help us. I think it's a good thing for her … for us because I think she didn’t have to do that and then she spent her time doing that for us.
My observations confirmed an instructor who was consistently well-prepared, confident, and who explained things very clearly to her students. She had a course wiki, which had pages of resources that she had developed to supplement the materials found in the *UTEP Guide to First-Year Composition*. In contrast, Carolina could clearly tell that her previous semester teacher was more inexperienced, noting that, as a graduate student, he was not only learning the material he was teaching but also how to teach.\(^{15}\)

As noted in Chapter 4, the second semester FYC course at UTEP was a hybrid course, something that might have posed a problem to a less technologically savvy student; however, Carolina liked this model, feeling that it allowed her to work on her own time. She also valued the distributed assessment aspect of the class, saying that helped remove potential teacher bias from the process. For her semester topic, Carolina chose drug legalization, writing a genre analysis, literature review, and an online op-ed focused on the topic, in addition to creating a video documentary.

The literature review/primary research report was on par with her first-year seminar research report for being one of the hardest writing tasks for the year, largely because of the amount of research it required. Carolina’s review included nine sources including articles, academic books, and web sources, plus a survey that she conducted focused on student attitudes towards drug legalization. While she heavily qualified the small sample size of the survey in her report, she had 43 participants, which is quite a respectable number compared to other students’ primary research projects. Carolina’s motivation and savviness as a student was revealed when talking about the primary research, as she initially had trouble getting responses, so decided to

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\(^{15}\) This being said, Carolina’s first semester teacher seemed better qualified to help Carolina on the grammatical aspects of her writing, as he was also a native Spanish speaker and lent her a book to help her improve her writing fluency.
send it out via Blackboard in her large lecture classes. In this case, a less astute student might have simply reported the survey results from a few people, a practice not uncommon for this assignment.

Another major project for her FYC course was a video documentary, which was generally recommended to do in groups because of the amount of work involved; however, because she did not want to give up her topic, Carolina decided to go it alone. Working on the documentary was the most stressful part of the year because of all the different aspects involved combined with the fact that she was learning a new program and operating system, iMovie on the Mac. The night before the documentary was due, Carolina ended up staying in the lab until 10 p.m., despite earlier goals of being home by 6 p.m. This was one of the few times she recalled her mother being truly angry with her because of her late arrival at home. Despite the difficulties completing the assignment, she felt she learned valuable skills that would serve her well in the future.

Although Carolina entered UTEP with an interest in engineering, disappointing experiences in her math classes found her realizing that she was not as good at math as she had thought. Consequently, she reconsidered majoring in engineering and indicated an interest in psychology early in her second semester, as she found the class interesting and liked that many things relate to this topic. As the semester progressed, Carolina became more confident in her major, and was planning to declare a major in psychology soon, but decided to wait until after the summer so she could research career options more to solidify her decision. While leaning towards psychology, she also considered political science either as a major or a minor, and explained her attraction to these fields of study: “They have in common that you can help others. Psychology—you can help people with their problems. Their social problems. And Political
science is on a higher level that you get to help problems that involve more people. Like do a lot of change -- to make a change in the world.” Clearly a desire to help others with problems was strong in Carolina and had been a dream for a long time: “Since I was little, I thought like I want to be someone important that can help others.”

**Conclusion**

As depicted in Figure 7.1, Carolina had a few challenges, but developed a comprehensive network to support her success as she transitioned through school.

![Figure 7.1](image-url)

Figure 7.1. Carolina’s sources of capital and challenge.
Reflecting on her first year at college, Carolina reported that she was required to read and write much more than she ever had to in high school, commenting that she “actually learned how to write more [this year] than any other year in English.” Throughout the year, she clearly felt she was improving, becoming a better reader, writer, and communicator in English, and that her largest perceived obstacle in succeeding at college, her knowledge of English, was becoming less of a problem everyday. She found she developed her writing skills most through rewriting, noting that “I think what helps is that you can write a paper and then look at it. Not the same day. Two days later, you can see many of the errors that you did.”

As evident throughout this case study, Carolina was truly an exceptional student devoted to excellence, and while self-conscious at times about things like public speaking or her English abilities, knew that she was a hard-working student. When asked what supported her success, she replied, “I think it's me. The way that I always do my homework and I have to spend my time like on my homework. And maybe other people, they have to work or they have some other things to do.” Carolina consistently worked hard and reported spending hours every night her first semester reading for her classes. She was supported by a love of learning that became evident by the way she developed various texts related to her topic in her second semester FYC course. She was one of the few students who enjoyed reading for pleasure and the only one who reported reading books over winter break, commenting, “I always like to read. And even in high school, they didn’t ask us to read or require us to read, but I did it on my own.”

When asked who was her most important source of support this year, she listed me as second behind her family. Carolina identified me as one of her few sources of detailed feedback on her writing, as she did not receive extensive feedback from teachers and graders, with comments on every paper I reviewed simply identifying that there were grammatical issues
without saying what they were. Clearly, however, Carolina’s family was an invaluable source of support in different ways, which she articulated in the epigraph to her case study. Unlike other students who had to take care of siblings or help in other ways around the house, Carolina’s mother always told her to study first. Also, Carolina felt pressure on her being the first in the family to attend college. By succeeding at college, she would be able to set a strong example for her younger siblings that they can too succeed, consequently helping secure a better future for all her family members.

**Mauricio: Driven by Grades and Parents to Succeed**

“I think the only reason why I go to [English] class is cause attendance counts, it’s a grade...[writing] is important because of my grade. But, it, for me it doesn’t mean anything.”

—Mauricio on the importance of grades

“[Mauricio] has been one of the most motivated students in any of my classes, actually. For example, for the literature review and report, the primary research project, he created this really elaborate survey, with four different sections. And he asked me to give him feedback on it, and he was the only student who did that.”

—Mauricio’s second semester college writing teacher

**Background and Defining Characteristics and Experiences**

Like Carolina, Mauricio was a late arrival to the U.S. school system, having studied in Juárez until his freshman year at Samson. Mauricio began school in the U.S. with minimal English, knowing only basic vocabulary, which his mother taught him. He was an immature freshman and misbehaved into his sophomore year until his sophomore year teacher and mentor, Ms. Cooper, brought him in line with her strictness. Ms. Cooper recalled that Mauricio refused to speak English at first, screaming at her when he misunderstood that any student who did not speak English would fail. She explained that Mauricio came to her with very little English even after a year at Samson, as his freshman ESL teacher would speak Spanish most of the time.
Mauricio was the only student who still lived in Mexico during the study, and crossed the border everyday to attend school. During high school, this meant getting up at 4 a.m., crossing the border, going along as his father dropped his brother off at school, and arriving at Samson around 8 a.m. During college, his crossing changed as he drove to a hotel his grandfather owned in downtown Juárez, walked across the border bridge, and caught a bus to the university. The increasing drug-related violence in Mauricio’s city affected him in various ways during college. Previously letting Mauricio stay out late because they trusted him, his parents imposed a strict 7 p.m. curfew which prevented him from staying at the library as late as he wanted. During his first semester, a family friend was kidnapped, resulting in Mauricio getting half credit on a major history assignment. While another professor understood this difficulty, giving him full credit for the missed assignment, Mauricio did not intend to tell his history professor about his situation because he saw this professor as a “mean person” and who was “real closed, like, he doesn’t like care about you, he just cares about you turning in the work.”

While Mauricio had this additional challenge of crossing the border to go to school, he had an advantage that many other students did not: a well-off family who owned multiple businesses and parents who constantly pushed him to get very high grades in school. While Mauricio denied his family was rich, he recalled having private computer lessons when he first got a computer and, when he started college, had cell phones for both sides of the border, including a U.S. iPhone. He paid cash for a 2006 used car and briefly lent his mother several thousand dollars from his savings for a new living room set. His favorite clothing was Guess, a high-end mall retailer.

Mauricio described his parents as crazy as they expected him to get A+ in all his high school classes, despite not having similar expectations for his siblings. According to Ms. Cooper,
Mauricio once told her a story in which he had gotten a failing grade in third grade and his father took him to a *maquiladora*\(^\text{16}\) for a day, making him work alongside assembly line workers who earned low wages. His father said this would be his life if he did not do well at school, and Mauricio “got very scared and went back to school and never failed anything again.” As a result of this push by his parents, Mauricio became a very grade driven student and explained that the worst thing a teacher could do to him was threaten his grades. During his senior year, he went out of the way to type up all his work for extra credit, and even fabricated an email from his parents to his teachers, which read:

> We are Mauricio’s parents, and we are really concern with his grades. Lately, our son has been showing some poor and unacceptable grades that do not meet with the minimum goal that we have set for our children. We will like to know if he has been giving you any kind of respectful attitude or if he has any issues with his attendance. Our requirements for him are to have 97's as a minimum grade in every class, but due to his last semester's grades, we are sure that in this and some other classes his lowest grade should be a 99. I would like you to please give him some extra work if possible, and we want you to know that you totally count with our authorization to keep him after school, during lunch and even before school if you think it is needed. We also understand that you you have a strict schedule to follow, so if you have problems with grading Mauricio’s late or extra work please just let us know. If you have any question please feel free to contact me by email. I am totally available for "Parent Teacher Conferences." Thank you for your time and patience.

\(^{16}\) U.S. owned factories that sprung up on the Mexican side of the border, due to cheap labor and lax labor laws, especially in the wake of NAFTA. A worker in one of these factories could expect to earn about $10 a day.
This email demonstrates the Mauricio’s skillful ability to communicate with others in order to promote his success. Mr. Robertson did not question the authenticity of this email largely because it was in line with the parental image, an image that was likely fairly accurate, that Mauricio had constructed for the teachers of his classes.

Largely because of parental support and pressure creating a self-driven personality, Mauricio constantly strived for the best during high school and saw that the big problem with other students at Samson was the lack of parental support. Ms. Cooper explained that Mauricio “would stand out anywhere because he has drive in him. He's gonna do well no matter where he goes because that's him. He's responsible. He wants to do best.” During interviews, he would regularly refer to school and life as a competition, expressing concern that he would have to be competing with students who had spoken English all their lives while studying at college. Maurico applied his perfectionist attitude to English as well, telling me in an early interview, “one of my goals is to like learn English perfectly, although it’s like hard, and I know I have a really heavy accent, but I want to get rid of it and I know the way of doing it is just to practice it.” While this concern over accent could have harmed a less confident student, it never seemed to affect Mauricio too negatively except to push him to work constantly to improve his English.

In this area, Ms. Cooper became an important mentor to Mauricio, supporting much of his English development. Mauricio described her role in his development, saying, “She taught me how to write and I think she was more like my inspiration to write because she was…really challenging, she was always pushing me and telling me to do this, do that. She’s like a great teacher for me.” He explained that the TAKS was a “huge obstacle” because he was required to pass it in order to graduate, something that seemed impossible when he could barely write a sentence in English upon entering his sophomore year ESL class. During Mauricio’s year, Ms.
Cooper had a number of students who she would require to come to tutoring before school, after school, and even on Saturdays, and she recalled that Mauricio would come all the time, constantly revising his work and seeking her feedback. Because of the high standards Ms. Cooper set and the commitment she had for Mauricio’s learning, Mauricio was dissatisfied with every other teacher he had during high school.

Mauricio eventually became a star student at his high school, something that stemmed from not only his high grades and drive, but his self-identified ability to befriend older people with ease. As a result of this latter talent, he gained the trust of his teachers and was asked to regularly work with the school counselors as a student. Because they valued his work so much, they would even pull him out of class, where they knew he could catch up with ease, and trusted him to handle the scholarship application files of other senior students. He boasted that he could essentially go to class when he wanted, because teachers trusted him and knew that he was doing a lot of work for the school administration. His work with the high school continued through his first year at college, but became more of a negative factor in his life because of having to work longer hours than the original 20 promised. During one observed class, he stepped out to take a call from the high school, and felt that his work there contributed to a lower than desired first semester GPA. Nonetheless, despite getting paid minimum wage for relatively high-level administrative work, he liked the responsibly and trust that went along with the job and kept it throughout his first year.

Due to the factors discussed here, an immense drive built by his parents and his hugely supportive sophomore year ESL teacher, Mauricio entered high school with minimal English but graduated in the top 10% of his class with thousands of dollars of scholarships. As mentioned in Chapter 5, he was accepted to the flagship state university, University of Texas at Austin, and
was pushed by Ms. Cooper to leave town for college, but he decided to attend UTEP because of the importance of family in his life.

**High School Literacy Experiences**

As mentioned in the previous section, Mauricio showed remarkable development in his English skills during his high school years, going from knowing essentially nothing in English to being one of the best writers in his senior level English class. However his sophomore year was by far his most important year of development. Ms. Cooper described his abilities when he arrived in her class vividly: “The first writing he did for me, the first page was one sentence. Every word was misspelled, misused. He just...I mean, it was very poor.”

During his sophomore year English class, Mauricio recalled writing everyday in class, and having to write a TAKS practice essay every Friday. These prompts varied, but tended to be personal and creative and Mauricio actually invented a number of his stories. As he grew into preferring personal writing over analytical writing, which he did not really do until senior year, Mauricio thought these prompts were cool and made writing enjoyable. He said they included writing about such things as “the biggest challenge you face” or “one day you helped someone.” Because he was so motivated to write for Ms. Cooper, Mauricio wrote his longest essay at Samson his sophomore year during Thanksgiving break. Over the break, he was required to write five TAKS essays, one to two pages each, and he became so engaged with one of the prompts that he wrote five pages. He said that he turned one of those five essays into his TAKS essay, and ended up getting the highest possible score. What is amazing about Mauricio’s achievement is that he had been learning English for less than two years, excelling ahead of students who had learned English their whole lives.
During his junior year, Mauricio took two English classes so that he could have enough credits to graduate in four years, since he had ESL classes his first year. These were not simply any English classes, however, but pre-AP English II and AP English III. According to Mauricio, he did not do nearly as much writing in these courses than as he did for Ms. Cooper’s class, and found that he would often repeat much of what he learned in her English II class. He did say that the writing in these courses did not focus so much on the TAKS. Nonetheless, having studied a month at another local high school, he felt that the AP classes at Samson were like regular English classes elsewhere in the amount of work that was required of students.

As he had been in AP classes previously, it was surprising to find that Mauricio was in a mainstream English class his senior year, where he reported it being easy and repeating things he had learned in previous classes. Talking with Mauricio and Ms. Cooper revealed that she had wanted him to be in a senior English AP course as opposed to the alternative dual-credit English course, as the former would hold him to national standards. However, because of low enrollment, the senior AP course was cancelled and Mauricio had not taken the Accuplacer required to place into the dual-credit course. Mauricio also described his decision to be in the regular class as laziness, which seemed difficult to believe.

Like the other students in this study, Mauricio’s major senior writing assignments included a personal statement and essays on Beowulf and Lord of the Flies. The Beowulf essay was particularly difficult for him and he said writing it gave him a headache. This was in part because of the difficulty he had understanding the antiquated English text: “I don't like that kind of writing cause since it's old English I can, I don't understand it totally and I have a hard time understanding normal English. The one we use usually and I think that's the reason. Cause it was old English.” Beyond this, however, it was challenging because it required him to do
something different than the personal narratives he became comfortable writing in that he was required to analyze a character: “I like writing stuff that I create, you know, I came out with it. If I come out with it, it will be cool. But if I have to write about something special, some character or something like that, I don’t like that.” Despite the challenge that Mauricio faced in writing this essay, he realized that in college he would not be writing personal stories as much as analytical essays.

Because of these difficulties, his *Beowulf* essay appeared less successful than some of this other work. His thesis was fairly standard, stating that “Beowulf kills the malicious creature which shows that Anglo Saxons will not hesitate to risk their lives to save their race.” His first citation from the poem supported his point well, pointing out that Beowulf is willing to die in battle if not successful in killing Grendel. However, the subsequent citations ended up being confusing, such as the fragment, “Bent back as Beowulf leaned up one arm” to others that did not really support his thesis. Mauricio’s strength returned in the last paragraph, where he was encouraged to creatively connect the lessons learned from analyzing Beowulf with a real-life example. Here, he began by writing, “As far as there is life on this Earth, there will always be some Grendel or a furious dragon looking to take over of all we have,” proceeding to write about the attacks on September 11 and the subsequent war on terror, which played nicely into his teacher’s conservative political sentiments.

For his final essay, Mauricio read *Lord of the Flies* and wrote an essay on it like the other students. Despite having taken pre-AP and AP courses, he said *Lord of the Flies* was the first full book he read during his time at Samson, and, in typical Mauricio style, said his main motivation for reading it was to get a good grade for the essay and the course. This essay ended up being much stronger than the *Beowulf* one, and Mauricio acknowledged putting much more
effort into it because he wanted to practice more serious writing to be prepared for college. In writing this essay, Mauricio even checked out a commentary book he found in the school library, which he explained described the book in more detail and gave a different interpretation of the story.

Mauricio began his essay again appealing to his teacher’s political leanings, setting up Stalin and the Soviet Union as representative of the authoritarian character Jack and contrasting it with Ralph, who is connected to the United States’ value of the welfare of people and of democracy. While working with Mauricio on this essay, I recall him struggling a long time in trying to write the perfect introduction. I eventually pushed him to move on out of concern that he would not finish the essay on time. The rest of the essay, while having occasional lapses of focus, generally developed the thesis well, supporting the discussion with well-chosen examples from the novel. Moreover, his paragraphs usually had strong topic sentences, such as “Jack’s desire to obtain total power over the island and the kids leads him to take some drastic choices.” As requested, all his quotes were cited with page numbers and he included a correctly formatted works cited list with the novel at the end of the essay.

As mentioned previously, Mauricio graduated from high school in the top 10% of his senior class, despite his GPA being weighed down by poor grades his first year, when he was struggling to understand his classes. Nonetheless, he feared the worst for college, and felt that he was hopelessly unprepared. When asked if the high school had prepared him, he replied,

College is beyond just a three to four page essay and we're not even scratching the surface of college. I think I'll have a hard time in college because I'm not prepared for it. I'm not used to writing a lot and here we've had one semester reading Lord of the Flies.
In college we'll have about a week to read a book and come out with a good essay. I don't think I'm prepared for college at all.

**Literacy and Learning in the First Year of College**

**First semester.**

Despite his gloomy expectations for college, Mauricio went through his first semester marveling how easy college was, which he admitted was helped because he had expected the worst. During an early visit to campus, he assumed everyone sleeping on couches in the library were exhausted from the work, but soon realized that “slackers” do exist at college:

I thought people like college life was gonna be like smart people everywhere and slacking wouldn’t exist here. There’s a lot of slackers here, lazy people. I guess with time like they’ll just go away, stop college or something. But there’s…some differences, because there are more people who actually do their work than in high school.

Mauricio found the first several weeks of college especially easy, which may have led him to put less time into his schoolwork than he needed, resulting in a less than stellar first-semester GPA of 3.0.

Like his counterparts at UTEP, Mauricio reported writing for most of his college classes, including his first-year seminar, history, and philosophy courses, in addition to his FYC class (see Table 7.2 for a list of Mauricio’s first-year writing experiences). As described earlier, the FYC curriculum at the university was very different from what Mauricio had practiced in high school, as he was not asked to write any personal narratives or analyze literature. Instead, Mauricio had projects such as a memo and an annotated bibliography, both of which he struggled with.
Table 7.2

Maurico’s First-Year Writing Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fall semester</th>
<th>Spring semester</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>FYC</strong></td>
<td><strong>FYC</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homepage portfolio</td>
<td>4-6 page genre analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3 page agency discourse memo</td>
<td>7-10 page literature review/primary research report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5 page rhetorical/visual analysis</td>
<td>5-6 minute documentary (group project)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-10 source annotated bibliography</td>
<td>2-page online opinion piece (cancelled by instructor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-6 page community problem report</td>
<td>Advocacy website (cancelled by instructor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>History</strong></td>
<td><strong>History (Spanish)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five 1 page response essays</td>
<td>No writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3 page argument/analysis essay on <em>Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Math</strong></td>
<td><strong>Math</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No writing</td>
<td>No writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Philosophy</strong></td>
<td><strong>Political Science (Spanish)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online discussion postings</td>
<td>5 three page essays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>First-Year Seminar</strong></td>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online discussion postings</td>
<td>Essay exam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 page research paper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the memo, Mauricio was asked to observe an agency in the community and write a memo informing the audience about its key characteristics, discourse practice, and the relation of the agency to an “important social or community issue.” An early email to me from Mauricio indicated he was finding this difficult. He wrote, “I have no clue of what I am doing!!! This is an easy assignment, but I am having a hard time with it because of the instructions.” With the email, he attached a very underdeveloped draft of a memo that had a couple of paragraphs describing the basic facts about a for-profit clothing company, not a non-profit company that he should have been focusing on. Mauricio’s difficulty with this assignment may have resulted from lack of direction from his inexperienced instructor who did not seem particularly adept at
explaining and scaffolding assignments. It also may have stemmed from this being a completely new type of assignment for Mauricio, unlike anything he had written in high school. Despite these difficulties, Mauricio found the memo assignment the only valuable writing he did all semester, because it had some real-world value: “The most valuable, well, maybe the memo because I think those are useful, but I don’t see myself writing a rhetorical analysis, am I wrong? Do you really do that?”

Another FYC assignment that caused Mauricio some consternation was his annotated bibliography, which he came to me seeking help for. For this piece, he was asked to come up with a research question, create an abstract, and provide annotations of seven to eight sources that he would use in a later course assignment. Although he had an interesting research question, “Does the way we talk to babies have a future impact on their learning?” he began working on this assignment last minute, struggling to find enough required sources. While giving feedback on drafts, I provided APA templates as his reference formatting was off, and recommended that his draft abstract be significantly shortened. In interviews, he explained that this ended up being the most difficult assignment of the semester, largely because of his unfamiliarity with APA, which he had identified as the “official” citation style of the university because it was being taught in his FYC course. Unfortunately, by the time of the assignment, his instructor had not taught any APA conventions, which did not help students like Mauricio, who were unfamiliar with this citation style because they were only taught MLA, if any citation style, during high school. After the assignment, the instructor apparently spent weeks lecturing from PowerPoint presentations on minute details of APA style, with one observed class dedicated to every detail of alphabetizing entries in a reference list. While Mauricio first found his FYC instructor “cool” and funny with his awkward jokes, he was utterly bored with the course by the end of the
semester because of the repetitive nature of the PowerPoint lectures and said he would have stopped coming if not for the required attendance. While he reported asking questions regularly at the beginning of the semester, by the end he would sit silently in the back of the class, because he had learned simply doing the work at college was much more important than being the teacher’s pet.

Mauricio’s frustration with citation styles was exacerbated by his first-year seminar teacher’s requirement that students use MLA style in her course, as she was an avid lover of Shakespeare and literature. Mauricio had a love/hate relationship with this course, disliking the fact that his teacher was “weird” and that the course was overly easy, but liking the fact that it was an easy A, and, in fact, ended up being the only A of his first semester. For this course, he reported only having to read a short story of several pages every other week, and posting a short paragraph response online. He did have one research paper for which he was required to turn in several drafts. He was a bit frustrated with this course as he had expected it to be more about showing him the various resources of the university, which it did not.

Like the other university students, Mauricio did a lot of writing for his history course, although he appeared to do less than other students in the study. He reported having to write five one-page essays, and a longer essay on the book, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. He disliked history with a passion, possibly stemming from his difficulties understanding history class in high school, as it was all talking—in English. He was excited that he received a high score on his first short history paper, but then saw his grades decline. From looking at one short paper, they appeared to be about explaining a topic from the book, as his “Short paper #2” discussed the development of British colonies in the Americas.
Of all the classes his first semester, Mauricio most disliked philosophy because of the difficulty of the readings and its focus on more abstract thinking. At the beginning of the semester, he said it was clearly the most demanding course reading-wise, as he would have to spend at least four hours a class doing the readings, and still go to class without understanding things very well; however, he noted that the other students similarly struggled and that the professor’s explanations helped clarify confusion. Along with the readings, Mauricio reported having to post online for every class, but reported receiving “Neither grades, nor responses, feedback” on any of his postings. While most students stopped posting, Mauricio continued posting throughout the semester as he knew that posting was part of his grade. Mauricio’s frustration with the course peaked with his mid-term exam, which required him to write a few short essays and a longer essay. Despite having done all the reading for the course up to that point, Mauricio failed the exam and disconnected with the course afterwards, beginning to skim the readings more and calling the course and the ideas in the course “insane.” Looking back at the end of the school year, he noted, “that kind of reading that I had for philosophy requires a lot of twisted thinking, you know, like, analyze things and question everything and seeing things from another perspective. So yeah, that’s why it was kind of more challenging.”

**Second semester.**

After a disappointing (for him) first semester that ended with a 3.0 GPA, Mauricio set a goal to get a 4.0 his second semester, and needed to earn at least a 3.6 in order to keep his scholarship money. In order to achieve this goal, he realized the importance of friend support, reaching out for help, and being more assertive when someone or something gave him a lower grade than he desired.
Mauricio was thinking a lot about his major early in the semester, reconsidering his desire to go into computer science after an uninteresting experience coding and because of his desire to work more with people. His family background was important, as he noted that relatives were all accountants or computer scientists. By the end of the semester, he declared a major, following family members by intending to double major in accounting and financial statistics. Explaining his decision, he said, “I know it has to be something related with math, I like numbers, I like money. So I think that’s best place for me to be at.”

Unlike all of the other study students, two of Mauricio’s classes, political science and history, were in Spanish. It was not something he explicitly wanted, but he ended up in these courses because of limited class options when he registered. After instinctively declaring “here” in English when the teacher was taking first-day attendance in history, he was ironically pinned as a nonnative Spanish speaker and told after class that he could not take the class without knowing Spanish. Although his first instinct was to point out that he lived in Mexico, he quickly played into the nonnative Spanish speaker role. Mauricio noted that playing into this role brought him sympathy from his history instructor, who was patient as he asked dumb questions, but made other students look dumb when they did so. Through much of the semester, playing into this role made these classes the most interesting for Mauricio; however, as he progressed, he began to feel a bit of remorse at deceiving his instructors.

Even though he was a native Spanish speaker, Mauricio felt well behind the others in the class who had been educated in Mexican schools throughout their lives. In contrast, Mauricio had been immersed in English classes throughout his high school years. The consequence of this was a struggle to understand the readings and discussions in his class because it was in an academic Spanish he had not developed in high school. He explained that the reading “sounds
like I'm talking with a lawyer. You know really high terms and things I don't understand. And I have to actually go in the dictionary and look for the word.” He lamented the fact that his instructors did not speak English so as to translate the more difficult words into an academic language that was more familiar to him. Despite his struggles, Mauricio felt that knowledge of academic Spanish would benefit him.

Unlike his history class of the previous semester, he did not write at all in the Spanish language history course. He was required to write more in his politics class, however. For this course, he wrote five different three page essays on topics such as his “opinion is about whatever’s happening at Colombia,” “what democracy is, what it means for us,” and “about my surroundings, how do I feel about it, what do expect from whatever surrounds me, and what am I doing to make a change in society.” He was hesitant to share these writing samples, saying that they were really bad because he knew the instructor did not bother to read them. He found this bit of information out from the class graduate TA, who said students were only given credit for turning them in, and Mauricio did not receive any specific grades or feedback for these assignments.

Mauricio’s second semester FYC class was again the class in which he did the most writing. In addition to the major assignments, a genre analysis, lit review, documentary, and op-ed, his instructor had him complete online postings of 100-200 words three times a week, which he alternatively identified as “crazy” and having nothing to do with anything to acknowledging that they focused on preparing for the major assignments. Of the various written assignments, Mauricio found the lit review most important because it was worth 20% of his final grade. He received a low A, which was above the solid B he received on his genre analysis. A look at this assignment shows Mauricio skilled at referencing research as he discusses various aspects of
college stress, which was his focal topic for the semester. In an interview, he explained what he thought this assignment was about, and why it was not overly difficult for him, despite not having done this type of writing in high school:

I had done my gender analysis, which I needed to use all the information, you know, my sources and cite them. So that’s mainly what any paper here at college is about or that I have to do, you know. Knowing how to cite and drawing in some sources and link them to your ideas.

While the literature review may have been the most important piece of writing Mauricio did all year, he felt creating the video documentary on stress for his FYC course was the most challenging. Confident in his use of technology, he recalled that his group procrastinated at first, waiting until the last few days to complete it. Unbeknownst to him, he would have to learn a new operating system (Mac) and a new piece of software (iMovie) in the process of creating a new documentary. Besides this, his group member was largely absent for much of the process, with his primary contribution being lending a Mac notebook to Mauricio.

Overall, Mauricio was generally unhappy with his second semester English instructor and the grades he received via the distributed assessment system. One major complaint centered on the lack of feedback from his teacher, who he reported only responded to two or so of his tri-weekly responses with grades and/or feedback and consistently directed them to the writing center if they wanted help on their writing:

if I had had a teacher that gives me just the exact feedback you [the researcher] give me, I would be happy, you know? Because she doesn’t. All she says is -- if I was -- if I had to do her job exactly, I would just go to class, put on a PowerPoint when the deadline is, and say “Go to the writing center” because that’s what she does pretty much.
Nor did Mauricio seem to be getting the most beneficial feedback from the committee who graded his essays. He did not submit optional paper drafts for which he might have received more feedback; rather, he only submitted final papers, on which the committee provided only summative comments and grades. While a look at feedback on his genre analysis and literature review found the graders pointing out general areas where his writing was lacking, the detail in the feedback was limited, especially in addressing Mauricio’s concerns with his grammar as an L2 writer. Both times he was given a “B” for writing fluency but the comments said “there were a few problems with grammar” without giving any specifics.

His complains about his second semester FYC instructor went beyond feedback, however. While his first semester instructor bored him to death, he described his second semester instructor as “nice” but really “shy” and “disorganized.” He noted that she was inexperienced and did not feel comfortable teaching the class, having a background in creative writing, not research writing: “it’s her first year doing English 1312. She had never done it. And she has said she prefers -- I mean, she -- the other day we were at the lab and she said, ‘I won’t ever do 1312 again.’” My observations confirmed a shy, soft-spoken teacher who was not as organized as she could have been. For instance, while she prepared a number of class activities on a Word document to use during class, she consistently made these really small so that students like Mauricio, who mentioned this as well, could not see what she was displaying. To Mauricio’s frustration, she discussed cancelling at least one of the final two assignments during the last class, which upset him because they were worth 20% of the course grade. He said he “knew” it was because she had forgotten about them, even though she blamed the English department.

In response to his disappointment with his FYC teacher and disagreement with grades, Mauricio was assertive and manipulative in this class. He appealed the grades for two out of
four major assignments and reported “exploding” in class when his teacher mentioned cutting the final two assignments. He claimed only going to five or so classes all semester, which could have been very true given that he was absent from all three observed classes. However, he noted to me that he had things “taken care of,” meaning that he had a friend sign in for him. For the primary research portion of his literature review, he described a 250-person sample for his survey, which he later told me was completely fabricated.

To Mauricio’s credit, especially in regard to the absences, he did have a difficult semester in which both his grandfather and his girlfriend of several months passed away, the latter in a car accident, so he was under a considerable amount of stress. Nonetheless, he achieved his goal of a 4.0 GPA the second semester.

Conclusion

Like Carolina, Mauricio had an extensive network of capital (depicted in Figure 7.2) supporting his success in transitioning to college despite the external challenges he faced.
Throughout the year, Mauricio consistently commented on how easy college was, even though he was not always getting As. His comments appeared to stem in part from his desire to create a persona of an overly talented and smart student and admittance of difficulties could hurt that image he so carefully constructed. He did at times admit challenges, noting that the Spanish political science course and that the documentary were both difficult experiences. His sense of the easiness of college was bolstered by expectations he had from high school when someone told him he could not realize how much more difficult college would be.

Coming from a privileged background and an a high school experience where he showed a remarkable skill for befriending teachers and administration, Mauricio knew how to work the
system and was generally much more adept and assertive in doing so than the other students. After struggling at first with the distance of his college instructors and learning that being a teacher’s pet does not pay in college, he worked the system to his advantage in other ways, such as by playing the role of a nonnative Spanish speaker in his Spanish classes, appealing any grade under an “A” in his English class, and regularly having friends sign in when he missed class.

Nonetheless, Mauricio knew it would take more to succeed at college, something he had gained through learning English so quickly and succeeding so well in high school. He explained, They helped me grow because I asked them to. And it’s just the same way here. If I want to succeed in college, I need to ask for the help. I need to -- I cannot expect them come to me to help me have to go to them and say, I need help here.

Whereas he had teachers like Ms. Cooper in high school, Mauricio did not seem to reach out extensively to his instructors his first year of college, at times distancing himself by creating false personas or fabricating research results. However, he consistently sent me his papers for feedback, finding that he received more specific feedback from me than his teachers and other graders, saying more than “this paper has a few grammar errors.”

In addition to reaching out to me, Mauricio discovered the importance of friend support, and worked closely with a particular friend in his English class. He described this relationship in detail:

I’m doing my paper – like all my work with a friend of mine that’s in that class, too, so we all remind each other about deadlines and about stuff like that so we don’t have to really worry about reading the syllabus and keeping track of it, because we know that – like I know he will tell me, and he knows I’ll tell him when I know. I guess he’s the only
person that I text with, because we’re always texting, “Did you do homework? What was it about?” you know.

Besides reminding each other of deadlines, they would read each other’s postings and assignments, giving more content-based feedback since they were both L2 writers and did not feel comfortable giving each other feedback on grammar.

In discussing how Sampson could make students more prepared for college, Mauricio gave a long story about Samson students visiting campus and how irresponsible they were, and how they had an entitlement mentality, having come from the poorer Mexico to a country with more resources. Following on this example, he noted that

students don’t really need to be prepared for college. That’s not something you’re -- you have to be prepared -- like you need somebody to prepare you for. It’s just your attitude, you know. The way you handle things, the way you see things, how responsible you are.

Recalling that he actively sought help from others and took on responsibility for his own learning, he felt that other students needed to do the same. He noted that he “prepared myself with the help of teachers I looked to go for to tutoring. I looked for help. I looked for feedback from them.”

Mauricio’s endless motivation to excel and his willingness to reach out to others when struggling has helped him immensely, and I am confident he will do well throughout college and beyond.
Yesenia: Balancing Social and School Lives

“they say they’re preparing you for college but really what they’re teaching you is that they’re not preparing you for college at all. So I think they should like read more in their own time, their free time, and like pressure the teachers to like write more papers. I don’t know, students don’t like to do homework or anything but at least, cause, for us you have to do a lot of homework in high sch-, in college. And in high school you don’t have to do anything, just who cares, high school. And right now, it’s just, you struggle a lot. Cause you don’t know how to read a book, you don’t know how to like write a ten page research paper, so yeah it’s really hard.”

—Yesenia on how high school prepared her for college

“When I saw her writing, I was scared… Yesenia is one of those success stories from here, she loves me after all the hard time I gave her, I called her coach and I, you know she’s not doing her work, I called her mom, and it got to where the point like she just loved me, she did all her work and her work, her hard work paid off, everyday she would do revising and editing and everyday she was there participating. Dramatic, dramatic improvement on her test scores from her sophomore year to her junior year, she passed. She passed, so, she has changed a lot. She’s one of the students that has just evolved. And I did struggle with her a lot.

—Yesenia’s junior English teacher

Background and Defining Characteristics and Experiences

Yesenia had an active social life and was definitely a partier, telling me stories of a summer vacation spent taking buses to Denver, a camping trip with friends where they got drunk and went looking for bears, and a trip to Mexico that was supposed to be three days, but ended up lasting three weeks. She was an admitted procrastinator, saying that she would look for any reason to avoid finishing her homework at home, whether it be a trip to Wal-Mart, a bowling excursion, or even a fly buzzing around the room. Nonetheless, she grew into being one of the hardest working students in this study, with her desire for success driving her to actively seek help from sponsors including myself, professors, and campus services such as the writing and math tutoring centers.
Yesenia came to the U.S. in 4th grade with her mother and older brother. She said she did not have a father, which I took to meant she did not know or remember him except through negative comments made by her mother. After a failed attempt to settle in Denver, they returned to Juárez before settling in El Paso. According to Yesenia, her mother’s primary motivation in immigrating to the U.S. was to provide better educational opportunities for her children, a motivation that drove many of families included in this study to immigrate.

Compared to other students in this study, Yesenia faced more educational challenges, possibly because she started later in the U.S. than some of the others. She was in an ESL program from 4th-7th grade, and transitioned to mainstream English in 8th grade. However, it appeared she was not quite ready for the transition, because she failed 8th grade. She had positive comments about her 8th grade English teacher, saying she helped her get used to English and she learned how to understand English better, because she was an African American teacher who spoke differently and more quickly from what she was used to. While this pushed Yesenia to learn, she also struggled because she did not understand. However, she did not ask the teacher to slow down out of fear of looking dumb: “I think they're gonna make fun of my accent or the way I...the way my English was. That's pretty much the problem.”

Yesenia’s educational challenges continued in high school, where she failed the TAKS her sophomore year, which she blamed in part on the teacher who did not focus enough on the test that year. Fortunately, she overcame this obstacle her junior year due to help from one of her favorite English teachers, Ms. Cecilia, who helped her practice for the test, gave extensive feedback, and made her repeatedly revise her essays. Yesenia valued this teacher so much that she even returned to her occasionally when she was in college to solicit feedback on writing.
Despite passing the TAKS, Yesenia’s writing was the least developed compared to other participants at the beginning of this study. She consistently said spelling was the largest problem for her in writing, and bluntly stated, “my spelling’s really bad” in the first interview. Nonetheless, as she progressed through her first year in college, she overcame some of this difficulty with practice, but possibly more importantly with learning how to use the dictionary, a translator, and a thesaurus, most often on her computer. As mentioned above, she actively sought out help from friends, teaching assistants, the university’s tutoring services, and myself. She lamented the fact that she did not have help from home, as her mother did not know English.

Like other students in this study, Yesenia had family responsibilities that often took her away from school and distracted her from completing schoolwork. Her mother worked in Mexico and was pursuing a college degree there. Because her return crossing to the U.S. typically lasted a few hours, this meant she was not home very much. More importantly for Yesenia, this meant responsibility for her six-year old brother fell largely on her. She described one such experience that occurred during high school and how it affected her:

Sometimes I have to like leave school like, one time, [my brother] wasn’t feeling good and so my mom called me to pick up my brother from school so I like missed the whole day. And that really affects me because if you don’t pass the class, you don’t get to play soccer. So I have to make up all my work in one day. It affects my attendance too.

After school, Yesenia always had to rush to pick up her brother and then spend the evening helping him with his homework, feeding him, and bathing him before bed.

Although Yesenia’s older brother lived with them for the first year of the study, Yesenia repeatedly emphasized how lazy he was and how he never wanted to take care of their younger brother. In fact, for a while his girlfriend and their baby were living with the family as well.
Yesenia and her brother used to fight about college, as her brother had dropped out after a few weeks, saying school was not for him. She explained the difference between them as a matter of motivation and competition: “I like challenges...if it's a competition I'm going into the competition. I don't care if I lose or not or if I win. I don't care. I'm a competitive person and he's not.”

Yesenia did not want her younger brother to end up like her older one, and worked on motivating him and encouraged her mom to read to him. She even took him to the library to check books out, so that he would get in a habit of reading. To motivate her younger brother, she would use her older brother as a negative example. For instance, when her brother said he did not want to learn English, she told him something like “you better like English cause if not you’re gonna suck at school like your brother.”

Yesenia’s relationship with her mother appeared to waver during the study. She was not happy about having so much responsibility for her brother, but understood that her mom did not have many other options. She complained about money issues and her mother fairly often as well. For instance, when she decided to stay in El Paso for school, she said her mom promised to help buy her a car, which she delayed doing. However, on the other hand, Yesenia said she was not overly pressured to work by her mother during college, and that her mother gave her money for expenses. This was in part due to the fact that she was watching her little brother and really could not work because of the restrictions on her schedule.

Despite these problems, Yesenia’s mother supported her in important ways. For instance, Yesenia’s mother bought her a Spanish book titled *La Vaca*, which Yesenia described as a motivational work: “They teach you how not to stay stuck in one place and keep going with your life…You should want more so that's pretty much why my mom bought me the book.”
while she did not seem overtly supportive at the beginning, Yesenia said her mother became more supportive and understanding as she continued college, likely because she was going to college as well and understood the challenges Yesenia faced.

As mentioned in the introduction, Yesenia was one of the more socially active participants. In high school, she played soccer and participated in DECA, the leadership group that Carolina was part of. At college, she often brought a friend or two to the interview, and they ended up sitting outside while we interviewed or worked on her paper for thirty minutes or more. She had one good friend in particular who paid for some of her summer trips, regularly took her to school and helped her pick up her brother, printed things out for her on his printer, revised and even wrote some writing assignments for her at college.

In addition to having friends locally, who were mostly males, Yesenia had a long-distance boyfriend who lived about 500 miles away for most of the study. Yesenia had met him online, and said he was helpful for her English, as he did not know any Spanish. So, despite speaking Spanish with many of her friends and always at home, she always talked, texted, and chatted in English with her boyfriend. Yesenia had initially wanted to attend the community college in her boyfriend’s city, but ended up starting in El Paso because she knew it would be cheaper to continue living at home. However, moving away to live with her boyfriend and transferring to school there was always a plan for her throughout much of her first year at college.

**High School Literacy Experiences**

During the final high school interview, Yesenia expressed regret in choosing Samson over a school closer to where she lived: “I decided to come [to Samson] and I think the teachers over there are more prepared than they are over here cause they're like ...over here I don't think they really care if we learn or not. You know what I mean. There, I think they do.” From
talking with friends, she felt students worked more at the school closer to her house, teachers did more to motivate students, and that they had better electives. However, she did note that students at Samson may have had different needs than students at the other school: “[Mexican kids] really need good feedback because in other schools maybe nobody really speaks Spanish and stuff and they really have good English, good essays and stuff, but here it’s not like that.”

As evident by the first comment, Yesenia overall did not feel well served by high school. Her first and second year writing teachers were not very helpful, and Yesenia said her sophomore year writing teacher was her least favorite teacher because he made them write a lot without providing feedback and discussed random topics during the course. Her main issue with him seemed to be that he did not focus on teaching the TAKS, which Yesenia failed that year and was placed into tutoring courses the following year as a result. Yesenia’s relationship with the TAKS was a love-hate relationship like most students in this study. She did not like focusing on it so much, but also saw it as an obstacle to graduation, which she could not pass if her teachers did not teach it all the time.

During junior year, Yesenia had what she reported to be her favorite writing teacher, Ms. Cecilia. When asked what Ms. Cecilia did differently, Yesenia replied, “what she teaches was different and like all her attention to you and not like, she teaches everyone and when you need help, she likes explain you step by step and stuff.” Yesenia’s complaint about her sophomore English teacher and most of her math teachers, including those at college, was that they did not explain how to do things but simply told them to do something. In an interview, Ms. Cecilia showed a special connection to Yesenia and described her as a “success story.” According to Ms. Cecilia, Yesenia came to her classroom with a lot of discipline issues and she recalled being “scared” when she saw her writing. However, she said she was extremely patient with Yesenia
and called her mom and her coach to push her when she slacked, and in the end “totally won her over.” Ms. Cecilia recalls that Yesenia eventually began doing all her work and diligently revised her essays. Yesenia began to regularly borrow Ms. Cecilia’s dictionary, after she told Yesenia that the dictionary was her “best friend.” As a result of all this hard work, and the patience shown by Ms. Cecilia, Yesenia showed dramatic improvement on her TAKS scores, passing her junior year, thus meeting the testing graduation requirement.

By the time I met her in her senior English class, Yesenia was clearly a dedicated student, well liked by Mr. Robertson, her senior English teacher. As mentioned earlier, her writing abilities were still less developed compared to many of her classmates; however, she had a stronger work ethic than most of them, something she appeared to have picked up in her junior English class. The two major assignments her first semester of senior year were a personal statement and an essay on Beowulf. She explained that the Beowulf essay was difficult at first because she did not understand the story, a feeling shared by many of the students in the class who struggled to grapple with Beowulf’s archaic language and structure. Nonetheless, she generally liked writing the Beowulf essay, while admitting that she did not spend much time on it. She liked the essay because she found history interesting, and was required to write some about the history of the work in the introductory paragraph. When asked how it was different from previous essays she had written at Samson, she said the major difference was that it was longer than most previous essays (about 500-600 words instead of around 300).

Yesenia clearly benefited from having plenty of time to write the Beowulf essay and support by Mr. Robertson who gave them step-by-step instructions, taking time to have students develop a thesis and an outline with textual evidence. While Yesenia’s introductory paragraph perhaps gave too much history on the story, as this was required by the teacher, she had a clearly
stated thesis: “This revels Anglo-Saxon use their intelligence as they use their strength to defeat their rivals.” The second paragraph was one of her strongest, as she gave a clear topic sentence, and introduced textual evidence that clearly supported her point. Her last paragraph was a bit awkward, making a connection between Beowulf’s intelligence and the intelligence used by President Obama to get elected. Students were asked to make a connection with real life in their final paragraphs, and most, like Yesenia, found this process awkward and generally made superficial connections.

For the last essay of senior year, I worked with Mr. Robertson to provide something more challenging and ask students to write a longer analytical essay focused on power relations in *Lord of the Flies*. Yesenia found this essay difficult, wishing she had more time to complete it and saying she fell about a hundred words short of the 900-1200 word limit. Like most students in the class, she only was able to read part of the book, so did not necessarily have as much understanding of the work as she would have liked to. She explained that due to lack of time in class, she worked on the essay at home. Unlike some other students in the class, Yesenia clearly wrote the whole essay and did not resort to cut and pasting to meet the word limit. In providing feedback, her teacher noted that, while there were a “lot of language problems,” Yesenia made an “obvious effort and many good points.” Like in the *Beowulf* essay, Yesenia had a strong thesis and supported this fairly well throughout the essay with a mixture of quotes and details from the reading. My feedback to Yesenia noted problems with subject/verb agreement, run-on sentences, and organization.

For Yesenia, the most important writing assignments she did senior year were her personal statement and scholarship essays because they were for more than a grade. In general,
she did not seem as grade-driven as other students, but wanted a more concrete purpose for her writing, such as getting a scholarship or being admitted to the college of her choice.

Outside of English, Yesenia did some writing in a Spanish class her junior year, where they were asked to write essays on issues ranging from personal topics such as the importance of love to a more public topic, but one that resonated with many of the students at the school, the drug-related violence in Juárez. Maybe because of the closeness of the topic, Yesenia did not like writing about the drug violence, but would have preferred to write about books, something a bit more impersonal. In general, she found more personal writing difficult, in part because she did not feel her life was particularly interesting to write about.

Senior year, Yesenia did not write outside of English except for an 11 page research paper for her math class, which she really disliked. Like one may expect from most students, she did not see the point of writing a research paper in a math class, since math focuses more on numbers than words. Since Yesenia was clearly not interested in working on this paper nor liked the teacher, she reported constructing most of the paper through copying and pasting from other sources; however, she was happy with the grade she received.

Looking back on her high school learning experiences at college, Yesenia clearly wished she had been more prepared and blamed the TAKS for this more so than other students, who often had more mixed attitudes towards the test. In a long criticism of her high school academic experiences, she said:

Like make us write uh, like more papers. You know they just concentrate on the TAKS. And they just TAKS, TAKS, TAKS, TAKS, they don’t really teach you how to write a 10 page research or how to start it or how to research stuff so you can make like, have a good paper. So, I think they should focus more on that than just TAKS, TAKS, TAKS.
When you’re a senior you don’t have nothing about the TAKS like you have free hours, like outs, and the classes are just like, instead of being in class you’re always making like meetings. Senior meetings, senior graduation meeting, and senior this, and senior that. They don’t, like you don’t really have time to do anything. Like in Robertson we did like three papers, but it was just like two page essays, it was just like whatever. And over here [at UTEP] it’s just like three page paper, four page paper, 10 page paper. It’s just hard.

Here, Yesenia criticized the emphasis on preparing for a test that bore little resemblance to her college writing experiences. According to her, when they actually had time to focus on other things, such as senior year, there were so many distractions that they never wrote as much as they should have in classes like English. However, like most students, Yesenia enjoyed these distractions and breaks from classes in her senior year. It was not until she had to suffer a rough period of adjustment to college life did she regret not having done more in high school.

**Literacy and Learning in the First Year of College**

**First semester.**

As mentioned above, Yesenia’s shift from high school to college writing was difficult, in that the demands were much increased from their high school levels. However, in making this transition, Yesenia actively sought help from me, a friend, and regularly visited her professors, including a history TA who provided feedback on her writing. While she may have entered with lower qualifications than some of her fellow students, her willingness to work hard, seek feedback, and revise helped her succeed, receiving Bs and Cs on all of her papers her first semester.
For her first semester, Yesenia was in a half-semester developmental reading and a full semester developmental writing course. Surprisingly, she reported doing the most writing in her history and first-year seminar courses, and not her writing course (see Table 7.3 for a list of Yesenia’s diverse first-year writing experiences). She did not seek help on her writing for her writing course, indicating that she found these assignments less difficult. Nonetheless, the writing demands for this course were fairly steep. As revealed in the course syllabus, she had to write a paragraph about a discourse community she belonged to, a memo about a campus or community issue, an application essay for a study abroad program, an entertainment review, an opinion piece, as well as a variety of daily assignments. The fact that Yesenia did not see her writing course as difficult may have stemmed from the laid back nature of her instructor, who was consistently friendly with students and kept the atmosphere of the class fun. It also may have been that the demands of the assignments and type of writing, often involving personal opinion, was not as different from her high school writing as the writing she did for other classes.

Table 7.3
Yesenia’s First-Year Writing Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fall semester</th>
<th>Spring semester</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Writing (Developmental)</strong></td>
<td>FYC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse community assignment</td>
<td>Homepage portfolio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application essay</td>
<td>2-3 page agency discourse memo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review essay</td>
<td>3-5 page rhetorical/visual analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion piece</td>
<td>7-10 source annotated bibliography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular learning journals</td>
<td>4-6 page community problem report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>History</strong></td>
<td>History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3 page analysis essay on <em>Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma</em></td>
<td>Paragraph summarizing and discussing a historical document from <em>Voices of Created Equal, Vol. 2</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3 page argument/analysis essay on <em>Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3 page extra credit paper comparing</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Yesenia’s developmental writing course, like many of the writing courses at the university, was held in a computer classroom. Students regularly used the computers to research and begin writing about their topics, but they also used them for drilling, a common use of technology in developmental education programs. For this semester, students were asked to subscribe to a McGraw Hill online tutoring program called Connect Writing, which was designed to support their textbook with grammar tutoring. However, the course instructor revealed she did not plan to use it in future semesters as many students, including Yesenia, had difficulty signing up and using the program.

Throughout her first semester, Yesenia continually worried about the writing assignments for her history course. Fortunately, this course was paired with Yesenia’s developmental reading course, where the teacher required drafts of all the history essays, including the extra credit one, and Yesenia found the support of this learning community very helpful. For history, she had to write a few two to three page essays, and was encouraged to write an additional essay of the same length for extra credit. The required essays were worth a combined 35% of the final course grade, a substantial amount. In general the essays required her to evaluate the quality of
information in the books they read for the course. In talking about her first essay for history, she explained the difference from her high school writing experiences:

Yesenia: like everything, cause in high school they didn’t really teach you how. They just tell you to do the paper and they don’t really give you feedback or anything, so you don’t know what I did wrong. Right here, like, um, just, different.

Interviewer: Ok, and so it was different, you didn’t get feedback in high school. Ok.
And what else, was the type of writing different?
Yesenia: Yes, because you need to use a lot of transitions, put a lot of evidence, and read the whole book…I don’t like reading, so.

In the first history essay, Yesenia had to argue whether or not the author of *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, Camila Townsend, used reliable and convincing evidence in writing about Pocahontas’ life. Since Yesenia had not read the entire work when she was first outlining this essay, she struggled to find evidence to support her points. My feedback directed her to the reference list and asked her to consider the types of sources: original documents, biographies, and academic journal articles. Using these, I suggested that she mention examples of each and say why those types of sources are reliable or not. As she had not done this type of analytical writing during most of high school, it was clearly challenging for Yesenia, but she ended up receiving a low B on this paper, with points deducted for a lack of sufficient examples, grammar problems, and difficulties with organization. While it did not appear she was provided with extensive written feedback outside of a checklist with checks or check minuses and point totals, she met with the TA evaluator to better understand what she needed to do to improve. In fact, meeting with him resulted in her grade raised being raised slightly from a C+ to a B-. 
Yesenia also stressed about the writing demands in her first-year seminar, especially towards the end of the semester, when she was required to write a 10 page research paper, the longest paper of her first semester and about seven pages longer than anything she had been asked to write before, with the exception of her copied and pasted math paper in high school. The topic of the course was on music and students were asked to write an ethnomusicology, and Yesenia picked a topic close to her, Mexican folklore music and dance. Because of the challenge of this paper, she procrastinated in starting, submitting a four page long draft about a week late. In one interview, she explained the struggle to fill so many pages: “it’s too long, 10 pages. She wants the introduction to be one page and I don’t know how I’m supposed to fill out the other nine. So I guess the conclusion has to be one page too. So that leaves me with seven, yeah, huh?” Nonetheless, her instructor provided detailed feedback on this first draft, which focused on copyediting the pages she submitted. At one point, Yesenia had put a “u” instead of “you,” which elicited a very strong response: “Yesenia, you must never, ever write the letter ‘u’ by itself in formal writing—okay?” (emphasis in original). In the summative comments on this draft, her teacher wrote, “you have a very interesting paper. This is a wonderful look of ethnomusicology. However, your writing level is consistently low. You must take your draft (including the other pages you add) to the Writing Center in the Main Library. Please see me after class” (emphasis in original). Despite earlier concerns, Yesenia ultimately did fill about nine pages, with the inclusion of images she was allowed to use. While she was a few short of the eight sources she was required to have, the paper was overall successful and included plenty of interesting information about her topic. When she came to me a few hours before the final was due, she still needed help with drafting an introduction, which I provided ideas for. Additionally, so that she
would not be penalized excessively for grammar issues, which were still numerous, I helped her copyedit the final draft.

For the semester, Yesenia received all Bs except for a C in math, which she blamed on her math teacher for not explaining things to them well. She felt that history was her biggest success, because it involved a lot of reading and writing, and she consistently explained how she did not like reading.

**Second semester.**

As Yesenia moved into and through her second semester at college, life at home began to get better after some struggles with her brother. After a fight during winter break and a bad decision to loan him some of her student loan money for a motorcycle, her brother eventually moved out, which Yesenia said was better for everyone because there was no longer drama at home that distracted her from focusing on school. While she was still taking care of her brother, she found this to be less of a problem in high school because she did not have to miss class to pick him up and found that it kept her at home instead of out with friends. Her mom grew more supportive as well: “I think my mom’s more like supportive about me, like my work and everything. She doesn’t like always bug me about, “Oh, clean this, clean that,” because now she knows I have homework and I’m really into school, so she’s relaxing more than she used to.” Yesenia attributed her mother’s shift in part to the fact that she was attending college in Mexico, so knew the kind of work it took to be successful at college.

Midway through the second semester, Yesenia broke up with her long-distance boyfriend, which meant she would be staying in El Paso in the fall, a decision that seemed positive given her success her first year at school at UTEP. However, by the time she told me this news, she had already found an in-town boyfriend who she was spending a lot of time with, leading her to
procrastinate more on her schoolwork. She knew this was a problem and that she needed to change, saying “It's cause after I met this guy everything was crazy. But I'm trying to get back like stop procrastinating a lot. I'm like, "I'm not like this. I'm not like this." So I have to go back to the way I was.” For better or worse, they soon broke up and Yesenia returned to devoting all her energies to school.

As she began the second semester, Yesenia was set on majoring in business, but would have to wait until the fall. She had high aspirations for the future, planning on getting an MBA and a doctorate, largely motivated by, in her words, “money, a better lifestyle.” She had been interested in business in a while, as she was involved in the DECA organization in high school, and liked organizing money-related events like fundraisers. As she received her student loan money, she made an informal business loaning money out to friends for interest. She clearly had assertiveness and an ability to play tough, qualities that would help in the business world. For instance, she described a group project during the second semester in which one person was not holding his own:

The basketball player, like he wasn’t doing anything at all, but once I told him like, “If you’re not going to work on the project, I’m just going to take out your name and I’m gonna talk to the miss [the instructor] so she won’t give you credit for it if your name’s not there.” But after that, he’s like, “Okay, just tell me what you want me to do.”

While students are often hesitant to report on a slacking peer and just end up complaining about a certain group member, Yesenia clearly did something about it, knowing that it was unfair that every member would get credit regardless of whether or not they did the work.

Table 7.3 depicts Yesenia’s writing tasks for the semester and how she continually wrote extensively into her second semester, and more than most other study students. Writing was
clearly an important part of the semester and it was connected with her favorite part about it:

“Every time I get my grades for the essays make me happy. I think that’s the greatest part ever because I put too much work and I expect a good grade, and I get a good grade.” While Yesenia received Bs and Cs on her first semester writing assignments, by the second semester, these were moving up to As and Bs. She regularly sought my feedback, as she would meet with me for most of her writing tasks seeking feedback on a draft. She also received editing help from a friend, but did not use the Writing Center after being dissatisfied with the help she received there during her only visit.

Yesenia transitioned from developmental to mainstream writing without any major problems, and was generally seen as a good student by her second semester instructor, who described her as, “Enthusiastic, friendly, optimistic. Gets a late start sometimes. Doesn’t start things quite on time. But yeah, I would say she’s a good student.” This instructor was one of the more experienced FYC instructors and had taught 1311 many times. Yesenia found her nice and liked the fact that she went around helping students during the class, something that high school teachers did but not most college instructors, who generally just talked in front of the class.

As discussed in Chapter 4 and depicted in Table 7.3, some of the developmental writing assignments correlated with the assignments in the mainstream courses, but the developmental assignments were shorter and less research based. Also, as evident by the blog and the documentary, technology became a more important part of ENG 1311 as well. Yesenia questioned this aspect of the course, wondering what creating a blog and a documentary had to do with English, and felt that they should be focusing on traditional writing skills instead.

While the general theme for 1311 courses was community based, Yesenia’s instructor took this further, giving the class a theme focused on peace and more specifically peace activists.
In the first few assignments, Yesenia focused on a very local issue, immigration, as she wrote an agency discourse memo focused on the work and discourse practices of a local immigrant advocacy center. In the memo, she noted how the center helped migrants from all over the world and promoted their work and solicited donors through a strong Internet presence. Her second major writing project was a rhetorical analysis of the *USA Today* editorial “Our View on Illegal Immigration: It Will Take More Than Fences.”

For the latter half of the semester, Yesenia changed topics, focusing on the increasing unrest in the Middle East. She considered the annotated bibliography and subsequent research paper some of the most important assignments of the year, as they required her to develop a few new skills: library research and APA citation style. However, having done very different type of writing throughout high school, she expressed frustration with research-based writing: “I hate writing research because you have to like search and put the sources, say where you got them, make APA style. Why can’t you just like write, write, write, write, write?” While she did have to write a research paper for her first-year seminar, she said this was easier because she already knew about the topic, was more interested in it, and did not have to use library research. In contrast, Yesenia chose an unfamiliar and complex topic for her 1311 research paper: explaining how Nelson Mandela’s theories about peace could help Libya in its current era of unrest. A look at her annotated bibliography revealed nine mostly library sources with the exception of an online article from a Spanish-language news outlet.

The thesis for her research paper read, “Connecting Libya with Nelson Mandela even thought they do not have anything in common, is valuable because the ideologies of Mandela can really help Libya to live in peace and stop all the violence that they are going thought right now.” As I worked with her to improve this piece, I explained that she needed to connect the two better,
as she discussed the situation in Libya and then Mandela’s ideologies but failed to make a convincing case that these ideologies were applicable in Libya’s case.

While some other students like Mauricio did not do as much writing in their history classes second semester, Yesenia continued to write extensively, having multiple exams with essay questions as well as take home essay assignments. Her first assignment was a paragraph in which she had to choose a document from the textbook and identify the document, the author, the date it was written, and summarize different aspects of the document. Yesenia chose the Mississippi Black Codes and ended up receiving a 95% on the assignment. Later essays asked more of students, as the second essay was supposed to be two to three pages. The second essay asked students to compare and contrast the attitudes of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois based on texts by them in the course textbook. As with the other writing assignments for the course, this one was well designed, contextualizing the issue, giving specific instructions, and telling them the main points that should be included in the essay, such as “Compares and contrast the documents. What is similar in their observations of the African American experience in the late 19th Century? What do they propose (both directly and indirectly)? On what aspects of black life do they differ?” For this assignment, Yesenia came to me with a very strong handwritten draft, and I was pleased in seeing that her writing skills were improving tremendously during her first year of college.

The one essay that I did not see until after Yesenia submitted it was one on the book, *Farewell to Manzanar: A True Story of Japanese American Experience During World War II Internment*, in which students were asked to chose several themes from a list and write about them. This was one of the more difficult essays of the semester for Yesenia because her English research essay took longer than expected, so she had to stay up all night writing this one.
Despite this, and not having feedback from me, she still managed an 80%, which she was satisfied with given the circumstances. A look at her thesis reveals a strong focus for the essay:

Even though that she was relocated to a concentration camp and her dad send to prison, and they had to go through a lot when she was only a kid and not be able to understand what was really going on at the time, by her writing this book she is letting us see the other side of war, and understanding how her childhood was, her way of living and her perception of loyalty to her country.

Given that she had to write it last minute and did not have editing help, there are a fair number of errors throughout, especially with past tense verb forms, an issue that Yesenia was aware of. Nonetheless, it was evident that her writing became more complex than it was in high school and that she was able to incorporate sources more effectively.

Another non-English class where Yesenia did some writing was in sociology, where she had to write what she thought was the most important essay of the semester, because of the topic it focused on: racism. For this essay, the class viewed a video called “A Class Divided” about an elementary school class in which students were taught lessons about racism by, for instance, saying those with brown eyes were inferior. The prompt gave clear instructions on how to format the assignment and specified that papers needed to be a minimum of two pages and could follow the numbered question/answer format. The result did not seem an essay, but a series of short answers to questions such as “How did the negative and positive labels placed on each group become self-fulfilling prophecies?”

Conclusion

Despite having some serious challenges surround her, Yesenia developed a fairly strong network of capital as depicted in Figure 7.3.
Figure 7.3. Yesenia’s sources of capital and challenge.

As noted earlier, Yesenia entered UTEP through the START program, which is a program that provisionally admitted underprepared students. At the end of the year, she noted this as a source of support, because failing a class meant that she could not return and would have to go to community college, a serious step backwards in her mind. Fortunately, through a combination of hard work, an increasingly supportive mother, and actively seeking help from others, Yesenia passed all her classes and clearly felt she was becoming a stronger reader and writer. She realized the importance of these support networks in our final interview, noting that “I think family, friends are like really important.”
She did not attribute her success to high school, noting that “The transition from the way you write in high school to college is like really, really different.” She was very critical of the high school focus on testing throughout the study, which she felt prevented them from ever doing long research-based essays that were regularly expected of students at the college level. She also seemed to blame high school’s failure to prepare students on a culture of low expectations:

in high school we don’t really do essays, like real essays. You know, in high school you just like copy-paste and they don’t even care if you copy-paste. But over here, like if you copy paste, you’re going to be sent to the dean’s office, so you have to really like put it in your own words and that’s like a really hard thing to do because maybe they’re gonna think like, “Oh, you copied,” when you didn’t. So just like -- so it’s been really important this year.

As evident by this comment and my experience at the high school, students would often copy and paste when confronted with an unfamiliar or difficult assignment. While this may have resulted in a lower grade, teachers were not really allowed to fail students and usually let this kind of behavior slide as a result. Thus, students like Yesenia became comfortable doing this and were not really practicing the type of writing necessarily for college.

Nonetheless, Yesenia adapted to college-level writing quite well, due to a variety of things such as the extensive practice she had and constant feedback from me. As noted elsewhere, students generally did not receive very detailed feedback on their writing from teachers, which limits their chances to improve. For instance, Yesenia’s second-semester FYC teacher noted that she focused on giving summative comments after she began collecting writing electronically. This meant that Yesenia might have been getting the knowledge to improve the rhetorical effectiveness of her writing, but not the localized feedback necessary to improve
accuracy. In addition to practice and feedback, Yesenia noted one important way she became a better writer: “Reading. Reading and because when you read, like you catch -- you learn words that, I don’t know, you’re like, “Oh, this really exists,” and you know some really weird word exists and you can use it.” This statement reveals how Yesenia saw a connection between reading and writing by identifying the importance of reading in expanding her vocabulary.

As noted at the beginning of her case study, Yesenia was the study participant most inclined to party, prompting Carolina to note that she was impressed to see Yesenia at UTEP because she was a bit of a partier in high school. Although Yesenia struggled a bit at first finding the balance between her social life and school, she noted at the end of the year, “now I’m like really into my school and I know when to party and when not to party.” When asked what kind of advice she would give to seniors at Samson, she replied,

Like they can go party in weekends, not during the week, because you have class. And to really like go to class and never miss the class because once you miss the class, it’s going to be hard to like understand the next like time you go to class. You’re not going to be on the same page as everyone. And like to read a lot.

Yesenia managed to have fun, but it was clear that she was putting school first, as I recall weekend nights at 10 p.m. when she texted me a question about one of the essays she was currently working on. In these instances, Yesenia knew that partying needed to wait.
Bianca: Overcoming Challenges with Valuable Sources of Support

“when you come to college, it’s like topics that you have to look for information that will help you or will make like a point. An idea or something. And in high school, you just have to write like the clouds were red.”
—Bianca on the differences between high school and college writing

“…she's a very good student she always, she's very outgoing, eager, confident too. I think she'll do well, she's very focused also…And she's outgoing and friendly and I think, you know those kind of students will have a better chance of doing well cause you know, they'll reach out for help?
—Bianca’s junior English teacher

Background and Defining Characteristics and Experiences

Although she had lived in the United States all her life, Bianca had perhaps the most challenging extracurricular life of all the study participants; however, she always remained positive and surrounded herself by supportive people. In a scholarship essay she wrote in senior year she recalled “hard times [when] we lived in poverty struggling day by day for needs such as bills and the rent” and remembered hearing her mother cry every night when she was about ten years old. While most of this study’s participants were no strangers to poverty, Bianca had an additional experience that separated her from the rest, something that made her personal statement for college a stark contrast from most others.

Since it would be best to hear this story in her own words, here is an extended excerpt from Bianca’s personal statement:

It all started one afternoon when I was in my room watching TV. I had just arrived from the Holocaust Museum when I heard somebody yelling, “get down, get down,” from outside my house. I jumped out of bed and I ran to the living room and suddenly I saw a bunch of men coming into my house and yelling. As I threw myself to the floor, I noticed that these men came after my mother.
It was chaos all over the house. My younger brothers and sisters were crying and I was just thinking how to control the situation. With my mother getting mistreated by these men and my siblings scared and crying what I was supposed to do, I felt a lot of pressure and wondered whether to cry or to keep strong for my family. I was only seventeen years old and I had to keep mighty like a mother for my siblings and be strong like a good daughter for my mother. They had come to take my mother to jail because she was in the U.S. illegally. However, I believe that a document shouldn’t determine or be an excuse to mistreat a human being.

With her mother arrested and eventually deported and her father out of her life, Bianca became the legal guardian for her three siblings, aged five, seven, and thirteen, when she was a junior in high school and only seventeen years old.

Having responsibility for her siblings meant that Bianca had to take them to school and pick them up afterwards, finding a new place for them to live, cooking, cleaning, and reading to them at night, all while completing her high school work. As she explained, she could no longer participate in extracurricular activities as her life outside of school was no longer hers. While Bianca lamented the fact that her teachers did not push her enough, she admitted that not having any homework made her newly acquired parental responsibilities easier. Instead of having homework of her own, she helped her siblings with homework, and moved her younger brother to a new school because he was not learning enough at his previous one.

Despite the challenges that came with being a mother to three children, it appeared to be helpful in some ways for Bianca as she matured rapidly due to the new responsibilities. Her English teacher for both junior and senior year, Mr. Robertson, noticed a big change and recalled
that Bianca had often been “loud” and “obnoxious” the previous year but that she “grew up quick” and developed into a quieter, harder working student.

As she made plans for college, Bianca constantly talked about applying for the college Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP), a program that aims to “offer migrant youth an educational opportunity to explore and develop their academic potential through an academic assistance program that will lead to their attainment of a bachelor’s degree” (CAMP, 2011). Both the University of Texas at El Paso and New Mexico State University (NMSU) about forty miles away offered this program. However, concern for her siblings constantly factored into Bianca’s college decision-making. She initially wanted to go to NMSU, but quickly realized that moving out of town was not an option because, as she said in reference to her siblings, “There's nobody that can take care of them like me.”

While the CAMP program was available at UTEP, she began leaning towards the community college for a variety of reasons, largely because she expected she would have to live on campus if part of the program. By the end of her senior year, she resigned herself to community college even though she did not want to: “I know it's better for my family. I don't have to look just for myself. I have to look for them. And I believe that it doesn't matter where you go to college. Just go.” To support this decision, she referred to a friend who told her that the community college was “A better place to start” because it was cheaper and easier while being essentially the same. During this time, I constantly urged Bianca to work something out with the CAMP director at UTEP, telling her that he would understand her situation and work with her. I pushed her in this direction it seemed clear that the extra academic and financial support provided by the scholarship would greatly increase her chances of success at college.
Ultimately, Bianca was accepted into the CAMP program and decided to head to UTEP as she was able to work out the living situation with the director. As part of the program, she took summer classes and lived on campus for a month. During the summer session, she recalled being required to go to tutoring everyday, until ten at night and sometimes until two in the morning. By living with fellow CAMP participants in the dorm, she formed friendships that the sustained throughout her first year at college. She even referred to the program as a sorority at times, as they participated in events on campus, such as a lip-syncing contest. They helped each other with homework, which provided Bianca with support beyond the daily tutoring required at the CAMP program office. Bianca felt the program gave her an advantage in multiple ways. By attending summer classes where she was pushed to achieve high grades, Bianca felt much more ready for regular work because it was less intense than summer classes. The program helped change her procrastinating habits, requiring her to have work drafted in advance and meet with peer leaders for feedback.

Beyond CAMP program support, other areas of support helped Bianca overcome the challenges she faced. Certain family members were not particularly supportive; Bianca recalled feeling abandoned by extended family members when her mother was in jail and she lacked the financial means to support the family. However, her aunt stood out as a very supportive family member during this time. While Bianca attended summer classes, her siblings lived with her aunt. During college, her aunt regularly came over to help cook and clean, sometimes spending the night. While her mother was now forced to stay in Mexico, she lived just across the border and Bianca talked to her everyday and visited her every weekend. She said her mother was proud she was going to college, and Bianca hoped to be successful so that she could buy her family a house and provide for them in the future.
Church also played a huge role in Bianca’s life, and she went to meetings at a nondenominational Christian church in downtown El Paso four to five times a week, usually bringing her siblings as well. When discussing the difficulties she had faced in her family, she always took a positive attitude, saying that God was with her to support her. Beyond the spiritual support provided by church members, she explained that some members helped support her financially, with one member regularly filling her gas tank. She also learned about college through members at church, and was pushed to go to and succeed at college by them as much as her mom. Despite all the challenges that Bianca faced, she was determined to go to college and succeed. Like many students from immigrant families, she held strong dreams of moving up the social latter and providing for the family that sacrificed for her: “I want something like a social worker to work with people, like more, I want to master in something, a good paying job…when I finish college, I want to buy a house for my mom and my brothers.”

**High School Literacy Experiences**

Bianca clearly had a favorite high school English teacher and was generally not satisfied with her other teachers, as she felt they were too relaxed or did not push students enough. Her freshman year teacher Mr. Sanchez was known among students for being very strict, a trait referenced by Paola as well. Bianca recalled that Mr. Sanchez pushed students to work, assigned homework (which was almost unheard of at the school), and required them to read and write outside of class. For Mr. Sanchez’s class, Bianca typically wrote two page essays, which she described as five paragraph essays. She said that this was the first class she ever typed an essay and lamented the fact that she wrote more her freshman year than the rest of her high school career.
Bianca’s sophomore year writing teacher was largely unmemorable for her, as she did not push the students much. For her junior year, she had the same teacher as she did senior year, Mr. Robertson, whom she also felt was too relaxed with students. For the most part, Bianca said her first three years in English class were dominated by practicing for the TAKS, which she always passed, typically earning three on a four point scale: “practicing for the TAKS, that’s what we do mainly here. Practice for the TAKS.” There were occasionally exceptions to this, especially in Mr. Sanchez’s class, where she remembered writing an opinion essay about criminalizing teen possession of permanent markers.

Outside of English, Bianca seemed to have more diverse writing experiences than the other study students her senior year, as she took a film course and a creative writing teacher with one of the English teachers. Additionally she had a college prep class where she wrote a lot, especially in preparing for the ACT. She also had an anatomy and physiology class where they regularly had to complete PowerPoint presentations and for which she wrote her most interesting paper at Samson, a paper on Chlamydia. She found the essay on Chlamydia both interesting and important because she learned a lot and was able to provide valuable information to the students in her class. Her ACT prep class may have been a little too late, as she recalled having a horrible time on her ACT. Because of time limitations, she did not finish a lot of questions, and felt very pressed for time on the essay, as she was still outlining when she was told she had five minutes left for writing.

Bianca’s film and creative writing courses required fairly extensive writing, and I had the opportunity to observe a few of these classes. The teacher highly valued personal expression, and had the students journal several times a class in response to songs, videos, and other types of media. For her creative writing class, Bianca recalled writing an eight-source research paper on
global warming; however, all the sources were from the Internet and the paper was only a couple pages long.

In addition to these various types of writing for other classes, Bianca wrote a few major essays in addition to a personal statement in her senior English class. As mentioned above, some of this writing, such as her personal statement, journals, and a scholarship essay based off of the statement, were very personal. Because of the emotions raised by writing about the experience with her mother, Bianca felt that the scholarship essay was the most difficult writing she did senior year. Helping her with a draft of her scholarship essay showed me that Bianca was able to write an interesting narrative in English, but needed help with grammar issues and expressing herself more descriptively. For instance, her draft read, “I got up of my bed and I went to the living room,” which we changed to “I jumped out of bed and ran to the living room.”

As most of her writing experiences in high school centered on personal-type writing, it is unsurprising that Bianca’s major senior year source-based analytical essays, on *Beowulf* and *Lord of the Flies*, were less than successful. Her thesis for the *Beowulf* essay was fairly simple, “*Beowulf*’s aggressive nature reflects the bravery of Anglo-Saxon society.” Although Bianca did provide required textual evidence for each paragraph, quotes were always placed right at the beginning of the paragraphs without any kind of signal phrase. Despite this, she did cite the line numbers for each quote and, especially in the first body paragraph, provided some insightful commentary on the quote. While she did a fairly good job of commenting on each of the quotes, the latter half of the essay, including her extended discussion connecting Grendel to El Chapo Guzman in the concluding paragraph, did not effectively connect back to her thesis.

Bianca’s *Lord of the Flies* essay had similar problems, starting off strongly but losing steam about halfway through the essay. For this essay, she focused on the different uses of
power by the main characters: “Ralph and Jack often fighting for the respect and power, which lets us know that power, can be use in two different ways. Power is use so much in this story because both Jack and Ralph want the respect and power from the others.” In evaluating this essay, Mr. Robertson noted that citations were lacking throughout, with only one quote including a page number. Even more disturbingly, in the latter half of the essay, there were multiple paragraphs lifted verbatim from SparkNotes. While the first body paragraph wanders a bit, there are moments of strong insight and overall the paragraph supports Bianca’s thesis. For instance, she writes, “Unquestionably, Ralph wants the civilization and productive leadership while the others want to be playing around so this tells us who really wants the good for the group.” Unfortunately, this and other insightful statements were partially lifted from the SparkNotes character analyses. This revealed that Bianca could find sources that talk effectively about her topic; however, she was unsure about citing these sources and unexperienced in providing these insights on her own. It also could reveal her struggle with writing a very different type of essay that is significantly longer than previous texts she produced in high school. While her tendency to procrastinate may have hindered her less other times during her high school career, learning a new genre of writing takes time, time she may not have had due to procrastination with this essay. Also, given her situation at home, she certainly had other things on her mind. The practice of copying was clearly atypical for Bianca, as her teacher was surprised and disappointed: “I was a little disappointed. She copied in some places. That was the main thing. Yeah, mainly I was disappointed about the copying. She didn’t cite, I don’t believe, and it kinda surprises me, again, because of all the time we’re putting into it, but who knows? Maybe what goes on at home and stuff distracts her, so it could’ve been better.”
Overall, Bianca was disappointed with her high school literacy education and did not feel prepared for college. Her favorite teachers were like Mr. Sanchez or a middle school teacher she remembered who used to push students to work and fail them if they did not. While Bianca acknowledged she had extra demands that would limit her ability to complete homework, she still repeatedly wished that Mr. Robertson would work them harder: “Well sometimes I don’t have time but I would like for Mr. Robertson to push me, to push us more, to have more work, to read more.” Bianca reported never reading a complete novel for her classes at Samson, with the only “big book” she ever read being *Harry Potter* for class in fifth grade. She tried to make up for it by occasionally checking out books from the library, and showed up to an interview with a few books, one being about women in Afghanistan. As she transitioned to college, she thought her biggest shortcoming was her vocabulary, expecting to need “more extensive…bigger words” for her college writing tasks.

**Literacy and Learning in the First Year of College**

**First semester.**

Bianca’s transition to college went differently than the other students’ as she was in the CAMP program. As part of this program, she was required to take summer courses and attend regular tutoring and study hours in the CAMP office. She also had a special orientation and the program took care of registration, ensuring that CAMP participants would be in learning communities together.

Like other study students, Bianca was most shocked by the amount of reading she was expected to do for college classes, and identified it has her biggest challenge and much higher than she expected. In the beginning of the semester, she said she had to spend about three hours a day reading, with most of it for sociology and history. For these two classes, she had to read
around three books during the semester. Looking back at high school, she felt that a key area where they could have improved was in requiring students to read more often and more difficult works: “I think the books that we read in high school, they were really easy compared to the ones we’re reading now so they should have difficult books to get us prepared for university.” Like other study students, Bianca quickly found ways to manage all this reading, which unfortunately consisted of skimming the reading, and skipping a lot of pages, knowing that her professor would discuss the readings in class.

For her first semester writing course, Bianca had the same projects that other students taking UTEP’s ENG 1311 class had, writing a memo about a community agency, an annotated bibliography and an associated research paper, a blog, among other projects (see Table 7.4. for a list of Bianca’s first-year writing assignments). Her instructor, Ms. Perry, had added a theme to the course, peace studies, a theme that appeared in several of Bianca’s projects.

Table 7.4
Bianca’s First-Year Writing Experiences

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<th>Fall semester</th>
<th>Spring semester</th>
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<td><strong>Art</strong></td>
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<td><strong>FYC</strong></td>
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<td>Homepage portfolio</td>
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<td>2-3 page agency discourse memo</td>
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<td>3-5 page rhetorical/visual analysis</td>
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<td>7-10 source annotated bibliography</td>
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<td>4-6 page community problem report</td>
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<td><strong>History</strong></td>
<td><strong>FYC</strong></td>
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<td>2-3 page analysis essay on <em>Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma</em></td>
<td>4-6 page genre analysis</td>
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<td>Essay exam</td>
<td>7-10 page literature review/primary research report</td>
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<td>2-3 page argument/analysis essay on <em>Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl</em></td>
<td>5-6 minute documentary (group project)</td>
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<td>2 page online opinion piece</td>
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<td>Advocacy website</td>
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Her first project for the class, a peace blog, was to be an ongoing project, but Bianca ended up only posting one entry. As a result, Ms. Perry ended up giving a low grade for this assignment, despite a comment earlier in the semester that the “peace blog looks good!” Her other projects for the course seemed stronger. For instance, Bianca wrote a memo about a community agency that helps pregnant women. Bianca reported drawing information about this agency via its newsletter, which she cited at the end of her memo, and a friend who had used their services. Ms. Perry was very positive about the memo, writing in her feedback, “You did a really nice job on your memo. It’s well organized, detailed, and well-written! The bullets and indented margins shouldn’t be there. Otherwise, great job!”

Bianca’s annotated bibliography and subsequent research paper were about Nelson Mandela and Tom Fox, and she was asked to compare their lives and activism. Bianca said the annotated bibliography was the hardest assignment of the semester, as it was an unfamiliar genre and she had trouble meeting the eight-source requirement. She explained that her CAMP peer leader helped her a lot, showing her how to evaluate sources and helping with the citations. This tutoring benefited Bianca, as she had a good variety of sources, including academic books and articles, and provided concise yet informative annotations for each of them.

The research paper based on the annotated bibliography seemed a bit less successful and, as her teacher noted, was a page short of the four page minimum requirement. For this paper, Bianca began by introducing the two subjects, Nelson Mandela and Tom Fox, and proceeded to write about the similarities and differences before concluding the paper. The paper had all the
important elements, yet still had some important problems. While Ms. Perry praised Bianca for the introduction and the organization of the paper, she noted that it was missing an abstract and in-text citations while having some issues with propositions. Ms. Perry, however, realized that this may have been the first such assignment for Bianca, and wrote, “Writing a research-based paper for the first time is challenging. Good job on your first try. Each time you’ll improve. I recommend that you get help along the way from the University Writing Center.” As seen in the discussion of Bianca’s earlier writing, she was not familiar with using citations in her writing. While the references listed in her annotated bibliography generally conformed to APA format, she did not cite these in her research paper nor include a reference list. Her comments in one interview indicate that she had not learned this by the time she was required to write the research paper, as she said she did not forget to do it, but did not know how.

Outside of English, Bianca did some writing in sociology, where she was asked to write a paper that had her to talk to her parents about where they were during important societal events and how they experienced these events. Overall, she found the sociology course the most challenging, as she had to learn a lot of new vocabulary (which reflects her high school expectations of college) and had a lot of reading. She did recall one positive experience for this class, noting that she received a high C on her mid-term exam when all her other friends failed.

Like the other students at the university, Bianca did the most writing outside of FYC her first semester in her history class, where she was required to write a couple two to three page essays that were worth 35% of the final course grade. Additionally, she had to write short answers and essays for her mid-term exam, which ended up being one of her most negative experiences of the semester, as she failed: “I felt really stressed, I was trying to put all the information and like I think I did it really fast, but then I, we didn’t even have enough time so.”
This experience hearkened back to her ACT essay experience, and reveals the problem of timed writing for students like Bianca, who could likely perform much better on these types of assignments if having sufficient time to develop, organize, and write their ideas.

Despite the setback of the mid-term exam, Bianca was encouraged after meeting with her TA, who explained that she could still get a B for the course. Her essays for the course were much more successful, and she received a B for the first one and an A for the second. In reading the two essays, the first one seemed more developed and as if she put more time into it. This essay asked Bianca to evaluate the credibility of Camila Townsend’s interpretation of Pocahontas in *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*. In this essay, she gave multiple examples, which she cited, and made an interesting comparison to the Disney version of Pocahontas, writing:

As an illustration of the sweet version the movie states, “John Smith was tall and clean shaven. He wore tight pants and some armor” (Disney’s Pocahontas). While the book states, “John Smith was short, had a full beard, and wore puffy pants (like everyone else). He did wear the type of armor shown” (Real life). In my point of view the most credible is the second one it states the way normal men appearance and it does not sound like a fairy tale prince.

For this essay, Bianca was graded via a rubric, which included title, introduction, thesis, evidence, conclusion, organization, and style and grammar. The amount of written feedback consisted of, “Overall, well done! You effectively answered one of the two paper topic questions. Your thesis argument became apparent early in the paper, and you progressively argued for this thesis through the remainder of the paper. You just need analyze more evidences from the book.” Despite a number of minor grammar issues, and referring to the biography as a
“bibliography,” Bianca received an “Excellent” for style and grammar, with no comments on improving her writing in this area.

For the second history essay, Bianca responded to the prompt, “Is Harriet Jacobs correct when she argues that slavery was far more horrible for women?” This essay was significantly shorter than the previous, coming in just under the two-page minimum requirement. Nonetheless, this essay showed Bianca becoming more confident in incorporating and citing quotes, as evident by this example:

Women where easier to take advantage of as Harriet Jacobs states, “This poor women endured many cruelties from her master and mistress: sometimes she was locked up, away from her nursing baby for a whole day and night” (pg.15). As said the owners of the slave would do cruel things as such just to make slave women suffer this is one of the cruelties made towards women.

Here, it was evident that Bianca was becoming more capable of finding textual evidence that supports her thesis, and was now able to incorporate it and comment on it in a more complex way, revealing that she had progressed since writing the Beowulf essay discussed earlier. Nonetheless, as evident by misspellings such as “where” for “were,” this essay seems less polished than the previous one. Nonetheless, Bianca reported receiving an A, and did not mention receiving any feedback on her grammar and mechanics.

In the interviews, Bianca noted that she was required to do much more on the computer in college than in high school, saying, “here everything’s in the computer. It’s really different. The grades, you have to submit your work, so it’s really different.” For her FYC class, she worked on a blog, analyzed websites, and created a movie. Most of the work for that class, as well as for her other classes, was submitted via the course management system, Blackboard.
While keeping everything digitally has its advantages, it can be problematic in one way. Her first-semester FYC instructor noted that she no longer provided in-text comments on student writing, because of the difficulty downloading the individual papers, using the comment feature, saving them differently, and re-uploading them. Instead, she, like Bianca’s history TAs, used rubrics and provided summative comments. As a result, Bianca did not appear to be getting the support she may have benefited from in regards to persistent issues with prepositions, spelling, and other stylistic features.

Overall, Bianca’s first semester at college was less successful than she hoped, and she ended up with a 2.57 GPA, failing her art history class and receiving a low C in her English class. Between talking with Bianca and her English instructor Ms. Perry, I learned a bit more about Bianca’s low English grade. Ms. Perry explained that Bianca’s grades in the course declined over the course of the semester, and her attendance dropped a bit as well. Her final course grade was particularly hurt by failure to complete the blogging assignment, and she received a zero on participation as she did not comment on other classmate’s blogs. Bianca explained that she kind of blew off these requirements, not feeling that they were enough to bring her grade down. She had trouble accessing the blog after she forgot her password, and did not take the necessary steps to recover the password or create a new blogging account, because of the belief that it was not a big deal.

**Second semester.**

By the beginning of the second semester, Bianca was confident in what she wanted to major in, but did not know how to go about declaring it, something she figured out as the semester progressed. She was set on majoring in criminal justice and minoring in psychology, and explained her choice: “because like in the criminal justice rank I want to work with kids like
involved in situations. Like if their parents were put to jail and stuff like that. I want to work with the kids, so that’s why -- that’s the reason I got like psychology and criminal justice.” Her choice was primarily based on her own situation where she took care of her own siblings in the aftermath of her mother being arrested and deported. This choice clearly shows Bianca’s concern for others, whether her desire to better support her own family or to help others in similarly difficult situations.

As depicted in Table 7.4, Bianca continued to write in most of her classes her second semester, with most of the writing still concentrated in her FYC class. As described in Chapter 4, the second semester FYC class at UTEP was a hybrid course, which Bianca was a bit concerned about at first, noting that it would be harder because she would have to be more self-motivated, doing things on her own time, and that she would not have the same connection with the instructor that she had in traditional classes. Nonetheless, when the class did meet face to face, she valued the structure of the class, in that it was more discussion and group work as opposed to lecture oriented, noting that “everyone's talking, giving opinions and we learn.”

Bianca felt her FYC class was the hardest of the semester, because she was always having to “read and summarize and stuff like that,” posting to the course Wiki every week. Additionally, as described in Chapter 4, her instructor had adopted a writing-about-writing approach to the course, so students read rhetoric and composition disciplinary articles almost every week. In addition to these weekly readings and postings, Bianca had a few major essay assignments, in addition to more technology-oriented projects, a video documentary and an online opinion piece. She liked how the assignments built on each other, as students were asked to focus on a particular topic throughout the semester.
While Bianca did very well on the documentary, which she worked on in a larger group, she struggled more with the traditional essay assignments, receiving a low B on her genre analysis and a C on her literature review. Her literature review fell short of the assignment requirements, as she only had three secondary sources, two of them low quality, when she was expected to have at least seven. This may have stemmed from the confusion of whether or not her primary sources counted towards the total, as she cited a total of four interviews in the reference list. As the grader noted, her primary research was of high quality, but really overtook any secondary research she offered, which was the main purpose of the assignment. Bianca’s shortcomings on this assignment likely stemmed from a few areas. As she noted, she found it hard to stay engaged in longer assignments and got bored during the researching and writing process. Also, she explained that she already knew a lot about teenage pregnancy from friends and family members, so likely felt less compelled to utilize secondary sources.

In comparison, Bianca’s genre analysis was an overall a more successful assignment, albeit a simpler one as it required her to compare and contrast two sources on teenage pregnancy from different genres. As her grader noted, she could have done more by including specific details from the genres, such as quotes. Nonetheless, she got an A on focus and generally stayed focused on analysis of the genres as opposed to the topics, one place where students commonly error. Perhaps the most disturbing element of Bianca’s grades for both assignments was her writing fluency grade as she received a C for one and a D for the other, with no mention of grammar issues much less any details on what she could do to improve. While Bianca may have gotten some feedback on this aspect of her writing from mentors in the CAMP program, it appears that grammar-based feedback within her classes was limited.
Bianca’s most interesting writing for the semester was an eight page essay for her criminal justice class in which she wrote about DNA exoneration:

I remember it was DNA exoneration for the prison inmates. That a long time ago, they didn’t have the technology we have now, right? So a lot of people -- there’s a lot of innocent people. There used to be, but they’re now dead. So it talked about like how DNA exonerations help like both like prisoners -- innocent prisoners out.

Not only was it the longest essay she had ever written, but it required her to do more research than ever before. She reported that having to look up lots of articles was tiring. While most of the sources she ended up using were Internet sources, she said she used a few from the library databases, but no library books. She said being interested in the topic contributed a lot to her level of motivation in this assignment, and she ended up getting around a 90%.

Bianca also completed a few writing assignments for her political science class, with an extra credit essay on Cesar Chavez and third party movements as well as a three page essay on one’s favorite public servant, for whom Bianca picked Michelle Obama. The public servant essay had four paragraphs, focusing on the position of importance, historical outline, political interaction and media coverage, and self reflection. At the end, Bianca included a list of three references under the heading “Citing and References.” The list had sources from biography.com, fruitsandveggeismorematters.org, and the Huffington Post, nothing particularly reputable. A look at Bianca’s essay revealed a strong focus, with her achieving the goals of giving background information on Michelle Obama, critiquing media coverage of her, and expressing support for her campaign against obesity. However, language problems persisted, making it difficult to understand at times. For instance, one sentence read, “Throughout time presidents wife have been on the look and the media coverage has been negative than positive even thought
they do affords to do good to society.” Despite the presence of sentences like this throughout the essay, Bianca reported getting a 95, only losing points for citations. Her continued difficulties at the sentence level combined with the noted lack of feedback on this area of her writing in English raise concerns that Bianca was not getting the feedback she needed in her classes.

Outside of school, Bianca’s life stayed mostly on track her second semester, and she did not report too many major problems. Money continued to be a concern, as she, like most students in this study, struggled to find a job. For a while, not having Internet access at home was making it difficult to keep up with the work in her hybrid English class and she would often bring her computer to church where she could access the free Internet offered throughout the downtown area. With my advice and support, she procured Internet access. However, she had another technology-related struggle in that her computer only had Microsoft Works, which saved files in a format incompatible with Microsoft Word. She said this caused her difficulties multiple times when submitting assignments, and likely negatively affected her grades. Despite these challenges, mid-semester she felt she was doing well in her classes and was aiming for a 3.5 GPA.

**Conclusion**

As revealed in throughout the discussion of Bianca’s experiences and depicted in Figure 7.4 below, Bianca overcame some major challenges in developing a support network that helped her succeed.
For Bianca, like most of the other study students, college was a very different experience from high school. In general, she explained the difference like this: “First you have to read a lot. You have to read a lot, like a lot. And then you have to write a lot. Then you have to study a lot. Then you have to wake up early a lot.” While for some students, college may mean waking up later, Bianca often had 7:30 classes in addition to the responsibilities of making sure her siblings got to school, so had no time to sleep in. For her, balancing early mornings at school with raising a family was her biggest challenge:

the fact that I had to come to school early, and you know that I need to take the kids to school, so I had a lot of trouble. So this lady helps, but there were days she couldn’t help,
and I had to give her money for gas. And so that’s the biggest challenge in my like -- in my family stuff. But if affected like school also.

Her family situation also made evenings difficult, as she could not focus on studying when at home, however much she tried. She reported looking at her books for hours without learning anything, and often stayed up well after her siblings were asleep. In response to this situation, she always tried to complete as much work as possible at school.

Multiple times Bianca expressed a wish that her high school teachers had made her read and write more, and talked in detail about the differences between high school and college writing in our last interview. Her struggles with research-based papers such as the literature review and her DNA exoneration essay likely stemmed from a lack of practice at the high school level:

in high school, we used to write papers but not like this type of papers, you know? Long and research. Like in high school, we didn’t have to research like all, a lot of articles. And cite work, reference page. That’s really different. I think high school should start teaching that…we used to do a lot of three page essays, but like really basic. Just like, they only focus like on the thesis statement. I don’t know. Just like the little things. Just like TAKS type of essays. It’s not like focus like on the really important subject. It’s just like a little topic and you have to just write about it.

In comparison to TAKS essays which asked Bianca to write about topics such as, in her words, “what would you do if you had found like a treasure,” her first year college writing assignments had her discussing very different issues like teenage pregnancy, DNA exoneration, and the value of having a viable third political party.
Despite the various challenges present in Bianca’s life working against her being a successful college student, she had various sources of capital that contributed to her first-year success. God was her most important source of support, and it is apparent that her involvement in church activities gave her a sense of confidence and optimism that was lacking in some of the study students who struggled. Besides this, members of her church clearly supported her in various ways, ranging from a woman who would regularly buy her gas and another person who would take her siblings to school many mornings.

Academically, Bianca’s most important source of support was the CAMP program, which not only provided her with some financial support but with structure necessary for her to complete the majority of her work and be successful in her classes. According to the program director, the program has provided Bianca and other students with a number of advantages: “we remove all obstacles, all barriers, for not only her, but for all students, and that’s so they focus on their classes only. And with her, it’s helped her allow to spend more time with her family.” Additionally, the program provided structure to Bianca’s academic life, ranging from requiring her to meet with her instructors to have them complete evaluation forms to meeting a certain amount of tutoring hours every week. Thus, Bianca ended up meeting with her instructors more often than other students in this study, and was likely helped because they all knew about the CAMP program and the type of students it served. In addition to knowing her instructors more personally, she benefited from accommodations made such as when she was very sick and consequently did poorly on an exam. As far as tutoring was concerned, Bianca said she developed a habit of doing most of her work in the CAMP office, and would always have peer leaders and others to read her work, quiz her on the readings, and ensure she was completing the necessary assignments.
When asked if she anticipated any challenges standing in her way, Bianca was confident in her ability to stay focused and graduate as quickly as possible. Unlike other students at UTEP or EPCC who may be reluctant to take out loans if necessary, Bianca did not anticipate money standing in her way: “I don’t think I’ll ever quit because of money. I’m going to have to get loans or whatever. I don’t care. I just want to finish.” Bianca’s family was always foremost in her mind, with her loan money going to support them and her desire to graduate intimately connected with supporting them as well. The director of the CAMP program was constantly amazed by Bianca’s ability to balance school and family life, and noted that she was more motivated than the typical student in the program:

She realizes that she needs to provide a better life for herself and her family. She needs to have an education to get a better paying job. It’s easy for her to go work at Wal-Mart or work somewhere else, get a job, and have an income coming in. But she’s chosen to invest in a four-year dream and try and graduate as soon as possible so she can help the family out.

Despite the fact that she was exhausted by a first year at college in which she always had to balance family, school, and church, Bianca planned to take as many summer courses as she could to make her dream of a degree and ability to better support her family a few steps closer.

Chapter Conclusion

The students profiled in this chapter could be loosely categorized in two categories. Mauricio and Carolina came to college with well-developed writing abilities and had lives outside of school that were conducive to focusing more intently on their studies. On the other hand, Bianca and Yesenia had less developed writing abilities and lives outside of school that were more distracting, as they both had to care for dependents who were in fact their siblings.
Nonetheless, while Mauricio and Carolina ended the year with higher GPAs, all students had a successful first year and plan to return for their second.

The reasons why all the community college students failed or dropped out and all the university students had successful first years are unclear. As mentioned at the end of the previous chapter, the university students generally showed stronger motivation from the beginning, actively pursuing scholarships or being willing to take out loans to support their postsecondary education goals. When they struggled, or even when they did not, they actively sought help from various institutional resources, which were more prevalent at the university than the college. These issues and others will be analyzed using Bourdieu’s analytical tools of habitus, capital, and field in the next and final chapter.
Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusion

The last several chapters have provided a detailed picture of students transitioning to college, focusing on the institutions they passed through as well as on their lives and literacy development within and beyond the walls of these institutions. Many of the stories were positive: teachers at the high school level being key mentors, a scholarship program for children of migrant workers supporting a student’s success. However, the stories are also ones of struggle, partially due to students but also due to instructors, institutions, and state/national politics. This final chapter revisits these stories, exploring how the students developed the habitus and networks of capital necessary to support a successful transition to college, which is defined here by both continued college attendance and financial aid eligibility standards by the institutions involved in this study: at EPCC, a 2.0 GPA and successful completion of two-thirds of the credit hours attempted and, at UTEP, a 2.0 GPA and successful completion of three-fourths of the credit hours attempted (EPCC, 2011; UTEP, 2011). The discussion then turns to the backdrop of these stories, critiquing the way agents, practices, and policies within different fields support and fail students like those in this study. The final comments focus specifically on how writing teachers and researchers can transform their teaching and research practices in order to better promote the success of increasingly multilingual and multicultural student populations.

Before continuing, I would like to reiterate why this study has considered all these levels (instructional, institutional, and state/national) as well as students’ lives outside the classroom in a study on writing. In the conclusion of her longitudinal work *Undergraduates in a Second Language*, Leki (2007) wrote,

In doing this research, I came to the opinion that writing researchers, in both L1 and L2, myself included, suffered a kind of professional deformation, exaggerating the role of
writing in the lives of L2 undergraduate students and in their intellectual and academic development. The academic lives I heard about in these interviews and saw in class observations could not be reduced to issues of academic literacy. (p. 283)

A traditional literacy study might focus intently on what occurs in the classroom to discuss student literacy development, discussing the types of writing tasks students face, the types of reading they do, and the type of teachers they have. In a sense, this model is based on the myth of a traditional student whose home literacy practices are similar to the academy’s and who has the necessary resources to be successful. This model treats student success and failure as a question of what occurs in the classroom, treating lives outside of this space as a nonissue for research on writing and reading. In its quest for objectivity, it values the idea of the classroom and school as a sealed laboratory in which issues concerning literacy development can be neatly investigated and the messiness of the outside world can be reduced to a few statistics on retention and graduation rates.

As researchers like Leki (2007), Sternglass (1997), Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001, 2010) have revealed, students do have lives outside the classroom and these lives do matter and are worthy of investigation even in studies focused on academic literacy development. In this study, literacy practices were constantly embedded in a variety of fields including classrooms, institutions, El Paso, Juárez, Texas, the United States, and Mexico, and events happening on all these different fields ultimately impacted the development of students’ habitus and capital and how these supported or hindered their transitions to college. It is for this reason that Arispe and Acevedo (2008) argued that access to quality housing, food, and health care cannot be ignored in studies examining academic success. As postsecondary institutions increasingly turn to teaching digital composition, digital divides in terms of access, which is
never generic (Sheridan, Ridolfo & Michel, 2008), will become increasingly important. In this study, external factors such as the drug-related violence in Mexico, punitive immigration policies separating families, and the need to care for dependents all affected students’ ability to focus on school. On the other hand, there were a number of agents inside and outside educational institutions that students drew on in building networks of capital supporting their success.

The Role of Habitus and Capital in Facilitating Field Transitions

The students profiled in the last few chapters passed through their first years in college with varying degrees of success. Mauricio and Carolina easily had the smoothest transitions, and ended their first years of college with GPAs in the 3.5-4.0 range. Yesenia and Bianca struggled a bit more to adapt to college life and had more challenges facing them in making this transition, but they both made it through their first years of college with 2.5-3.0 GPAs and are currently in their second years at college. Finally, Daniel, Joanne, and Paola had what could be considered unsuccessful transitions, failing or dropping most classes their first year. Paola was somewhat of an exception in this regard as she received mostly As in her first semester. Using the analytical tools of habitus, capital, and field, I now revisit these students’ pathways into college and develop an understanding of transition that can help researchers, teachers, and policy makers better facilitate linguistic minority students’ transitions to college.

Mauricio and Carolina: Successful Transitions to College

Mauricio.

Of all the students in this study, Mauricio was best positioned to succeed in making the transition to college especially because of familial and economic capital. While he lived in Mexico all his life and had parents who did not attend college, his family possessed the most economic capital of any family in this study. Even though they did not have higher education
themselves, Mauricio’s parents, as well-off business owners, were able to provide Mauricio with the knowledge and habitus to succeed. For instance, Mauricio recalled having private computer lessons in middle school, which gave him confidence when navigating technological environments, especially as he started college. His parents always aggressively pushed him to succeed academically, even though they were unfamiliar with the U.S. schooling system.

Mauricio’s transition from the field of the Mexican educational system to the U.S. educational system at the beginning of high school appeared much more difficult than his subsequent transition to college. In making this transition, Mauricio lacked the linguistic/rhetorical capital that is so vital in the English-only U.S. educational system. He recalled getting low grades in his classes and not understanding anything, which made him very upset because he felt powerless to meet the expectations of his parents, who demanded nothing but the best grades. This period of transition was traumatizing to Mauricio as it was to other study students, and illustrates Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) point of “symbolic violence” exercised through language and “pedagogic action” (p. 5). Nonetheless, hit with this moment of crisis, Mauricio was supported by the network of capital he was beginning to form, as depicted in Figure 7.2. With familial capital stemming from pressure by his parents, he knew that he would have to work extra hard to succeed, and drew his sophomore year English teacher into his network. The experiences and agents surrounding Mauricio led him to make choices that developed a college-oriented habitus, leading him to work independently beyond what was required in school. By taking advantage of constant practice, feedback, and after school and weekend tutoring, he rapidly built up his linguistic/rhetorical capital and went from being an outsider to one of the most respected students in the high school.
In *Outliers*, Gladwell (2008) referenced sociologist Lareau’s (2003) work to argue that parents from higher economic classes developed a sense of entitlement in their children, giving them the confidence to more freely interact with superiors. While this is a broad generalization that may not hold up across different cultural backgrounds, it may partially explain why Mauricio had a particular talent for befriending authority figures within the school. He worked closely with school counselors, had access to confidential school records, and processed scholarship applications. The navigational capital these experiences brought likely helped Mauricio secure more scholarships to college.

All these factors helped support a relatively smooth transition into college for Mauricio. While all the students described college as a very different field from the high school, Mauricio came with a rich network of capital that was robustly developed in all areas: aspirational, familial, social, linguistic/rhetorical, and navigational. Because of the independent work he went through when learning English and the constant push from his sophomore year English teacher and parents to achieve, Mauricio had a habitus well suited to the college environment by the time he entered college, hence little adaptation was needed to do well in this new field.

**Carolina.**

While Carolina’s family did not possess the economic capital that Mauricio’s did, she had an equally successful and smooth transition into college. Like Mauricio, she transitioned to the U.S. educational system the year before high school, but her transition appeared smoother, which may have stemmed from the learning environment she was placed in. In addition to ESL classes, Carolina recalled having content-area classes in English, but with other ESL students so that they were given extra support by teachers. She felt that she had to do more work under the Mexican education system than the U.S. system, suggesting this might have resulted from her placement
in language learning classes in the U.S. Nonetheless, she recalled understanding nothing in her U.S. classes at first. Although Carolina quickly became better in English, she continued to lack confidence in English throughout high school and she dropped dual-credit classes, which would have given her both high school and college credit, in her last year because of this low confidence. This continued questioning of her abilities may be attributed in part to an educational environment that does little to value the rich multilingual linguistic/rhetorical capital that students like Carolina bring with them to school, consequently making students like her see themselves as inferior because of their perpetual language learning status.

As depicted in Figure 7.1, Carolina developed a robust network of capital that likely supported her transition into and through high school, and into college. Although her family did not possess the economic capital of Mauricio’s nor was her mother able to help her with homework in English, Carolina’s mother helped boost her familial and aspirational capital. Knowing that Carolina was the oldest, she pushed her to graduate from high school in three years and go to college, so that she could help the other members of the family financially and motivate her younger siblings to follow her path. While unfamiliar with the U.S. schooling system, Carolina’s mother knew that doing well in school required time to study and complete assignments. As a result, she did not make Carolina help out extensively around the house while attending college, ensuring that Carolina had the time to focus on her schoolwork. In this sense, Carolina’s mother played an important role in developing a habitus in Carolina that was well suited for college.

Throughout high school, Carolina utilized and built her social capital by participating in DECA, a leadership organization, but more importantly by regularly attending a community center where she attended free English and computer classes while taking advantage of
homework tutoring services. She built her linguistic capital and confidence through these experiences, which led her to regret an earlier decision to drop her dual-credit class. After graduating in the top 10% of her class, she spent the summer before college by going to Washington DC with DECA and teaching citizenship classes in the community center. Overall, her experiences in these organizations helped her build up the linguistic/rhetorical capital necessary to do well in high school and later in college. Additionally, working with adult learners likely boosted Carolina’s aspirational capital by helping her realize the value of being educated. Like Mauricio, she developed a habitus through these experiences that depended on working more independently from her family to gain new experiences and successes. When she entered the new field of college, Carolina was already used to working independently whereas her peers were not.

Yesenia and Bianca: Difficult yet Successful Transitions

Yesenia.

Compared to Mauricio and Carolina, Yesenia had the advantage of entering the U.S. educational system relatively young, in 4th grade, and had ESL classes through 7th grade. At the beginning of the study, she was a very confident communicator and very fluent in spoken English, but her written English was not as advanced as most students in this study. A look at her network of capital in Figure 7.3 reveals a less developed network than Mauricio and Carolina, but one that was sufficiently strong to help her successfully transition into and through her first year in college.

Throughout the study, Yesenia had extensive aspirational capital that resulted from a strong desire for a better future. She wanted a degree in business to increase her economic capital and had goals of pursuing an advanced degree and owning hotels. In this respect, she was
likely supported by her mother, with whom she generally had a close relationship and who was attending college in Mexico to make a better life for the family. Nonetheless, while Yesenia’s mother helped build Yesenia’s familial capital in this way, the capital in this area was somewhat diminished by constant fights with her older brother and the responsibility she had for caring for her younger brother after school. However, Yesenia did see a positive aspect to caring for her younger brother in that it kept her at home as opposed to always going out with friends.

As detailed in her case study, Yesenia’s social capital was very developed, and she had a network of friends who supported her by helping with writing assignments and driving her to campus. Before and through most of this study, she also had a boyfriend who only spoke English, which supported the development of her linguistic/rhetorical capital in the area of spoken English. In high school, she was also involved in extracurricular activities such as soccer and the DECA leadership organization. Finally, Yesenia’s social capital was built through her outgoing nature, as she was unafraid to ask for help when she needed it. By seeking support such as feedback on her writing, Yesenia was quickly developing her linguistic/rhetorical capital throughout her first year at college.

Yesenia’s drive to amass the necessary capital to have a successful first year at college was in part due to the fact that she was admitted to UTEP on a conditional basis. The realization that she could be asked to leave UTEP if her grades were too low helped her in doing what was necessary to have a successful first year. Even though she had the most robust social life among the students in this study, there were several Friday nights when she texted me asking for help on an essay. Even though Yesenia’s high school experiences did little to develop a college-ready habitus, her aspirations for a college degree combined with the demands of college transformed her habitus, leading her through a successful first year at college.
Bianca.

Of all the students, Bianca had some of the most substantial challenges working against her as she transitioned to college; however, she built up a robust network of capital that supported her through a successful first year at college and into her second. Like other study participants, Bianca was very close with her family and had a mother that actively supported her aspirations to attend college; however, as detailed in her case study, her familial capital was threatened her junior year in high school when her mother was arrested and deported. Stripped of the constant presence of a supportive mother, Bianca was left to raise three children through no fault of her own.

Nonetheless, Bianca overcame the challenges surrounding her by developing a rich, supportive network of capital, which is depicted in Figure 7.4. The events surrounding her mother’s deportation did little to diminish her aspirational capital, but rather increased it, because the need to graduate from college and support the family became that much more urgent. Moreover, Bianca wanted to become a social worker, and was strongly motivated by the desire to help others in her situation. Even though Homeland Security agents took away Bianca’s mother, Bianca maintained contact with her, talking to her every day on the phone and visiting her in Juárez on the weekends. Bianca’s familial capital was further bolstered by a supportive aunt who regularly visited to help cook, clean, and take care of other household chores.

An outgoing and positive person, Bianca never lacked social capital in her network. Her primary source of support in this area was her church where she went several times a week and served as the Sunday school secretary. The support from church attendance came not only in the form of her untiring faith but also by financial, emotional, navigational and other support from members of the church community. She recalled always reading the Bible and journaling about
it in English, which likely helped Bianca build her linguistic/rhetorical capital. The support Bianca received from church attendance connects with findings by other researchers that religiosity is positively correlated with success (Antrop-González, Vélez, & Garrett, 2008; Jeynes, 2002).

Outside of church, an invaluable source of social, linguistic/rhetorical, and navigational capital and habitus development was the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) program that Bianca participated in her first year. Whereas other participants easily got distracted by home life and Joanne struggled in balancing life as a student and mother, the CAMP program required study and tutoring hours that developed in Bianca a habitus that would support her success in college. The program supported her in other ways, building her social capital by connecting her more fully with the campus community along with forming a social network and learning communities with other CAMP students. The program also build Bianca’s navigational capital by giving special orientations for CAMP students, requiring them to take classes during the summer before most students in her class started college, and registering her for classes her first year. By providing individualized tutoring, the CAMP program helped Bianca develop her linguistic/rhetorical capital as well.

Daniel and Joanne: Difficult Transitions

Daniel.

On the surface, Daniel appeared to have a lot of capital supporting a successful transition to college. He identified English as his L1, indicating that he had a linguistic/rhetorical capital advantage over students who transitioned to English later in their lives. He had a father who was also a teacher and completing an MA degree, and research has shown that parents’ educational levels are important familial capital in predicting college success (Stage & Hossler, 2000). His
familial capital was additionally bolstered by two sisters attending college while Daniel was a senior in high school.

Nonetheless, Daniel had what could only be characterized as an unsuccessful first year at college, failing or dropping all of his classes, with the exception of his developmental reading and writing classes. In part, this was due to the fact that Daniel’s habitus did not adapt quickly enough to succeed in college, as he did not have strong agents pushing him to succeed like some of the more successful students in this study. The field of college was much different from high school in that it required self-regulation and independent study skills. In an interview, Daniel attributed his difficulties in part to his high school experience which he said, “didn’t teach me, like, how to do things by a certain date and all that. And like how important it is to do good and study, you know what I mean.”

In addition to having a habitus unsuited to college-level work, Daniel faced new challenges in transitioning to college. The first semester, his grandmother became sick, and Daniel’s devotion to her became a priority as he missed several classes to make sure she made it to the doctor. His familial capital was diminished as Daniel’s father continued to distance himself and both Daniel’s sisters dropped out of college. While some of the more successful students had a parent or two supporting them, Daniel seemed to lack this valuable source of capital. Daniel’s aspirational capital seemed to diminish as he faced more disappointments his first year as college, and he reconsidered his goal to be a biomedical engineer, indicating a preference to be a mechanic.

Unlike more outgoing students like Bianca and Yesenia, Daniel’s social capital was relatively low and he was considered a “loner” by one of his writing teachers. During interviews, he talked about how he would have time after college to find friends. He did not have the
inclination that other study participants had to seek help, and was the only student who never took advantage of my constant offers of writing help his first year at college. He seemed disconnected from his classes and teachers, with the exception of his first semester developmental reading and writing teachers, who helped Daniel bolster his social capital by reaching out to him both inside and outside of class. While these actions and the institutional responsibility will be addressed later in this chapter, they were too little too late to help Daniel succeed. Similarly, Daniel reported liking his developmental writing class in the spring because he knew some of the people there, but the developing social capital here was not sufficient to support a Daniel increasingly distancing himself from school.

**Joanne.**

Like Daniel, Joanne dropped or failed most of her classes her first year at college but she also appeared to have some valuable sources of capital as she transitioned into college. Joanne had familial and navigational capital from her cousin attending college who she also lived with, as the cousin helped her complete tasks like register for classes and suggest getting a work study position. Joanne was close to Paola, who had an excellent first semester during which she was highly engaged in her schoolwork. Joanne had always attended U.S. schools, so did not have the rough transition into high school that Carolina and Mauricio had, although she did struggle to make the transition from bilingual to mainstream classes in 7th grade. She had aspirational capital in the form of a goal to be a psychologist, something she had held for the previous few years.

Nonetheless, Joanne had a number of challenges surrounding her and did not develop a network of capital sufficient to overcome them in time to have a successful first year. She was a single mother and always struggled to balance home and school lives, understandably putting her
child first. Soon after she entered college, Joanne moderated her goals of being a psychologist, aiming for a shorter educational path in order to spend more time with her daughter during her formative years. Joanne was quiet and introverted, and, like Daniel, did not have a large group of friends, especially at school. Although she had been very close to Paola during high school, it seems like they began to go separate ways during college, talking and seeing each other less often.

Whereas Daniel had some supportive teachers to help develop his network, Joanne never made close connections with her teachers her first year at college. The one relationship I witnessed was with her first-year seminar teacher, who noticed Joanne was missing class and was not doing well, but did not actively reach out to Joanne. Joanne’s linguistic/rhetorical capital stagnated as she did very little assigned reading and had very few writing assignments, with most assessment in the form of multiple-choice exams.

Realizing that college was not going well and that taking care of her daughter was a big challenge, Joanne moved back in with her parents in Juárez during winter break, hoping that this source of familial capital would give her more time to focus on school. At first, this did not seem to do much to help Joanne succeed, because she had more time (although she certainly lost time in crossing the border everyday) but did not have the habitus of working independently nor had the network to support the habitus development necessary to succeed immediately at college.

**Paola: An Unpredictable Transition**

As I articulate an understanding of transition that emerged from this study in the next section, it is important to remember that the nature of students’ transitions to college is unpredictable due to the complexity of the interplay between factors within and outside of school. No story in this dissertation illustrates this better than Paola’s. As mentioned in her case study,
Paola expressed some of the biggest doubts about attending college, explaining that she felt compelled but did not really want to go, and thought about being a flight attendant instead. Thus, at one point, her aspirational capital seemed rather low. Nonetheless, as students around her began preparing for college, this attitude quickly turned around and she became excited about going to college and securing a better future.

Paola’s familial capital did not seem as developed as that of some of the more successful students. While she lived with both parents, she did not seem overly close to them or her siblings, as she reported spending a lot of time away from home. Family issues became a concern for her at various points her first year, with one brother running away from home and another becoming ill. Finances were always a concern, as Paola’s parents struggled to find steady, well-paying jobs.

In regard to social capital, Paola had positive and negative areas. She always seemed to have a few close friends, even though she was a fairly quiet and shy student. When visiting her classes, I always saw her talking with a friend before or afterwards, and she also earned the respect of her teachers through diligently completing her work. However, Paola’s attitude to school began to quickly shift after she found a boyfriend towards the end of her first semester. At first, the relationship seemed conducive to Paola’s schooling as she explained that her boyfriend pushed her to do well in school and had aspirations to attend college himself. However, this relationship continued to deepen and rapidly drew Paola away from school after winter break.

Areas where Paola was undoubtedly strong were her linguistic/rhetorical and navigational capital. Paola wrote a lot in her first semester writing class and received good feedback from her professor. Her writing was developing and she became confident enough in her work and her speaking to volunteer to read her paper aloud to the class. In regards to navigational capital,
Paola never seemed to struggle to take care of daily tasks such as register for classes and secure financial aid, and, if she faced any difficulties in this regard, she had the persistence necessary to work them out.

Had I followed Paola only through her first semester in college, I would have written her off as a success story. She had a strong motivation to put the work necessary into her classes, which was shaped by aspirations for a better life and for a genuine interest in learning. However, when an unpredictable factor in the form of a boyfriend entered her social world, focus on her education diminished.

**Understanding Transition**

A revisit to the participants’ stories in the previous section has revealed many different transitions in the participants’ lives, transitions that a more traditional college student may not have to undergo as discourse practices in educational systems are largely aligned with their home discourse practices. Students in this study regularly and successfully moved between the U.S. and Mexico, between English and Spanish, between home and school life, transitions that other students might not have experienced. Moving between educational institutions was just one transition embedded in a larger network of successful transitions, and required mini-transitions on multiple levels. For instance, in reading and writing, students moved from short stories to historical novels, from handwritten personal narratives to typed analyses, research papers, and even video documentaries. The habitus of students readapted as they shifted from one field to another. “Why can’t I just write what I think?” was a common question students asked me when having to research for papers at the college level, a question that arose because they had been so used to writing what they thought for so long.
Bourdieu (1977) has described the adaptation of habitus when transitioning through different fields as hysteresis, writing,

The hysteresis of habitus, which is inherent in the social conditions of the reproduction of the structures in habitus, is doubtless one of the foundations of the structural lag between opportunities and the dispositions to grasp them which is the cause of missed opportunities, and, in particular, of the frequently observed incapacity to think historical crises in categories of perception and thought other than those of the past. (cited in Hardy, 2008, p. 134)

In other words, hysteresis is the lag that occurs when agents move through different fields, as their habitus can be slow to adapt to help them function successfully in a new environment. As seen in the descriptions in the previous section, hysteresis became apparent when the habitus that students developed in a high school that required little independent work outside of school met the field of college that required a habitus that would support students engaging in extensive reading and writing outside the classroom. Interestingly, most of the students anticipated this challenge, repeatedly saying during the high school interviews that college would require a lot more independent work. This realization raises the question of why some learners adapted and succeeded in college while others did not, since all students expected college to be very different.

Examining the descriptions of individual students above, it becomes apparent that the two most successful students had already been developing a habitus suitable for college in high school, working beyond school hours to ensure they were successful. This was in part prompted the necessity to rapidly build their linguistic/rhetorical capital in order to succeed in an English-only educational environment. It was also supported by robust networks of capital that included not only family support, but various sponsors including a community center and devoted teachers.
While Mauricio was supported additionally by economic capital, Carolina was also able to develop the habitus that students from higher income brackets often possess because their parents push their children through the school system and place them in better funded, more rigorous schools (see Gladwell (2008) and Lareau (2003) for a description of these types of students/parents). Carolina’s mother was different from many first-generation parents who support educational aspirations but still expect their children to actively contribute to the family while attending school (Merisotis and McCarthy, 2005). As Torres (2004) noted, “Helping parents understand the level of work and expectations placed on college students as well as information on how to support their son or daughter is an important aspect in helping Latino/a students succeed” (p. 467).

While they struggled more and had more challenges in their lives, Bianca and Yesenia similarly had successful transitions to college. Unlike Mauricio and Carolina, they did not have the advantage of developing a college-oriented habitus in high school, but they had influential agents around them during their first year in college. Supported by various forms of capital, including strong aspirations for better lives, a comprehensive scholarship program, and a supportive social network, both Bianca and Yesenia developed the habitus necessary to carry them through a successful first year and into their second. Their stories reveal the importance of developed social capital, as researchers have found that participation in extracurricular activities, learning communities, religious organizations, and connecting with literacy sponsors all support student success (Antrop-González, Vélez, & Garrett, 2008; Astin, 1997; Barnhouse and Smith, 2005; Cargill and Kalikoff; 2007; Jeynes, 2002; Scenters-Zapico, 2010; Tinto, 1993, 1997).

Daniel and Joanne were a different story. Like Bianca and Yesenia, they faced a pronounced hysteresis upon entering college. Unlike Bianca and Yesenia, Daniel and Joanne did
not have a strong network of capital to support them and help them adapt to college. While they began college with fragile networks and potential sources of capital, many of these sources fell away as they moved through their first years. Most notably, they lacked the familial capital that played an important role in Mauricio and Carolina’s stories and the social capital that was so important in facilitating Bianca and Yesenia’s transition. Daniel did have a few caring teachers at the college level, which has been correlated positively with success among Latina/o students because it builds their social capital (Antrop-González, Véélez, & Garrett, 2008). However, as in Antrop-González et al.’s (2008) study, these caring teachers were too few in Daniel’s college life to make a significant impact.

Paola’s case was a bit different from the rest of the participants as the challenges she faced did not seem to be a question of habitus development, as she did extremely well her first semester, delaying interviews so that she could focus on completing her homework. Her case reveals that any understanding of transition is always limited by the complexity of human lives and the possibility of any number of factors to intervene at any time.

To some, the results of this study might be sobering. Of the nine students I started with, seven began college right away and four made it through their first year without failing or stopping out. However, even students who struggled, Paola, Daniel, and Joanne, had successes that a traditional perspective of transition would overlook. Paola excelled her first semester at college, proving she could handle the work, and made a conscious decision not to return for much of the spring semester. Joanne was considered one of the harder working students in her high school English class, taking only a month or so off away from school while having a child, balancing school and home responsibilities during high school and graduating on time.
Viewing transition as a one-time move from high school to college would paint these three students as failures. Quinn (2010) has pointed out that conceptualizing transition in this way simplifies a much more complex reality. Even worse, it marginalizes students who do not fit within a traditional model, as working class students who leave school are seen as failures and depicted as perpetual “drop outs” even though their path through the educational system may be much different than their middle and upper class counterparts. In Quinn’s (2010) view, viewing “life as permanent flux is a celebration of risk and uncertainty, an energetic conception of subjectivity which seeks to free it from the limiting constraints of personhood” (p. 123).

Understanding that Daniel, Joanne, and Paola’s stories are still being created and that they are in school or have ambitions to return to school and get degrees makes it clear that labeling their cases as failed transitions is much too simplistic and premature.

Given the complexity of their paths, it is unlikely that Daniel, Joanne, and Paola will graduate in the four years that college is “supposed” to take. This is supported by research that has shown that community college students take longer to finish college degrees, and that many struggle to make the transition into a 4-year college (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Unfortunately, national measures, originally based off of an NCAA system designed to measure the progress of student athletes, unfairly portray institutions like UTEP and EPCC, who serve a largely commuter population (Natalicio, 2007). UTEP’s President Diana Natalicio (2007) has repeatedly challenged these traditional measurements, arguing that they fail to account for 70% of UTEP’s graduates because they ignore transfer students, part-time students, returning students, and students who begin in the spring semester. Similarly, a recent report by the Higher Education Research Institute found that public institutions actually outperformed private ones in terms of graduation rates when the type of student enrolled was factored into data analyses.
Although public institutions have significantly lower overall graduation rates, they are more effective at graduating non-traditional students than private institutions (DeAngel, Franke, Hurtado, Pryor, & Tran, 2011).

In a presentation on retention rates, Natalicio (2007) made the distinction between an “express train university” and a “commuter train university,” grouping institutions like UTEP and EPCC in the latter category (see Figure 8.1) because their students regularly move in and out of college while completing a degree instead of completing a degree in one continuous period of attendance. By negatively portraying a university like UTEP and students like Daniel, these graduation rates create the belief that investing in institutions that serve a higher number of linguistic minority students is an unwise decision.

![Figure 8.1. A slide from Natalicio’s (2007) presentation on graduation rate measures.](image)

Carolina, Maurico, Bianca, and Yesenia are currently on the “express train” path, overcoming challenges and gradually building stronger networks of capital to move through and
beyond college. Daniel, Joanne, and Paola may be seen as on the “commuter train path,” with Daniel describing this pattern in his family: “Yeah, well like, my uncle--well one of my uncles, he went to school right away. And oh, my dad, like, he did the same thing. Like, he stopped for a while and it took him forever but he got to where he wanted to be. And I don’t know, I guess that’s how it is with us.” They all have ambitions to return to college at some point, with Joanne having already returned for her second year, while Paola and Daniel are taking an extra semester off before planning to return. These students could stop in and stop out, going back to the college, leaving school again, and returning again. Whenever they decide to make the transition between the college and the university, they will likely face a new period of hysteresis as evident from the lack of alignment between these two institutions’ curricula depicted in Chapter 4.

While it is necessary to develop new understandings and measures for transition and graduation rates in an era of increasing college diversity, there are issues that need to be addressed at different levels in order to facilitate more successful transitions to college for linguistic minority students. In every context, there are practices and policies that work effectively and those that are not so effective, and to those I now turn. While I acknowledge that student success is a mutual responsibility and that students like Daniel and Joanne need to take the initiative to focus on school outside of the classroom, the rest of this discussion will generally avoid focusing on the students’ responsibility, as research taking a deficit view of linguistic minority students has already placed more than enough blame on students. Instead, I now turn to the classroom, institutional, and state/national contexts, detailing how they supported and failed the students in this study. I close by arguing that changes need to occur at these various levels in order to make institutions more representative in a United States where minorities will become the majority by 2042 (Roberts, 2008).
Classroom, Institutional, and Societal Successes and Failures

Classroom Level

Successes.

Over the course of this study, I had the opportunity to interview 22 teachers and visit the classrooms of 18 of them. Teachers came from a wide variety of backgrounds, had very different teaching styles, and their levels of experience ranged from over 35 years to teaching for less than a year. Moreover, the student participants shared countless stories of other teachers as well. Many of the teachers taught in a way that contributed to student success; however, there were some practices that could be improved.

Several of the students felt that the high school had a culture of low expectations and complained that teachers did not push them enough. Writing about African Canadian students, Cummins (1997) described low expectations of minority students as one of several “systemic barriers to students’ academic engagement” (p. 421). Some of the students’ favorite teachers broke this trend of low expectations, such as the often-mentioned Mr. Sanchez who Paola so vividly described in her personal narrative essay. Where teachers were told not to assign homework, Mr. Sanchez said he always gave homework and said he was able to get students to complete it as the year progressed. While they likely complained at the time, students like Joanne and Paola valued this in hindsight, feeling that high school would have been a completely different experience with more teachers like Mr. Sanchez.

Another instance of an excellent teacher may be seen in Mauricio’s sophomore year teacher who he identified as vitally important to his success. She also demanded a lot of her students, but clearly went beyond expectations to form personal relationships with students like Mauricio, tutoring them after school and even on weekends. As Mauricio recalled, a key
element to his growth that year was constant writing, feedback, and rewriting. Unfortunately, as will be discussed below, quality feedback was often absent from these students’ experiences.

Besides teachers who push students, those who reach out to struggling students can contribute to student success. While Daniel’s first year at college was mostly a string of bad news, he had a few positive moments in his first two developmental classes and one element that stood out in these instances was these were the only times he interacted with teachers outside the classroom. When he was missing school to take his grandmother to the doctor, his first semester developmental writing instructor approached him to see what was wrong instead of waiting for him to see her. In the case of his developmental reading teacher, Daniel recalled a few, albeit brief, interactions outside of class. While failing or dropping all his other classes, he received an A and B in these two. This finding, at least in part, connects with those of Astin (1997), Tinto (1997), and other researchers of the first-year experience in that personal relations between faculty and students are positively correlated with success.

**Failures.**

First language composition researchers like Connors and Lunsford (1993) and Sommers (1981) have acknowledged the centrality of receiving quality feedback to developing as a writer. In regard to writing instruction, lack of feedback was the largest limitation I saw across all the institutional contexts and it validated Lunsford and Connors (1993) comment: “We have a long road ahead of us if we are to make real and useful so much of what we confidently discuss in our journals” (p. 218). Participants in this dissertation study would often be asked to complete assignments that they never received any feedback on and their opinions of and the effort they put into writing suffered accordingly. At the high school level, all the students in this study questioned the point of the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS)
essays and most said they did not put any effort into them because they did not mean anything and knew they would not be receiving any feedback. At the college level, Paola recalled being worried about a set of essays for her first-year seminar class that her instructor barely read. While she was happy about the A she received for the essays, she was disappointed that she received no meaningful feedback from the instructor. Mauricio reported the most frustration with lack of feedback and stopped putting effort into assignments like his philosophy responses after he received “Neither grades, nor responses, feedback” on any of his postings. He found out from a graduate TA that his history professor did not read their writing so he stopped taking the essays seriously. Finally, he was immensely frustrated with his second semester FYC teacher who directed students to the writing center instead of reading and commenting on writing herself.

Some teachers should not be the sole targets of blame in the lack of feedback students receive, as high school teachers like Mr. Robertson can have up to 150 students and some adjuncts at the college level have a similar number of students, making it difficult to comment effectively on so much writing. However, if teachers are going to demand quality work from students, they should treat this work seriously as well, taking time to respond with thoughtful feedback. Unless it is work clearly directed to another peer or peers or journaling activities to increase fluency, they should avoid assigning more work then they or their graduate TAs are ready to read and provide feedback on. Even in the case of peer-directed work like peer review drafts and discussion postings, an instructor should be involved to ensure students are taking the work seriously. Otherwise, students like Mauricio will easily see through the deception, lowering the level of their work to match the way the teacher treats it. As revealed by instructor comments in Chapter 4, the move to online commenting may make this feedback problem worse as some instructors can initially be resistant to commenting locally on electronic submissions.
As more and more instructors and programs move to online commenting, instructors should be conscious of providing localized feedback, understanding that this type of feedback is important for all students.

Simply commenting more on papers is not the answer, as this not does alleviate pressure on already overworked teachers. Additionally, L2 writing specialists like Ferris (2008) have warned about the risk of overwhelming L2 writers with feedback, recommending that teachers look for patterns of errors in writing. Moreover, the way feedback is given has the potential to devastate students. For instance, Yesenia’s first-year seminar teacher corrected every error in a three-page draft and added the following summative comment at the end: “your writing level is consistently low. You must take your draft (including the other pages you add) to the Writing Center in the Main Library.” Fortunately, Yesenia did not take this too personally, but every student is different and a comment like this has the potential to demoralize a student. Also, it is unlikely that she learned as much from blindly correcting all these errors as she could have by focusing on a few major errors.

Whereas students generally felt their high school teachers cared about their success and well-being, this was not the case at college. Students knew that college would be more independent, but a few of them were surprised at how little the instructors there appeared to care about them as students. For instance, Daniel and Mauricio generally did not bother to tell instructors about instances where a family member was sick or a family friend was kidnapped, because they had the impression that instructors only cared about students turning in the work. Interviewed instructors consistently said that they encouraged students to email them if there was a problem and some, especially at the community college, went out of their way to allow students to make up assignments. However, they rarely reported emailing a student if they were
absent, instead expecting the student to contact them. As seen in the case of Daniel, reaching out to a struggling student can make a valuable difference as it is much easier for a student to leave if they have the perception that no one will notice or care.

**Institutional Level**

**Successes.**

The various institutions in the study generally had a number of resources that would help promote student success. For instance, Samson High School was eligible for a number of grants and services due to their largely Latina/o and low income population. Samson was able to use this money towards tutoring which benefited students like Mauricio who were able to get extra help after school and on weekends that they would not have otherwise. Tied in with the tutoring program was another program that provided students with a netbook if they completed a certain number of tutoring hours. While there were mixed reviews about the online tutoring programs themselves, many students in the school who could not otherwise afford a computer were able to benefit from this opportunity.

At the postsecondary level, both EPCC and UTEP offered various support and tutoring services but UTEP seemed to have more developed services in this regard, likely due to increased institutional resources. Although this study’s participants had mixed experiences in writing and math tutoring centers, they were helpful for a number of students like them. One of the biggest keys to Bianca’s success her first year at college was the CAMP program. While being a federally funded program, it took the initiative of people at the university to apply for funding and administer the program. UTEP was also the institution most likely to develop students’ technological literacies, in part because it had the funding necessary to do so. It not only had numerous computer labs but the staff necessary to train students to tackle more
complex projects such as video documentaries. Carolina benefited from one such lab the night she stayed late to complete her most difficult project of the year, the video documentary.

On some levels, the institutions embraced their increasingly diverse and mostly Latina/o student populations. For instance, as discussed earlier and referenced in Kuh et. al. (2005), President Natalicio of UTEP had made a conscious decision a few decades ago to see the predominately Latina/o student body as an asset and not take the deficit view that some faculty held. Publicity materials drew regularly drew attention to the fact that UTEP was a Hispanic-Serving Institution with slogans such as the “First national research university with a 21st century demographic” and “Access and excellence” and the College of Business advertising itself as the #1 school for Hispanics. UTEP has been a pioneer nationally in developing bilingual programs of study, offering some content area core classes in Spanish while developing unique programs like a Bilingual Professional Writing Certificate and, at the graduate level, a bilingual MFA in Creative Writing. In order to promote student retention, UTEP developed a robust first-year experience with first-year seminar classes, learning communities, and other supportive programs. According to the Associate Provost of Undergraduate Studies at UTEP, Dr. Donna Ekal, the university has conducted studies on barriers that diverse students face in succeeding at college and have arranged interventions to help students who face challenges with child care, transportation, and other impediments. Unfortunately, these moves to promote and value diversity were not always publicized well enough, taken advantage of by students, and implemented in every aspect of institutional life.

Failures.

One of the largest failures at the institutional level in regard to literacy development were the disconnects between Samson High School, EPCC, and UTEP. Although proud of their high
school, with only one student saying she would go elsewhere if starting high school again, students consistently felt they were unprepared in regard to college reading and writing tasks. Students at the high school would do very little reading and write short essays in one genre, work that clearly was not preparing students for college. As discussed in detail in Chapter 4, this was largely due to the state and national pressures such as the focus on standardized testing, so the majority of this blame falls at the state and national level. Nonetheless, teachers consistently felt stifled by institutional policies that restricted the ways they taught, feeling that there was a better way to prepare students to succeed on the test while achieving broader goals in literacy education.

At the postsecondary level, there was a clear disconnect between the writing experiences that students had their first year at EPCC and UTEP, despite a number of institutional initiatives designed to help students make smoother transitions from EPCC to UTEP and even from UTEP to EPCC. Dr. Ekal revealed that UTEP and EPCC have formed partnerships together and with local high schools to develop programs like the early high school college program and programs to facilitate credit transfer between institutions, including reverse transfer for students moving from UTEP to EPCC. However, it appears that more could be done to coordinate curricular goals between the institutions via committees such as the ones Olendzenski (2008) described in which composition teachers from five regional postsecondary institutions came together to develop shared learning outcomes for composition courses. Students at UTEP consistently wrote more, read more, and wrote in a wide variety of disciplines. In contrast, writing at EPCC was largely restricted to FYC and first-year seminar classes, with the latter being home to less effective assignments like the unread essays or the “cut-and-paste” career portfolio. Unfortunately, because of the wide divide in attitudes towards composition instruction among instructors and faculty at EPCC and UTEP, not to mention the impact of testing policies at the
high school levels, hope for writing curriculum alignment appears to be a distant possibility at this point.

Despite institutional embraces of diversity and increasingly diverse teaching faculties, a culture of monolingualism still pervaded the various institutions. Interviews with teachers at the high school, who were mostly Latina/o and native Spanish speakers, revealed a strong English-only attitude, with some putting forth the sink-or-swim model as the ideal. When the junior level mainstream English teacher Ms. Padilla developed more progressive ideas like encouraging code switching in some writing, a practice supported by researchers like Canagarajah (2006a, 2006b), she was too nervous to implement such a “radical” practice in fear that she would face retaliation from both teachers and administration.

Teaching faculty at the college level was less diverse and instructors were less likely to know Spanish, although some of them did. As in high school, students’ Spanish literacies played a minimal role in their literacy experiences at both EPCC and UTEP. Although there was generally a less antagonistic attitude towards Spanish in the classroom, it was rarely seen as a resource to be built upon. Students were rarely encouraged to research in Spanish, and assignments could have been taught anywhere as they did not account for and build on the strengths of the institutions’ unique student bodies.

These instances reveal that simply having a diverse teaching faculty is not sufficient, especially if they have been indoctrinated into a mainstream English-only culture that minimally values the diverse linguistic resources and cultural experiences that students bring to the classroom. Students in this study had a wide variety of experiences in multiple languages and multiple countries, possessing rich multilingual literacies that were commonly ignored at the classroom level.
State and National Level

Successes.

Minority student success means a lot at the state and national level, with statistics showing that states like Texas and California will not have a large enough educated workforce if they do not start educating more of their citizens. Similarly, President Obama noted that the U.S. is behind in degree production and that we need graduate more students in the next 10 years if we are to stay competitive on the world market (Lewin, 2011). State and federal grants made valuable contributions to the various institutions in this study, as seen in the tutoring and netbook program at the high school. EPCC and UTEP also benefited from grants as well, with UTEP’s first-year student success program initially coming from a grant aimed at promoting minority student success in the STEM disciplines. Bianca’s CAMP program was also funded out of a renewable grant.

All the students except Mauricio depended on need based financial aid including Pell Grants as well as federal student loans. It is evident from the decision making processes that avoiding debt was a priority for several of them, so especially for the college students, Pell Grants made the difference between going to college and not going to college. For other students like Yesenia and Bianca, federal student loans helped support their decisions to start at UTEP. For Bianca, federal loans also helped her raise her siblings while going to school, something she would not have been able to do otherwise.

Failures.

While state and federal funding helped students in this study transition to college and support their success in various ways, this is always a double-edged sword. The director of the CAMP program said it was a renewable grant, and was concerned about the program being a
victim of the current budget fight playing out in Washington. The West Texas Writing Project, where Ms. Padilla developed progressive ideas about allowing some code switching in student writing, was a victim of federal budget cuts that completely eliminated funding for the National Writing Project (Washington, 2011).

According to Ingle and Ingle (2008), well over 60% of Latinas/os who attend college attend public institutions, largely due to their affordability. However, funding for public postsecondary institutions has been declining at the state level for years, leading to increased tuition for those least unable to afford it. At the national level, the purchasing power of Pell Grants continues to stagnate, remaining the same despite tuition increases well beyond the rate of inflation (Perez, 2008). There have even been moves in Washington DC to dramatically cut the Pell Grant amounts. Given this anti-education political context, it is unsurprising that the President’s much-lauded goals to increase degree production have been largely neutralized through a lack of funding promoting them (Marcus, 2011). Researchers have consistently found a positive correlation between adequate finances to fund college and student retention (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993; Cabrera, Stampen, & Hansen, 1990; St. John, Cabrera, Nora, & Asker, 2000; St. John, Paulsen, & Starkey, 1996), so continued cuts to higher education funding will diminish attempts to achieve the degree production rates necessary to maintain the United States’ status as a world leader.

Another area where state and federal policy has affected the students in this study is in the area of reproductive education and sexual health. About half of the students (including those who did not begin college) were either parents or expectant parents, with one student delaying college after finding out she was pregnant. This reflects trends in broader contexts as Texas has the third-highest teen pregnancy rate in the country, with El Paso higher than the Texas average.
Latinas have the highest birth rate among all races and almost twice the national average with 78 of every 1000 Latinas aged 15-19 giving birth in 2009, which is the current rate in El Paso (Ballinger, 2011; CDC, 2011). High teen pregnancy rates in El Paso can in part be attributed to the fact that Texas is known to provide little information in the way of sexual education and, when they do, it is often about advocating abstinence-only programs, which have been shown to be overly ineffective (Ballinger, 2011; Wiley & Wilson, 2009). A few years ago, all the Planned Parenthood clinics in El Paso were closed as a result of federal and state funding cuts (Maldonado, 2010), making it more difficult for students to find information about their reproductive health options. A sad irony found the former Planned Parenthood clinic at the EPCC campus where this study was conducted purchased by the college and turned in to a tutoring center. While a new tutoring center will be helpful in supporting students’ transitions to college, it fills a different gap than the previous center filled.

The news from the state and federal level continues to worsen in another area that has serious repercussions for students like those in this study, immigration policy. While Bianca’s story was clearly the most dramatic, other students struggled over family separations and immigration related issues. In Bianca’s case, her home was torn apart and her family broken up with no regard that taking away their mother left a family without a caretaker. As one student did not begin college because of pregnancy, the other student who did not start college did so because she had to wait on residency papers, a process that would take a year or more, in order to secure financial aid. During this time, this highly motivated student found that other aspects of life intervened in her plans to return to school. The continued antagonistic attitudes toward immigrants in the U.S. only promises to hinder the educational aspirations of students like those in this study. The Dream Act, originally introduced in 2001 as a way to provide undocumented
children with goals to serve in the military or achieve higher education a path to citizenship, seems a very distant dream at this point. States like Arizona, and more recently Alabama, are vying with each other to produce increasingly harsher immigration laws, driving undocumented families and their school-age children underground and further from achieving educational goals.

The dominance of standardized testing is the final area where federal and state policy clearly failed the students in this study, and is the failure most closely connected to writing instruction. Unfortunately, the tendency is to blame failure on the school itself as opposed to the larger policies forcing the school administration and teaching staff to act in a certain way. Researchers like Paul (2004) and Booher-Jennings (2005) have repeatedly shown that the NCLB act and other testing requirements unfairly penalize schools with a high percentage of linguistic minority students. Samson High School, home of students like Carolina and Mauricio who had just started learning English, was under immense pressure to bring students like these to a fairly high level of English academic proficiency in a couple years, despite often-cited research showing that it takes more time to build English academic fluency (Adamson, 2005). Due to the fact that the school was in danger of being shut down or privatized, the administration and teachers had little choice but to turn the school into what the senior English teacher dubbed a “TAKS academy.”

The results of this study demonstrate how a poorly designed test and a dominating focus on test preparation can greatly hinder students’ college readiness. From middle school through high school, the dominant mode of writing that mainstream students saw was a variation on the personal narrative, a type of writing that was largely absent from the college writing tasks students had, especially at the university level. Students like Yesenia and Bianca repeatedly
lamented the fact that they focused so much on TAKS preparation and so little on the research-based and analytical writing that would dominate their college writing experiences.

All the students commented on how they were not prepared for the intense reading requirements in college. Reading, so intimately connected with writing development, can also be ignored in a school context so heavily focused on a test where the only reading consists of short narrative and expository pieces. Teachers reported never being able to finish a book with their classes because they had to focus on testing for most of the year. Reading and writing were only in short bursts, so when students had to read 50 pages a class or write a 10 page paper at the college level, they too often gave up because they simply had not developed the necessary skills in high school.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Ultimately, success in college is a mutual responsibility involving students, institutions, instructors, family, friends, and policy makers. As revealed throughout this dissertation, all the students were generally unprepared as they entered college, some more so than others. However, some students actively worked with family, friends, community organizations, churches, institutions, and instructors to build networks of capital, facilitating transitions that helped them pass their first year classes and move into the second year of college. Other students, who did not have the initiative to create these networks, struggled and dropped out, although some have intentions of returning. While institutions will never be able to engage every student or erase all the barriers to student success that societal inequalities create, scholars promoting increased diversity in higher education (e.g., Bamber, 2008; Blunt, 2008; Thomas, 2011) believe that postsecondary institutions need to undergo substantial transformations to promote full minority access and success. Thomas (2011) wrote that these transformations include “an institutional
commitment in engaging a diverse student body and changing institutional structures, processes and governance; developing an inclusive culture and altering processes of knowledge creation and knowledge transfer to be more inclusive of a diverse student body” (pp. 2-3). In the process of becoming a “the first research university with a 21st-century demographic,” UTEP has moved in this direction at the institutional level, but much more remains to be done in postsecondary institutions across the country, including UTEP, especially at the curricular level. These concluding statements will focus specifically on how writing instructors and researchers can contribute to these transformations.

The application of Bourdieu’s analytical tools in the first half of the chapter revealed that student success in transitioning to secondary school and into college was largely based on assimilating to the dominant U.S. culture, building capital in academic English while increasingly falling behind in Spanish literacy. Although the students possessed “the traces of particular cultures, traditions, languages, systems of beliefs, texts and histories which have shaped them,” (Hall, 1993, p. 362), these could have been more fully recognized as resources at the classroom level. As Hall (1998) has said, “If all students are to maximize their educational potential, the institutions of higher education have to increase their awareness of, and support for, the growing diversity of students who enter higher education” (p. 4, cited in Bamber, 2008).

Research on retention and the first-year experience has consistently shown that retention is positively correlated with forging connections with other members of the college community (Astin, 1997; Tinto, 1975, 1988, 1993, 1997). Tinto (1997) has written, “choices of curriculum structure and pedagogy invariably shape both learning and persistence on campus, because they serve to alter both the degree to which and manner in which students become involved in the academic and social life of the institution” (p. 620). By creating a pedagogy and curriculum that
leads to students leaving behind aspects of their culture such as home language practices, institutions may struggle to improve retention and graduation rates of increasingly diverse student bodies. However, there is an alternative path, a path already realized by two-way bilingual education programs most commonly seen at the K-8 level, programs that “integrate language minority and language majority students and provide instruction in, and through, two languages” (Christian, 1996, p. 67). In comparison to traditional educational models, which are subtractive in nature, two-way bilingual programs are additive, based on the belief that both language majority and minority students benefit from being bilingual in an increasingly globalized world where cultural boundaries are being erased by technologically driven advances in communication. In a multi-decade study of such programs in 23 large and small school districts in 15 different states, Collier and Thomas (2003) found that two-way bilingual programs are more likely to close achievement gaps between language majority and language minority students while benefiting language majority students who, through the “cognitive stimulus of schooling in two languages,” can advance beyond the skills of their “monolingually educated peers” (p. 61). In composition studies, scholars such as Canagarajah (2006a; 2006b), Horner and Trimbur (2002), and Matusda (2006) have advocated for the inclusion of multiple languages in composition classrooms at the postsecondary level as well.

In implementing multilingual pedagogies at the postsecondary level, there are a few important factors to consider. First, linguistic minority students need to be taught the dominant variety of English in U.S. society, as this is currently the language of power. However, this should never be taken as a reason to erase the diverse literacy practices that students bring to the classroom, as these practices are essential for communicating in an increasingly globalized world and L1 literacy development can positively influence L2 literacy development (Carreira, 2000;
Siegel, 1999). Second, it is vital to maintain high standards, a sentiment that is represented in UTEP’s slogan, “Access and Excellence.” Too often, the response to struggling students or students with difficult home lives may be to lower standards, as done at Samson where administration discouraged teachers from assigning homework. Research has shown that low expectations ultimately hurt students and that students will consistently rise to meet challenges presented to them (Cummins, 1997). Third, as has been evident throughout this study, any change occurs in a network of competing forces and is, as Faber (2002) so vividly illustrated, a constant power struggle. At the secondary level, a teacher like Ms. Padilla who wants to develop students’ multilingual literacies can be restricted by a fellow teacher or an administrator, who in turn is restricted by a state and/or national English or testing policy. At the postsecondary level, those expressing more progressive attitudes towards multilingual literacy instruction may be criticized by fellow instructors/faculty. Nonetheless, there are some ways that students and writing faculty at the postsecondary level can begin contributing to institutional transformation.

The first step in transforming an institution and, more locally, a writing program, into one that is designed for its students is to learn about the students. Writing program administrators (WPAs) can assess the demographics, needs, and preferences of the students in their programs, conducting surveys asking about placement preferences, language backgrounds, education backgrounds, and more, much like I did in a WPA Journal article (Ruecker, 2011a). In response to these surveys, WPAs may find that they need to work to transform the existing placement systems, offer cross-cultural composition courses (see Matsuda & Silva, 1999), and make other programmatic shifts to meet student needs. At the classroom level, instructors can survey their own students for some of the above data via an online survey and ask them to write about their literacy experiences or create a map documenting the various discourse communities they
participate in, which is an early assignment in UTEP’s FYC program. What strengths do they come to the classroom with? Where do they need to develop? In making this connection, it can be useful to learn about students’ lives outside the classroom. Are they taking care of siblings? What is standing in the way of studying? Throughout this study, students were continually surprised at how little their college professors appeared to care about them as individuals, making it easier to disappear from a class because they did not feel recognized or valued.

Given statistics cited in the Introduction about low retention rates of minority students (e.g., Lumina Foundation, 2007; Llagas & Snyder, 2003), it is vital that WPAs and writing instructors constantly look for ways to improve student retention in their programs. Research has continually shown that a student’s first year is the most telling of their later college success, and with small classes, writing instructors are uniquely positioned to help students connect with other students and the college community, leading to greater success. Retention begins with making the personal connections with students described above, but goes beyond that as well. Although a student like Daniel struggled through most of his classes his first year, he was able to succeed in two classes, success that was helped not only by the relative ease of the curriculum but also overly supportive instructors. When a student is missing, an instructor can help promote retention by approaching the student for the reasons behind the absence or sending an email saying they were missed in class that day. WPAs can consider the broader picture of retention, finding out more about the students who drop out of their program’s classes and working with other institutional departments to address these issues. However, WPAs need to be given the time and resources to investigate and implement changes. For instance, the current Council of Writing Program Administrators’ (2008) FYC Outcomes statement includes a point about helping students learn “The relationships among language, knowledge, and power in their
fields,” but otherwise does not address language issues and does not advocate teaching students how to compose in multiple languages and varieties of English.

Transforming the curriculum is a key component to increasing the diversity of higher education, a component that was often lacking in the institutions studied in this project. A curriculum limited to teaching “Standard American English” does not serve the needs of increasing numbers of students who speak a different language or a different variety of English at home. Moreover, a multilingual curriculum benefits English L1 speakers with some foreign language study as it give them the opportunity to develop an additional language, knowledge that will support their effectiveness as communicators in a world where communication increasingly crosses borders. Teachers can design assignments in which students can consciously code-switch, using their multiliteracies to express themselves in richer ways. They can consistently encourage their students to research in multiple languages. The possibilities of assignments that build on students’ multiliteracies are endless, but one possibility is transforming a traditional FYC assignment like a rhetorical analysis. One effective alternative to the traditional assignment is to create a cross-cultural rhetorical analysis where students are encouraged to choose articles on the same topic from two different countries and written in two different languages, conducing an analysis in which they explore how each author’s situatedness changed the way they wrote about the topic. In designing and teaching these assignments and pushing students to research in multiple languages, teachers can constantly remind their students that they are uniquely situated to conduct this type of work because of their multilingual and multicultural backgrounds. This type of encouragement can go a long way in breaking down the deficit discourses and labels (Spack, 1997) that have surrounded multilingual students’ past educational experiences, consequently building their confidence as students, writers, and researchers. While composition
studies has been slow to move away from the standard English-only ideology that dominates writing instruction in the U.S., the situation is improving as mainstream journals are publishing more articles focused on addressing the diversity of writing classrooms and anthologies designed for exposing new graduate TAs to important discourses in the field are increasingly including chapters on working with L2 writers (e.g., Glenn, Goldthwaite, & Connors, 2008).

Commitment to serving linguistically and culturally diverse students should be considered in hiring and promoting faculty. Knowledge of multiple languages, especially those common to students at the institution where one is seeking tenure, should be valued in tenure decisions. There are many benefits to having a multilingual faculty. First, by going through the experience of learning another language, multilingual faculty are better able to understand the challenges their students face in mastering the conventions of academic language. Second, learning another language helps one understand the structure of their own language better, consequently being better able to give students the linguistic help they need. Finally, and most importantly, it holds faculty to the same standards that the institution has for students and creates a culture of multilingualism throughout the institution. Preferably, faculty will learn one of the languages of their students, as this will help them connect better with students while also better understanding the challenges they face in learning English.

In hiring full-time writing faculty (this does not include graduate TAs), priority should be given to people with experience and interest in working with L2 writers and other underrepresented student populations. Despite the fact that multilingual Spanish/English speaking students were the majority at Samson, EPCC, and UTEP, monolingualism was the norm in instruction and very few instructors at both the high school and college level had formal training in working with L2 writers, assuming that experience would be enough. Throughout the
different environments, students often did not receive the feedback they needed to improve. Students like Bianca did not develop nearly as much as she could have her first year. Feedback on writing tended to be minimal, or in the case of Yesenia’s draft in which every error was corrected, too much. It is true that teachers are overworked, ranging from the high school teacher with 150 students to the adjunct at the community college teaching six classes at multiple campuses. As my research revealed, localized feedback is often at risk when teachers comment electronically. Nonetheless, feedback is the heart of becoming a better writer and should be the bulk of work that a writing teacher has, something that simply cannot be avoided.

In order to seriously implement some of the transformations suggested here, composition researchers need to rethink their processes of disciplinary knowledge construction in order to gain more credibility with institutional leaders and policy makers. This brings me to the limitations of this particular study. While it was a huge undertaking for me as an individual researcher conducting around 100 interviews and analyzing thousands of pages of transcripts, I am only telling the stories of a few students in one high school, one community college, and one university in a city uniquely situated on the U.S.-Mexico border.

In this sense, this project does not differ significantly from much of the work that has been done in composition research: collecting, analyzing, and sharing narratives. Although the number increasing, many composition graduate programs lack required courses in methodology while graduate programs in education or psychology often have multiple core courses in quantitative and qualitative research and analysis. Haswell (2005) and Johanek (2000) have both criticized composition studies for its aversion to empirical research, especially quantitative work. In response to repeated attacks on writing instruction by national policies like the NCLB act and the recent stripping of funding from the National Writing Project, organizations like NCTE and
CCCC have responded with strong condemnation of these practices, but composition researchers have not actively worked to produce the kind of data, broad quantitative studies, that convince policy makers.

Composition studies is not without a history of more scientific research, a history that dwindled with the rise of epistemic rhetoric and its critique of a positivist tradition with a belief in a fixed reality. Emig’s (1977) and Flower and Hayes’ (1981) work revealed the possibilities of aligning composition research with psychological research. Although their discomfort with a positivist research tradition was revealed in a sarcastic comment about the “Methodology Police,” Lunsford and Connors’ (1993) conducted a large study on teacher commentary involving 3,000 papers and a few dozen trained raters. Composition studies stands to learn from research in related fields like education, applied linguistics, and L2 writing, as researchers in these fields have consistently maintained high levels of research design, as evidenced by articles in journals like the *Journal of Second Language Writing*. By developing quantitative studies that include a variety of institutions and students in different regions of the country, composition researchers can make a stronger case for implementing the changes recommended in these concluding comments.

One of the final interviews in this study was conducted with two figures integral in the development of first-year student success programs at UTEP. Towards the end of the interview, I inquired about the responsibility that educators and institutions have in working for broader societal change to promote student success. One of them explained that the view on this came down from seeing college as a right or a privilege:

I think no matter who you talk to, you’ll get obviously one of two responses, yes or no.

Being as it comes right back to philosophical argument of it is, is college education a
right or a privilege? And I think from talking with others, you can see we believe that it’s our right and that it’s our responsibility to provide young and old people, whoever comes to our doors, with, you know, a college education because it will improve the quality of their life dramatically…we should find every way we can to help every obstacle that students have so that they can get to school and get to class and succeed.

As writing teachers and researchers, we play a small but integral part in supporting students’ transitions to college. While we can begin by changing our classrooms, we need to advocate for change in broader contexts, producing data that convinces policy makers, voters, and others that monolingual curricula, underpaid and overworked writing teachers, and poorly designed standardized tests are threatening the future of the United States in a knowledge-based and increasingly globalized economy.
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319


Appendix A: Beginning of study survey

1. Please complete the following information so I can stay in touch with you:

   Name:
   Email address:
   Phone number:

2. How often do you speak English with the following groups of people:

   Your grandparents       Never     Rarely     Sometimes     Usually     Always
   Your father             Never     Rarely     Sometimes     Usually     Always
   Your mother             Never     Rarely     Sometimes     Usually     Always
   Your brothers/sisters   Never     Rarely     Sometimes     Usually     Always
   Your friends            Never     Rarely     Sometimes     Usually     Always
   Your teachers           Never     Rarely     Sometimes     Usually     Always

3. How good is…

   your spoken English? Not good     Okay     Good     Very good
   your written English? Not good     Okay     Good     Very good
   your spoken Spanish? Not good     Okay     Good     Very good
   your written Spanish? Not good     Okay     Good     Very good

4. How often is English spoken in your home?

   Never     Sometimes     Often     Always

5. How long have you lived in the United States?

   I don’t live in the United States
   All My life
   Part of my life (please specify number of years) _____

6. How long have you attended school in the United States?

   All my life
   Part of my life (specify number of years) _____
7. How many years have you attended school in English? Have you attended school in another language? If so, what language and how long?

8. Where did you go to school before high school? Please describe your English classes there. Were you in mainstream English or ESL (English as a Second Language) classes? Were you ever in a bilingual program?

9. Why do you want to go to college? What would you like to major in?

10. Where do you plan to go to college? Why?

11. Have other members of your family attended college? If so, whom? Did they graduate?

12. Has your schooling been interrupted in any way because you moved, got sick, or for another reason? Please explain if you feel comfortable.

13. What do you think will be the biggest challenges for you as you make the transition to college?
Appendix B: Beginning of study interview

Previous Writing Experiences/History

1. What type of writing do you do everyday? How does this differ from writing you do at school?
2. Who has been your best writing teacher?
3. What do you look for in a good teacher?
4. What class has been the most helpful to your development as a writer?
5. What classes or coursework haven’t you liked so much?
6. What has been your hardest essay to write?
7. What has been your favorite essay to write?
8. Do you feel like you’re a better writer in English or Spanish? What language do write better in? What language do you write more often in?
9. Have you had more formal training in English writing or Spanish writing?
10. What kind of writing have you done for standardized tests like TAKS? Have your classes focused on the writing on these tests?
11. Do you feel that the writing instruction you’ve received here and in your previous school has prepared you for college?

Instructional Practices

1. What kind of writing do you usually do in your English classes? What do you usually write about? If you write essays, what are their typical length? What has been the longest essay you’ve written during HS?
2. What other classes do you have writing in? How is the writing different in these classes?
3. Does your English teacher give you feedback? If so, is it usually given orally or in
writing? What kind of feedback do you usually get? Content-based or grammar-based?

4. Writing process

5. When you have a writing task for school, how do you usually complete it? Does this process change with different school tasks?

6. How is your process different when writing an email as opposed to something for school?

7. Do you make outlines?

8. Do you revise your papers? Have you had many chances to revise during HS?

Outside Influences

1. Does it take you long to get to school? How do you get to school? Do you ever have problems getting to school?

2. Do you have a job? If so, what is it and how many hours a week do you work? What do you do with the money you earn at your job?

3. Do you play sports or participate in any after-school activities? If so, what? How many hours a week do you spend in these activities?

4. Do you receive any outside help with your homework tasks? Do you attend tutoring sessions? Get help from your parents? In what subjects do you normally receive help?

5. How many brothers and sisters do you have? Are they older or younger than you? Do they attend school? If so, where? Who do you think is the best student in your family?
Appendix C: Monthly Interviews During High School and College

General

1. How have you been since the last interview? Have you had any really positive or negative experiences at school? In your life outside of school?

2. What kind of writing have you done since the last time we talked? What has been your most difficult writing task? Why was it difficult? How did you deal with this difficulty?

3. What is currently your favorite class? Why is it your favorite?

4. What is your most challenging class? Why is it challenging?

Based Off of Writing Samples

1. How long did you spend on this piece of writing? Do you think you had enough time to complete it? If not, how would you have improved it with more time?

2. Do you feel your teacher gave you enough feedback on this piece of writing?

3. Was the feedback helpful? If so, what feedback did you find the most helpful? What did you find the least helpful?

4. What did you learn from writing this piece that will help you in future writing you do?

5. Is this a typical assignment for your class? If not, how is it different?

Focused on General Learning Experiences and Classroom Observation

1. How do you like your (class I observed or other subject) class? What influences your opinion? Your like/dislike of the subject? Of the teacher?

2. How would you judge your abilities in that class compared to your classmates? Better? About the same? Worse?

3. How do you feel the teacher treats the students in the class? Respectfully?
Disrespectfully? Harshly? Fairly? Unfairly?

4. Does your teacher treat you like other students in the class? If not, how are you treated differently?

5. How do you choose where to sit in the class? Do you sit with friends? Are seats assigned?

6. Does the teacher ever use Spanish or is the class always conducted in English?

7. Which of the following does your (subject) teacher do in addressing your language needs:
   a. cares more about content than grammar mistakes
   b. gives thoughtful feedback on your writing
   c. takes time to explain things so you understand them
   d. takes time to work one-on-one with you
   e. asks you to revise your papers
   f. any other things?

Follow up Questions Based on the Previous Interview

Dependent on student.
Appendix D: End of High School Interview

Semester Related

1. What has been your favorite part about this semester? Your time at SHS?
2. What has been your favorite classes this semester? Least favorite? Why?
3. How important has writing been to you this semester?
4. What is the most important piece of writing you’ve done this semester?
5. Do you feel the work you’ve done this semester has helped prepare you for college? If so, how?
6. How has your knowledge of academic English improved this semester? Have you learned any new words? Phrases? Improved your writing in some specific way?
7. How have you felt about the interruptions to class this semester? Pep rallies? Test dates? Shortened schedules? Have you found these interruptions worth it or do you feel your schooling has been negatively affected?
8. How has the reading of LOTF compared to other books you’ve read at SHS? Did you read more or the book or less than typical? What could we have done to teach the book better?
9. How did you go about developing a topic for the essay? Did you use the materials we prepared? Did you take notes while reading?
10. What are you most concerned about in writing this essay? How can we help you with that?
11. Have there been any changes in your life outside of school this semester that have affected your school work?
12. What was the most interesting writing you did while at HS? What was the most challenging?

13. Did you ever have opportunities to write in Spanish at HS? Would you have liked the chance to work on your Spanish writing?

General

1. Do you plan to attend college next semester? If not, why did you decide not to? If so, where do you plan to go? Why do you plan to go there?

2. What are you most excited about in going to college? Most nervous?

3. How do you think college will be different from high school? Where did you get that information?

4. How do you think the writing at college will be different from the writing you did for high school? How did you get that idea?

5. How do you think studying at HS has prepared you for college? Where do you think your preparation might be lacking?

6. If you had the opportunity to start again, would you choose SHS? Why or why not?

7. What challenges have you faced in learning English academic writing?

8. How has your family helped you progress as a student? Do you feel supported from them?

9. How have other factors outside of school helped or limited your growth as a student during your HS years? As a writer?
Appendix E: Beginning of College Interview

1. How did your summer go? Did you attend any kind of orientation or college-related activities? How were classes?

2. How did the college application and registration process go? Did you get the financial aid/scholarships you expected?

3. How has your experience at college been different than what you expected so far? How has it been similar?

4. Have you had any writing assignments so far? Based on first impressions, how do you think the writing demands will be different in college? How do you think the reading demands will be different?

5. What has been the biggest challenge you’ve faced in adapting to college life?

6. Do you find that you have more or less free time than you did in HS? How do you feel your HS work prepared you for college?

7. Do you work? If so, what do you do? How many hours a week do you work?

8. What challenges do you have that interfere with your ability to complete your college work? How do you work with these challenges? Do you have support from anyone?

9. What are the advantages of attending college in town? The disadvantages?

10. Have all/most of your friends from HS begun college? If not, why? Have you made a lot of new friends at college?

11. What is currently your easiest class? Which is your hardest? What do you find most interesting? Least interesting?

12. How is your English class different than your high school classes? How does your
teacher compare to your high school teachers? How did the class I saw today compare with your normal classes?

13. What is your first-year seminar like?

14. How is the expectations for technology usage different at college?

15. How would you compare your abilities with the students in your classes?

16. Are you happy with your college decision? Would you have preferred to go elsewhere?
Appendix F: End of College Semester Interview

1. How have you been since the last interview? Have you had any really positive or negative experiences at school? In your life outside of school?

2. What kind of writing have you done since the last time we talked? What has been your most difficult writing task? Why was it difficult? How did you deal with this difficulty?

3. Have you been keeping up with homework?

4. What has been your favorite part about this semester?

5. What has been your favorite class this semester? Least favorite? Why?

6. How important has writing been to you this semester in comparison to high school? In what class are you doing the most writing?

7. What is the most valuable piece of writing you’ve done this semester?

8. What is the most interesting piece of writing you’ve done this semester?

9. How would you describe the difference between high school and college to seniors at SHS?

10. Do you feel your high school work prepared you for what you had to do this semester? If not, where was it lacking?

11. How has your knowledge of academic English improved this semester? Have you learned any new words? Phrases? Improved your writing in some specific way?

12. Have you been offered the opportunity to utilize your Spanish knowledge in any of your classes?

13. Have there been any changes in your life outside of school this semester that have affected your school work?
14. Have you started working? If so, how much do you work?

15. Do you plan to continue college next semester? If so, have you registered?

16. Is reading important in your family? If so, what kind of reading materials do you have in the house? Are they typically in English or Spanish?
Appendix G: End of First-Year at College Interview

1. How have you been since the last interview? Have you had any really positive or negative experiences at school? In your life outside of school? Have there been any major life changes?

2. Have you declared your major? What made you decide that major?

3. Have there been any changes in your life outside of school this semester that has affected your school work?

4. What kind of writing have you done since the last time we talked? What has been your most difficult writing task? Why was it difficult? How did you deal with this difficulty?

5. Have you been keeping up with homework?

6. What has been your favorite part about this semester?

7. What has been your favorite class this semester? Least favorite? Why?

8. How important has writing been to you this year in comparison to high school? In what class have you done the most writing?

9. How important has reading been to you this year in comparison to high school? In what class have you done the most reading?

10. How important has technology usage been to you this year in comparison to high school? In what class has technology been the most important?

11. What is the most important piece of writing you’ve done this semester? Year?

12. What is the most interesting piece of writing you’ve done this semester? Year?

13. How has your knowledge of academic English improved this year? Have you learned any new words? Phrases? Improved your writing in some specific way?
14. Have you been offered the opportunity to utilize your Spanish knowledge in any of your classes?
15. Have you started working? If so, how much do you work?
16. What have been your biggest challenges this year? Did they interfere with school, such as gotten you a bad grade on a paper or made you miss classes?
17. When confronting a major challenge, have you talked with anyone at school about it such as teachers or staff? Have they been understanding or made any accommodations?
18. What has been your biggest success this year?
19. How would you describe the difference between high school and college to seniors at SHS?
20. What advice would you make to seniors at SHS to avoid or overcome any difficulties you have faced?
21. Do you feel your high school work prepared you for what you had to do this year? If not, where was it lacking?
22. Do you feel the high school focus on TAKS helped or hurt your college success? Explain.
23. Do you plan to continue college in the summer or next year? If so, have you registered? How did the registration process go?
24. Do you have any concerns as you continue college? Is there anything that could stand in the way of you graduating?
25. What have been your most important sources of support this year? What do you think will be your most important source of support as you continue?
Appendix H: End of First-Year Interview for Students Who Dropped

1. How have you been since the last interview? Have you had any really positive or negative experiences at school? In your life outside of school? Have there been any major life changes?

2. What made you decide to drop your classes this semester? How did you make the decision? Who did you talk with about it?

3. What was your biggest challenge in continuing college?

4. What do you think the school or teachers could have done differently to help support your success?

5. What could you have done differently to be successful?

6. Did you let any teacher know about your difficulty or did any teacher reach out to you?

7. What classes did you do the best in? Why do you think you did well in those classes and not as well in others? Was it a question of the teacher? The subject matter?

8. Had you been keeping up with homework in the dropped classes?

9. Do you feel your high school work prepared you for what you had to do this year? If not, where was it lacking?

10. Do you feel the high school focus on TAKS helped or hurt your college success? Explain.

11. How would you describe the difference between high school and college to seniors at SHS?

12. What advice would you make to seniors at SHS to avoid or overcome the difficulties you have faced?
13. What is the most difficult piece of writing you’ve done at college?

14. What is the most interesting piece of writing you’ve done at college?

15. Have you done any writing this semester? What has been your most difficult writing task? Why was it difficult? How did you deal with this difficulty?

16. What has been your favorite part about college? Least favorite?

17. What was/has been your favorite class this year? Least favorite? Why?

18. Have you started working? If so, how much do you work?

19. What are your future educational plans?
Appendix I: High School Teacher interviews

General

1. What kind of writing assignments do you typically give your students? Why do you choose these types of assignments?
2. What do you think are the strong points about the writing practice and instruction you provide your students?
3. What kind of feedback do you give on students’ writing? Is it usually grammar-based or content-based? Do you think students read your comments?
4. How do you use or incorporate technology in your teaching? Do you have your students use computer technology in class? What for? What other ways is computer technology used at Samson?
5. Do you feel that you have enough access to technology at Samson? Have you been provided with enough support and training to use this technology effectively?
6. What limits your ability to provide students with the opportunities to practice and improve their writing?
7. How has the focus on testing changed over the years you’ve been here? Has it increased? What has the increased focus on testing done for your instruction?
8. Do you feel that students at HS are getting the writing instruction they need to be prepared for college? If not, why not?
9. How long have you been at Samson? How has the nature of writing instruction changed over that time?
10. How do students usually sit in your classes? Do you assign seats? If not, do students
group in certain ways? Along language ability, place of birth, class or other lines?

11. What kind of language identity labels (ESL, ELL, LEP) are in use at Samson? How do you use these labels? How does the school use them? Are you careful in how you use them?

Student Specific

1. How does S’s writing and speaking ability compare to other students in your classes? How would you describe S’s language abilities?

2. Does S need assistance mastering spoken and written academic English? If so, do you feel qualified in providing help? How have you helped S?

3. How would you describe S as a student?

4. How do you think S will do in college? Do you think that she will struggle in a certain area? Where do you think she will do well?
Appendix J: College Instructor interviews

General

1. Briefly describe your education background and your teaching experience.

2. What kind of writing assignments do you typically give your students? Why do you choose these types of assignments?

3. What do you think are the strong points about the writing practice and instruction you provide your students?

4. What kind of feedback do you give on students’ writing? Is it usually grammar-based or content-based? Do you think students read your comments?

5. What kind of activities do you typically include in your classes?

6. How do you use or incorporate technology in your teaching? Do you have your students use computer technology in class? What for? What other ways is computer technology used at EPCC/UTEP?

7. Do you feel that you have enough access to technology at EPCC/UTEP? Have you been provided with enough support and training to use this technology effectively?

8. What limits your ability to provide students with the opportunities to practice and improve their writing?

9. Do you feel that students in high school are getting the writing instruction they need to be prepared for college? If not, why not?

10. How do students usually sit in your classes? Do you assign seats? If not, do students group in certain ways? Along language ability, place of birth, class or other lines?

11. Do you feel qualified to work with the ESL students in your classes? If so, why? If not,
how could you feel more qualified? What kind of support do you provide for them?

12. Do you know Spanish? If not, how could it help you teach your students better?

Student Specific

1. How does S’s writing and speaking ability compare to other students in your classes? How would you describe S’s language abilities?

2. Does S need assistance mastering spoken and written academic English? If so, do you feel qualified in providing help? How have you helped S?

3. How would you describe S as a student?

4. How do you think S will do as she continues in college? Do you think that she will struggle in a certain area? Where do you think she will do well?
Appendix K: CAMP Director Interview

1. How long have you been with the CAMP program and how did you get involved?

2. How do students find out about the program, and what factors do you consider in their applications? What is the acceptance rate?

3. Why do you have the intensive summer semester? What orientation activities do you have during the summer?

4. How much is CAMP involved in scheduling students’ classes the first year? Do you complete the registration process for them? Why?

5. What is your rationale for placing students in the same class? What happened with art history?

6. What do you do to get students involved in University community? Lip Syncing, Dinner Theatre, etc? Why do you find these events important?

7. How do peer leaders work? How are they recruited?

8. How does the CAMP community work? Are students supportive of each other?

9. What kind of problems have you had with students?

10. How would you compare Bianca to your other CAMP participants?

11. Does she have more struggles than the others? How has she been about participating in tutoring and other events?

12. What percentage of students go on to graduate?

13. What kind of tutoring requirements do students have? Do you encourage them to use other campus services as well?

14. What kind of support extends beyond first year for students?

15. I noticed that CAMP is a year by year grant. Is the application process competitive? Are
you worried about the current political climate in Washington?
Appendix L: History Professor Interviews

1. Briefly describe your education background and your teaching experience.

2. Why does writing play such an important role in the history curriculum at UTEP? Did the department develop this initiative on its own or was their collaboration with other faculty, from English for instance?

3. What kind of writing assignments do you typically give your students? Why do you choose these types of assignments?

4. What do you think are the strong points about the writing practice and instruction you provide your students?

5. What kind of feedback do you or TAs give on students’ writing? Is it usually grammar-based or content-based? Do you think students read the comments?

6. Do your students write as much as you’d like them to? If not, what limits your ability to provide students with the opportunities to practice and improve their writing?

7. Do you feel that students at high school are getting the writing instruction they need to be prepared for college? If not, why not?

8. Do you feel qualified to work with the L2 students in your classes? If so, why? If not, how could you feel more qualified? What kind of support do you or TAs provide for them?
Appendix M: First-Year Experience Directors Interview

1. Please describe the role(s) you have played in supporting first year student success at UTEP.

2. Why have you focused so much attention to the first-year experience?

3. How has the creation of the University College supported student success at UTEP, especially among low-income and first generation college students?

4. My students have experienced much diversity in their University seminars. While one reported it being one of her hardest classes, having her reading history disciplinary articles, another reported it as easy and largely a waste of time, only reading a short story every other week. How do you control the design of the courses and monitor the rigor with which they are taught? Are you generally satisfied with the courses?

5. How would you explain the difference between the UNIV seminars offered at UTEP and the EDUC ones offered at EPCC?

6. In your recent book, you describe collaboration between UTEP, EPCC, and local ISDs. Is this collaboration still active? How has it fostered more successful transitions between the different institutions?

7. In that discussion, you also mentioned the Accuplacer and the different interventions that have been done to bump up student placements. How do you value the Accuplacer as a placement device? Do you think that it is by and large accurate?

8. In my research, I have found that various programs, ranging from the CAMP program to community organizations like La Fe, have been helpful in supporting student success. What programs have the University College started to support success besides the ones we’ve discussed?
9. In regard to programs like the aforementioned ones, how do you feel about the current political climate in Washington and Austin affecting these programs and what does it mean for students?

10. I have learned that many issues seemingly beyond the university’s control (pregnancy, family responsibilities, financial difficulties, immigration status) have affected students success the first year of college. Do you think that universities, colleges, and individual instructors have any role in addressing these issues, and if so what role do they play?
Appendix N: Sample TAKS Test Pages

DIRECTIONS
Read the two selections and the viewing and representing piece. Then answer the questions that follow.

My Father Sits in the Dark
by Jerome Weidman

My father has a peculiar habit. He is fond of sitting in the dark, alone. Sometimes I come home very late. The house is dark. I let myself in quietly because I do not want to disturb my mother. She is a light sleeper. I tiptoe into my room and undress in the dark. I go to the kitchen for a drink of water. My bare feet make no noise. I step into the room and almost trip over my father. He is sitting in a kitchen chair, in his pajamas, smoking his pipe.

"Hello, Pop," I say.
"Hello, son."
"Why don't you go to bed, Pa?"
"I will," he says.
But he remains there. Long after I am asleep I feel sure that he is still sitting there, smoking.

Many times I am reading in my room. I hear my mother get the house ready for the night. I hear my kid brother go to bed. I hear my sister come in. I hear her do things with jars and cups and until she, too, is quiet. I know she has gone to sleep. In a little while I hear my mother say good night to my father. I continue to read. Soon I become thirsty. (I drink a lot of water.) I go to the kitchen for a drink. Again I almost stumble across my father. Many times it startles me. I forget about him. And there he is—smoking, sitting, thinking.

"Why don't you go to bed, Pop?"
"I will, son."
But he doesn't. He just sits there and smokes and thinks. It worries me. I can't understand it. What can he be thinking about? Once I asked him.
"What are you thinking about, Pa?"
"Nothing," he said.

Once I left him there and went to bed. I awoke several hours later. I was thirsty. I went to the kitchen. There he was. His pipe was out. But he sat there, staring into a corner of the kitchen. After a moment I became accustomed to the darkness. I took my drink. He still sat and stared.
Going to America
by Nicholas Gage

In 1949, at the age of twelve, Nicholas Gage left Greece with his sisters to be reunited with their father in America. Their mother, Eleni Gatzoyannis, had been killed by invading Communist guerrillas in their mountain village, but her four children had escaped. Prokopis Koulisis, an acquaintance from a neighboring village, helped watch the children on the eighteen-day journey to America. In this selection, Nicholas remembers his first thoughts and emotions as the ship leaves Greece—and eighteen days later when it arrives in America.

As the ship began to pull away, I watched the figure of my grandfather shrinking. Suddenly he began to wave the walking stick he always carried, carved from the branch of a cornel tree and polished to a dark sheen by his hands. Finally it was only the frantic waving of his stick that distinguished him from the other dots on the harborside.

My fingers touched something cold and smooth, and I pulled it out of my pocket. It was the small black stone that I had picked up outside my house on the night of our escape, because my mother had ordered me to throw one behind me so that I would never return to the place that gave us so much suffering. I had kept that stone in my pocket for eight months, and now it was time to toss it into the sea.

My mother had often told us the story of how my father, an itinerant tinker of seventeen, when he boarded the ship for America, triumphantly tossed over the rail the fez\(^1\) that the Turkish occupiers of northern Greece forced men to wear in those days as a symbol of their subjugation. When the fez disappeared into the waves, she said, my father felt like a free man for the first time in his life.

Now it was my turn to throw this stone from my village into the same sea, to ensure that I would never be pulled back to this land of war and famine, bombs, torture and executions. My mother had said that any one of her children who came back would receive her curse. Throwing the stone was the way to turn my back irrevocably on Greece and my face toward America, where my father waited.

But my mother’s body was still in Greece, in the church only a few yards below our ruined house. They had called her the Amerikina\(^2\) and all her life she had dreamed of America, but she would never leave our mountains. My sister was still somewhere behind those mountains, too, unless she was dead.

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\(^1\) A fez is a cone-shaped hat with a flat top, a tassel, and no brim, worn by men of Turkey and other Middle Eastern countries.

\(^2\) Amerikina means “the American one,” a nickname given to the author’s mother because her husband had gone to America to work.

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Page 9
Use “My Father Sits in the Dark” (pp. 4-8) to answer questions 1-11.

1. The father does not like the kitchen light because —
   A. he is ashamed of the way he looks to his son
   B. he had no electricity when he was young
   C. his eyes are still adjusted to the dark
   D. the noise it makes disturbs his thoughts

3. What is paragraph 40 mainly about?
   A. The narrator hears a clock, a car, and papers on the street.
   B. The narrator realizes the night is louder than he had thought.
   C. The narrator can hear the sound of his father breathing in the dark.
   D. The narrator has his first experience of the comforting sounds of the night.

2. Read the following dictionary entry.
   
   **even** vən \adj\ 1. calm, undisturbed
   2. having no bumps 3. equally matched or balanced 4. fair and impartial

   Which definition best matches the meaning of the word even as it is used in paragraph 18?
   
   F. Definition 1
   G. Definition 2
   H. Definition 3
   J. Definition 4

4. Which of the following is a major conflict for the narrator?
   
   F. His father's behavior keeps him awake at night.
   G. He must stay quiet when he walks through the house.
   H. He feels that his father's behavior indicates that something is wrong.
   J. His fear of his father prevents him from understanding the older man.
DIRECTIONS

Answer the following questions in the space provided on the answer document.

29. What does darkness symbolize in "My Father Sits in the Dark"? Explain your answer and support it with evidence from the selection.

30. In "Going to America," what is one way Nicholas is affected by moving to America? Support your answer with evidence from the selection.

31. What do the narrators learn about their fathers in "My Father Sits in the Dark" and "Going to America"? Explain your answer and support it with evidence from both selections.

BE SURE YOU HAVE WRITTEN YOUR ANSWERS ON THE ANSWER DOCUMENT.
WRITTEN COMPOSITION

Write an essay explaining how a person can feel connected to a special place.

The information in the box below will help you remember what you should think about when you write your composition.

REMEMBER—YOU SHOULD

☑ write about the assigned topic
☑ make your writing thoughtful and interesting
☑ make sure that each sentence you write contributes to your composition as a whole
☑ make sure that your ideas are clear and easy for the reader to follow
☑ write about your ideas in depth so that the reader is able to develop a good understanding of what you are saying
☑ proofread your writing to correct errors in spelling, capitalization, punctuation, grammar, and sentence structure
Todd Ruecker was born in St. Louis, Missouri. The youngest child of David L. Ruecker and Nancy A. Ruecker, he graduated from DeSmet Jesuit High School in St. Louis Missouri in the spring of 2000 and spent a year at St. John’s College in Santa Fe, New Mexico before transferring to and earning a Bachelor’s Degree in English with a minor in Classics from Truman State University in Kirksville, Missouri. After spending a few months in Europe, earning a Teaching English as a Foreign Language certification in Prague, Czech Republic, he returned to Truman to complete a Master’s in English, writing a thesis titled *Understanding and Improving the Success of Peer Review Involving Native and Nonnative Speakers of English*. After graduating from Truman for the second time, he moved abroad to the Czech Republic where he taught business professionals, junior high, and high school students English as a foreign language for almost two years. He then spent six months in Chile volunteering with the Chilean Ministry of Education’s English Opens Doors Program, internning in the program’s head offices in Santiago, Chile and teaching in a high school in Villa Alemana, Chile. After Chile, he returned to the U.S. to pursue a doctoral degree in Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Texas at El Paso in El Paso, Texas.