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REASONS TO LEAVE, REASONS TO BELIEVE: STUDENTS' STORIES OF
WITHDRAWING FROM FIRST YEAR COMPOSITION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

LeeAnn (Mysti) Rudd

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December 2012

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This dissertation gathers and classifies the self-reported reasons students gave for withdrawing or considering withdrawing from first year composition (FYC) courses at an urban community college on the Gulf Coast of Texas (CCGC) between 2004 and 2008. With an average student attrition rate of 20% in FYC courses at CCGC, the research question began as the following, “What can FYC teachers learn from students’ stories of withdrawing from FYC that can inform a composition pedagogy developed to increase student persistence?” A mixed methodology for gathering data included coding end-of-the semester questionnaires distributed to persisting FYC students plus conducting seven in-depth case studies of former students who had withdrawn from FYC.

This study reveals the lived experiences of FYC students at CCGC as they struggle to attend college while juggling time, money, health, and family obligations, all factors which I have classified under the division “Student Circumstances.” I hypothesized that these “Student circumstances”—including student entry characteristics plus events that happened beyond the teacher’s control (illness, accidents, etc.) would account for the majority of reasons students gave for withdrawing from FYC at CCGC. The results, however, show the opposite to be true: the majority of students who withdrew from FYC did so for reasons outside of the division “Student Circumstances.” In fact, 2 out of 3 participants who had dropped FYC at CCGC gave reasons for

withdrawing that could be connected either to their levels of academic self-efficacy (belief that they could accomplish the course work), or teachers' classroom practices (including course policies), or both.

Since students' academic self-efficacy and teachers' practices can both be impacted by teachers of FYC, the conclusion of this study explores the possible ways FYC instructors can amend their FYC courses to teach towards a "pedagogy for persistence." FYC teachers are encouraged to see themselves not only as professors of English but also as "sponsors of persistence" for their FYC students, then asked to consider how this expanded role might change their practices both inside and outside the FYC classroom.

*This dissertation is dedicated
to the ones who walked away—
those who withdrew or disappeared from FYC—
without their voices heard.*

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Many people made the completion of this manuscript possible and deserve recognition and appreciation. If I had inherited the talents of my mother, Lorraine Olson, I would bake each of you a chocolate angel food cake enclosed in a baggie with a suitable Hallmark card taped on top; instead, I offer you my heartfelt thanks and indebtedness which I plan to pay forward by helping others accomplish their academic goals.

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the accent she used for her Ole and Lena skits, “Uffdah, neda, it yust doesn’t mat-ter!” whenever something really important but really disappointing happened. I can testify that uttering “Uff dah” does put criticism—both from myself and others—into perspective.

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CHAPTER ONE

EXPLORING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN RETENTION, FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION, AND COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction to the Study

Prologue: Welcome to the Last Day to Drop Classes

“Knock-knock.” It is the last day to drop classes on the campus of a two-year college on the Gulf Coast of Texas¹ where I am an instructor of English, teaching five sections of first-year composition (FYC) per semester. This is the fourth student to visit me this cool, spring morning during my early office hours, 7-8 a.m. MWF. I am generally delighted to discover that students have tracked down my difficult-to-find office on the edge of campus, but not on the last day to drop.

“Will you sign this?” Yolanda asks, then adds hurriedly, “I’m sorry, but I have to drop.” I can tell by the finality in her tone and the fact that she’s zipping up her jacket that she’s already made her decision and does not want to discuss it. Many of my students don’t say anything as they lower their gaze and timidly push pink and yellow copies of a drop slip towards me. And I never know quite what to say either, although I try to sound upbeat and hopeful, chirping, “Well, I hope you try again next semester,” as I sign the slip, assigning a “Q” rather than an “F,” the only merciful choice left to me at this point as a “Q” is given if the student is passing at the time of withdrawal or drop” (2006-2007 *Catalog* 45).

¹ To protect its identity, I will use the acronym “CCGC” (standing for Community College on the Gulf Coast) in subsequent references to my home institution.

But after the door closes behind each student, I am acutely aware that I feel a sense of loss, wondering what went wrong for that student, that semester, wondering if there were things I could have done as a teacher to help this student succeed in FYC. Not wanting to intrude on a student's sense of privacy or to shame her for dropping, I seldom ask for an explanation, so the reasons impacting each student's decision to drop often exit my office along with the student. And if that student doesn't sign up to repeat FYC the next semester, chances are I will never see her or him again.

The urgency for this research project of gathering students' self-reported reasons for leaving FYC increased along with my accumulation of experiences with students such as Yolanda. As I signed drop slip after drop slip, semester after semester, I became more and more disturbed by the alarming attrition rate of FYC students at my home institution (20%). I wondered about the factors that led a student to drop a particular course and what we, as composition teachers on this community college campus, could do to ameliorate this drop out rate.

But my interest in students' stories of withdrawing from college writing courses began long before I was a teacher in a college composition classroom and can be traced back to my own experiences as an undergraduate student, enrolling in "Freshman English," as the first-year writing course was called at my college in the Midwest back then. Since "all researchers are positioned," as Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater declares in "Turning In upon Ourselves: Positionality, Subjectivity, In Case Study and Ethnographic Research" (115), and our positions have the potential to impact the ways we shape and perceive data, allow me to share part of my own story of being an undergraduate student navigating first semester writing assignments.

*From the Farm to the Suburbs: The Story of the Researcher's
First-Year Writing Experience*

Over thirty years ago as an eighteen-year-old first generation college student fresh from the farm, I enrolled in first-year English in a small, somewhat elite, church-affiliated liberal arts college in Minnesota. I chose this school because my sister had experienced great success there seven years earlier, graduating summa cum laude in '77. Though I had visited a dozen other campuses my senior year of high school, this was the only school I toured that was bordered by corn and wheat and soybean fields, reminding me, of course, of the family and farm I would leave behind. More important than the programs, the course offerings, the faculty, or even the tuition, my decision to attend this college was largely based on geography: I could imagine feeling at home there as I could satisfy my daily requirements of gazing at the flat horizon of a Midwestern sunset, running on country roads lined by rich, black fields, and reading atop granite boulders tucked between evergreens.

Once I moved into the dorm, however, I realized that I was different from the well-to-do suburban students who attended this school. Unlike most of them, I had grown up poor, though I never lacked for food. I had enough clothes to get by—a dozen shirts and three pairs of jeans—which seemed fine in high school where few of us cared about designer labels or whether something was made of 100% cotton. Unlike many of my classmates, I had never considered attending college out of state, for even if I were given a full scholarship, who would pay for my plane tickets home? The rural high school I graduated from in 1980 offered no foreign language, no creative writing, no calculus. In those years of declining enrollment, the end of the baby boom left many schools struggling for state funding since the formula was based on the number of students

enrolled. Cutting programs became commonplace as this was the only way to keep these rural schools limping along, trying to avoid the inevitable: consolidating with the next town and subsequently ending well fueled sports rivalries.

Though I would require full financial aid to attend this college, I knew that many wealthy suburbanites who had graduated from prestigious high schools in the “Twin Cities” of Minneapolis and St. Paul would be my classmates. I had never learned to study in high school (scanning the texts five minutes before the tests usually resulted in “A’s” for me), so I worried that I would not be able to keep up with students at the collegiate level, that I was so ill prepared that I would have to sprint while my classmates jogged in place. Because of these concerns, I did not sign-up for cross-country or join anything I had belonged to in high school—neither student council nor drama, not math and science club, nor, as Dad forbid, a new club recruiting on campus—“The Young Republicans.”

It didn't help my sense of inadequacy when my English teacher, Professor Fernholz, opened the semester by declaring, “I never give a freshman an ‘A’; if you could get an ‘A,’ you wouldn't be a freshman. In fact, if any of you somehow manages to get an ‘A’ on a paper, I will tear off your name and make copies for the rest of the class.” He then proceeded, on that first day of class, to present each of us with a print copy of a picture of a painting, assigning us to write a single-page, hand-written description of it. I had been exposed to little or no formal art on the farm, had never been to an art museum, and had never seen an original oil painting. But I had been instructed by the 1966 pink edition of the *Borgund Lutheran Cookbook* (given to me by my mother as a handbook of sorts when I left for college), whose mission statement is summed up in the lines of its opening poem: “to bring a smile to a frowning face, / to flash a light in the gloomy place,

/ to spread the gospel of happiness / where hearts are heavy and cares depress" (2).

Because I had been trained to profess the good in everything, even though the couple in the picture the professor provided (which my cultural education would later help me identify as "The Absinthe Drinker" by Degas) didn't exactly look happy, I described them as "contented after a big meal in a nice restaurant." I imagined that they had been together long enough to accept each other unconditionally, and therefore conversation was no longer a necessity. Apparently, there was not much room for me to be more incorrect as I received a D- on this assignment. The "real" story, according to the professor, was that the husband was an alcoholic and the woman was fed up with him. The look on her face was supposed to denote disgust, not digestion.

As a result of a midterm conference with my teacher, I eventually learned that he wanted us to write literary analyses, specifically, to make a claim about the novel he had assigned and then find passages in the text that would support this claim. It took me nearly eight essays, but I finally was able to write in a way that pleased this teacher. You might think this could be a sort of success story, my own version of "appropriat[ing] a specialized discourse" . . . "as though [I] were a member of the academy" as David Bartholomae describes in his classic article, "Inventing the University" (61). I must have approximated my teacher's "specialized discourse" adequately because I received the first "A" he gave to a paper in our class. As he had vowed to do, he passed out copies to the whole class. Though my name was no longer on it, I worried that my classmates would suspect I had written it. Being singled out for attention (whether positive or negative) was something to avoid according to my cultural conditioning.

But Alan Emerson, a classmate well prepared in the art of literary criticism, saw my flushed cheeks and guessed that the paper was mine. He lived in the same dorm I did and had asked me over to his room a couple of times under the auspices of watching *Macbeth* from the perch of his bunk bed, but I was interested in neither Alan nor Shakespeare at the time. With a knowing smirk in my direction, Alan proceeded to tear my paper apart in front of everyone, remarking that it didn't deserve the grade it got. I remember thinking that he was probably right, that certainly his suburban high school had taught him more about literary critique than mine ever had, so he was the expert, and I was the novice. Professor Fernholz enjoyed the lively attack, and then defended his choice by stating that it was, after all, just a freshman paper and therefore he didn't expect it to be perfect.

But what strikes me most, looking back at this sixteen-week, first-year English course, is that I *never spoke up once* in class the entire semester. I was so worried about being perceived as “dumb” that it made me silent. It wasn't that I was burning to say something but more so an indication that I believed I did not possess the language with which to say it. I had yet to “invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language while finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, on the one hand, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline, on the other” (Bartholomae 61). Perhaps it was not surprising then, that by the end of the next school year, my sophomore year, I had transferred to a more anonymous institution—a large, metropolitan, research university—where I could submerge my silence in a sea sixty-thousand other students. Even though English is my first and only language, and I attended a college within two hundred miles from the place I was born and lived the first

eighteen years of my life, I still had great difficulty finding my place in the university in general, and in the first-year English classroom, in particular.

But I never had a conversation with anyone in the academy regarding my fears of being ill-prepared and my subsequent feelings of unease; I did not discuss my misgivings with a teacher nor an advisor, nor dared voice my fears of failure with friends or family. Instead, I slowly slid my way out of the university, crawling back so gradually that twenty years would elapse before I would complete the bachelor's degree that I began in 1980.

Connecting My Own Story to FYC

My own story explains my personal connection to the sometimes bewildering experiences that students undergo in the FYC classroom, but I am *not* claiming that my reasons for leaving three different institutions of higher learning necessarily reflect or even intersect students' reasons at my home institution for withdrawing from FYC. What I *am* claiming is that the experiences of students who withdraw from FYC, along with the circumstances that led to their decisions to withdraw, are often a mystery to their former FYC teachers, just like my experience was to the teacher of my first-year English course. Where there could be conversations between teachers and students, I see chasms of silence. This study, then, is one attempt to bridge these chasms by inviting back into the academy the voices of students who have withdrawn from FYC at my home institution. By interviewing former students and sharing their stories with composition teachers, my hope is that these stories will aid us in adjusting our assumptions about why students withdraw from FYC, causing us to ask ourselves what, if anything, we can do to promote retention of our students through our composition pedagogies.

Considering the Roles and Goals of the Researcher

My initial role, then, is to be a receiver of these stories, a witness to the lived experiences of FYC students as recounted by them. In line with the goals of feminist action researchers, I desire to “help participants understand and change their situations” (Reinharz 175), to provide an opportunity for them to shape and re-shape their stories as the telling can lead to agency if it provides the teller with “a sense of being a ‘subject’ capable of acting and committing [herself] to others,” (Kearney 151). In his book *On Stories* published under the *Thinking in Action* series, philosopher and novelist Richard Kearney describes the mechanism by which telling our stories can lead to changes in our lives:

The recounted life prises open perspectives inaccessible to ordinary perception. It marks a poetic extrapolation of possible worlds which supplement and refashion our referential relations to the life-world existing prior to the act of recounting. Our exposure to new possibilities of being refigures our everyday being-in-the-world. So that when we return from the story-world to the real world, our sensibility is enriched and amplified in important respects [resulting in] the refiguring of our world as we return from narrative text to action. (133)

These student stories have the potential to change not only the perceptions of the possibilities available to the students telling the stories, but also the perceptions of the FYC teachers at my home institution. If we as composition teachers listen closely to the stories our students tell, we cannot help but be affected by their realities, and, if we care about being responsive to our students’ needs, “the story of our teaching” might need to

be re-told as well. So as I listen to and then re-tell the stories students have shared with me, I align myself with the goals of Clandinin and Connelly in their closing remarks of *Narrative Inquiry* as they state, “The purpose of this retelling, like retellings in any aspect of the narratives of our lives, is to offer possibilities for reliving, for new directions and new ways of doing things” (189). In terms of the goals of my study, these retellings could lead to new ways of teaching in the FYC classroom.

By paying attention to students’ tellings and retellings of their experiences enrolling and withdrawing from FYC, struggling to define for themselves notions of failure and success, I hope to begin to articulate a pedagogy that would lead to reduced attrition rates in FYC. What would such a corner of the field of composition be called—“retention composition” or maybe “composition for persistence”?

Composing a Research Question

I often ponder the “tipping point” between striving for and giving up on one’s academic dreams as I hypothesize the factors that affect students’ decisions both to enroll in and to withdraw from FYC. There are some factors that seem beyond students’ control, like issues of health and economics and family obligations; there are some factors at least partially under their control—like the number of hours spent working each week—or partying—or watching TV. There is an underlying psychological factor too large to address in my study, but still it stirs my curiosity: what makes some people give up on their goals more readily than others? I will consider factors that affect a student’s *resiliency*, defined as “the ability to recover quickly from illness, change, or misfortune,” (“resilience”) only as they can inform composition pedagogy, particularly the practices of FYC teachers at CCGC. Ultimately, I want to know what makes an FYC student decide

to bring a drop slip to my office for me to sign. I want to listen to their stories of dropping—or disappearing—from FYC and see if I can theorize a composition pedagogy that could lead to increased persistence, at least on my campus. Restated, my research question is this: **in what ways can students' stories of withdrawing from FYC inform composition pedagogy?**

Listening for Context, Looking for Agency

Because I am a compositionist concerned with issues of social justice both inside and outside of the academy, when I listen to my students' stories I am also interested in grouping the factors influencing students' decisions to stay enrolled or withdraw from FYC along lines of agency, asking the question, "Who or what has the power to control this factor?" By listening to the stories of former students who have withdrawn from first-year composition courses at CCGC, I hope to come to a greater understanding of the context of the community both inside and surrounding FYC classrooms of my home institution. In *Narration as Knowledge*, Joseph Trimmer asserts that "the stories we tell ourselves create the very space that we as a group, any group, inhabit" for "place is made by story" (9). Like Trimmer, I subscribe to the belief that "the true regions of the world are mapped by the stories we tell" (9) and that by listening to students' stories I will come to a greater understanding of the context of my students' struggles and the social and cultural forces impinging on them.

Changing Our Perceptions, Revising Our Pedagogies

The stories of students who have withdrawn from FYC have the potential to change not only the perceptions of the possibilities available to the specific student storyteller, but also the perceptions of the FYC teachers at my home institution as we ask

ourselves how these stories might inform our classroom practices. As we come to know these students better through the sharing of their stories, this information can aid us in developing student-centered teaching that relies upon a more holistic perception of our students. By paying attention to students' stories of navigating the tightrope between hope and discouragement, of bouncing in and out of the academy while negotiating fears of failure and/or success, we, as FYC teachers, can learn to adjust our practices in ways that make it possible for more students to succeed in our FYC courses.

Informed by students' stories, I believe that FYC pedagogy can re-create in the FYC classroom some of the conditions that Tinto and Engstrom report that the learning community they studied accomplished as it

eradicated fears and anxieties, developed [students'] sense of belonging, increased their confidence in their abilities, enhanced their self-esteem, and reinforced their belief that they were on the "right track." These students remind us that it is not enough to be competent in class; students also have to believe in their competence. (3)

My hope is that teacher responsiveness to students' stories of withdrawing from FYC can fuel pedagogical changes leading to increased rates of persistence for future sections of FYC at CCGC.

Review of the Literature

Some Key Terms from the Field of Retention Studies

In their historical overview of the scholarship of retention, Joseph Berger and Susan Lyon note the evolution of terms used to describe student departure, tracing the earliest

terminology to “student mortality,” as student attrition was called in the 1930s (5). Their distinctions between key concepts occurring in retention research are worth reviewing:

- Retention: refers to the ability of an institution to retain a student from admission to the university through graduation.
- Persistence: refers to the desire and action of a student to stay within [a particular] system of higher education from beginning year through degree completion.
- Attrition: refers to students who fail to reenroll at an institution in consecutive semesters.
- Dropout: refers to a student whose initial educational goal was to complete at least a bachelor’s degree but who did not complete it.
- Stopout: refers to a student who temporarily withdraws from an institution or system. (Berger and Lyon 7)

William Tierney prefers to use the term “leave-taker” rather than the labels “stopout” or “dropout” for those who withdraw from an institution (318). Since all of the students I interviewed planned to complete their degrees, and some had withdrawn from FYC but not from CCGC, I aspire to follow Tierney’s lead by referring to the students who withdrew from FYC as “leave-takers.” Some of my research, however, was conducted before I came across this term, so I will also try to be true to the language I actually used in interviews, questionnaires, and letters. I will use the term “retention” when I am emphasizing the benefit to the institution of keeping a student enrolled and the term “persistence” when I am focusing on the benefits for the students of working towards completion of their degrees.

The Problem of Retention at Two-Year Colleges

In 2007 PBS aired a documentary titled *Discounted Dreams: High Hopes and Harsh Realities at America's Community Colleges*. The movie opens with statistics regarding the attrition rates of community college students across the nation:

- Half of the students who begin at a community college fail to graduate.
- Of those who do finish and try to transfer to a four-year college, only two out of three make it into a four-year institution.
- Of those who successfully transfer, they are three to four times more likely to drop out than those who began their studies at a four-year school.

These are quite daunting statistics, but they probably make more sense if we consider the lived realities of community college students: half of them work full time, and one third of them are the primary caretakers of their families (*Discounted Dreams*). The end result is that for every one hundred community college enrollees, only thirty achieve the dream of making it to the university.

In *The Knowledge Factory*, Stanley Aronowitz describes the ironic role of the two-year college in many American communities: they fulfill the “promise of open admissions, where any student with a high school diploma or GED may be admitted. But for many students the promise has turned hollow because the conditions of their schooling—both their life situations and their education—conspire to raise the odds of failure” (57). Aronowitz claims that increased enrollment in community colleges combined with state and local budget cuts means these colleges “have been forced to offer fewer sections, leading to overcrowding in the remaining sections, and to exclude, by techniques of triage, students they consider less likely to succeed” (57). “As the 1990s

draw to a close,” Aronowitz concludes, “enrollments have not dropped, but dropouts have skyrocketed, especially in large cities where black, Latino, and Asian students predominate” (58). These increases in the drop-out rates of students at community colleges emphasize the urgency of re-examining issues involved in the retention of FYC students.

Two-Year Colleges and the Gatekeeping Function of FYC

Barry Alford, author of *The Politics of Writing in the Two-Year College*, takes seriously the accusation that community colleges end up “‘managing ambition,’ of lowering the hopes and expectations of their students,” rather than helping them achieve their educational dreams (vii). Alford indicts first-year composition at two-year schools as a prime deliverer of the message that many of these students just aren’t good enough, that “literacy and writing [are] a barrier to be overcome” (vii). He is not surprised, then, when “students fall victim to the linguistic and cultural markers they bring in the door,” (vii) and therefore take leave from these classrooms. Tom Fox comments on the expectations of administrators and non-compositionist faculty on his campus who regard the purpose of FYC as existing “to repair the ‘broken’ language of students so that they will either fail or will go on to use the language of their particular discipline” (“Working Against” 92). This conceptualization of FYC would make it a “gatekeeping course designed to weed out students who cannot perform at the expectations of the faculty,” thereby functioning as “the initial roadblock to student persistence” (Eagan and Jaeger 41). In their article “Closing the Gate: Part-Time Faculty Instruction in Gatekeeper Courses and First-Year Persistence,” Eagan and Jaeger primarily look at introductory math and science courses as an entry step into a major, but they also consider general

educations courses, which would include FYC. They describe the ramifications of not doing well in a gatekeeping course:

For students not majoring in math, science, or engineering, gatekeeper courses often come in the form of a general education requirement, and failing to do well in such a course may result in a student's withdrawing from the institution due to an inability to complete required courses necessary to demonstrate degree progress. In addition, poor performance in gatekeeper courses may discourage students psychologically by deflating their self-confidence in their ability to succeed academically.

(40)

The “gatekeeping” function of FYC has been challenged by many crusaders in the field of composition (including Mike Rose, Tom Fox, and Geneva Smitherman) who see it as an unfair practice used to deny some students full access to the academy based on the language practices they bring to the FYC classroom.

What we have learned from compositionists committed to access is that FYC doesn't have to serve as a gate closing behind “deficient” students on their way out of the academy. By sheer numbers alone—“50% of all first-year college students and 40% of all undergraduates take composition courses in two-year colleges” as Alford reminds us—composition classrooms in two-year colleges can become powerful sites of praxis, places to enact liberatory pedagogy locally (vii). “If we, as the voice of our profession, value a literacy that is democratic, inclusive, and critical,” Alford concludes in his introduction to *The Politics of Writing in the Two-Year College*, “we will start by focusing on the two-year colleges,” (viii). In his closing to *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose reminds us

what is at stake as he calls for educators of “underprepared” students (such as those we face in FYC) to compose a more just and inclusive pedagogy:

We are in the middle of an extraordinary social experiment: the attempt to provide education for all members of a vast pluralistic democracy. To have any prayer of success, we’ll need many conceptual blessings: A philosophy of language and literacy that affirms the diverse sources of linguistic competence and deepens our understanding of the ways class and culture blind us to the richness of those sources. A perspective on failure that lays open the logic of error. An orientation toward the interaction of poverty and ability that undercuts simple polarities, that enables us to see simultaneously the constraints poverty places on the play of mind and the actual play of mind within those constraints. We’ll need a pedagogy that encourages us to step back and consider the threat of the standard classroom and that shows us, having stepped back, how to step forward to invite a student across the boundaries of that powerful room.

(238)

Committing to Student Success

Although Rose does not attach a label to the brand of pedagogy he describes above, the shifts in perspectives that he calls for make a good foundation for a pedagogy committed to student success. Instead of relying solely on our home institutions to deal with the retention problem by developing programs to increase retention rates, what if we as FYC teachers took seriously the charge of looking for ways to positively impact persistence in our FYC classrooms? How would this inform the curriculum we adopt, the

assignments we give, the “teacher talk” we engage in, the climate we create in each of our FYC classrooms?

Rather than relying on our institutions of higher education to make the major decisions regarding the retention and success of our FYC students, I believe FYC teachers can inhabit an important role in promoting student persistence. Whether we care to admit it or not, the practices of FYC teachers can have a direct impact on the persistence of FYC students resulting from the ways we design and grade our assignments, the ways we speak, listen, and respond to students, and the ways in which we dictate and enforce course policies—all contributing to an environment for learning that is ideally inclusive of each student rather than exclusive. The hope is that students will find the FYC classroom to be a safe and supportive place to learn, a place that recognizes and accepts that “students will always come to college with varying levels of ability in various situations” (Fox “Working Against” 98), rather than an alienating place where students are labeled as “deficient” or “not college material.”

I realize that not all FYC teachers want to re-envision their pedagogy in terms of its impact on student persistence. So what I am proposing will not appeal to all who teach FYC. But I also know many FYC teachers who worry about their students’ lives outside the classroom and already consider the ways in which FYC requirements and students’ lived experiences enhance or interfere with one another. I know teachers who lose sleep pondering what grade to give a student because of its impact on financial aid and scholarships. I know teachers who have had to re-look at their attendance policies or conferencing requirements because students did not have the means to get to class. How do we as FYC teachers respond sensitively to our students’ plights while also upholding

the rigorous standards of the academy? This question is not easy to answer—but I believe it is important to consider the long-term ramifications of looking for ways to help our students succeed, to help each student find a foothold in the academy. By gathering the stories of students who perhaps did not feel particularly invited to cross the “boundaries of that powerful room” that Rose speaks of (*Lives* 238), I hope to add to a composition pedagogy that considers the experiences of the leave-takers of the FYC classroom.

The Constancy of Retention Rates

As retention expert Vincent Tinto points out, “research on retention is voluminous. It is easily one of the most widely studied topics in higher education over the past thirty years” (“Foreword” ix). Retention scholar John Braxton relies on Tinto’s review of over seventy years of empirical research to conclude that “the national rate of student departure has remained constant at 45% for over one hundred years” (Braxton 1). Of course, these statistics fluctuate according to the type of institution, and highly selective colleges and universities have a departure rate of only 8% between the first and second year (Braxton 1). Community colleges, on the other hand, are known for their abysmal rates of retention, as Alford regrettably points out that “it is still true that only about 12% of two-year college students ever graduate” (vii). Putting aside the disparity between the enormously higher completion rates at high select schools versus low status community colleges and what that says about an open or fair society, these graduation rates have been fairly constant over seventy years, so why is so much attention given to retention in higher education now?

Why Administrators Are Paying Close Attention to Retention

Since the numbers of students enrolled impacts revenue, administrators in higher education in these difficult economic times are paying close attention to the rates of student persistence and institutional retention. Tinto depicts three scenarios that link retention rates to revenue: 1. Many states are tying funding to graduation rates. 2. Some “ranking systems include graduation rates as one measure of quality.” And 3. For some schools, “increased retention is critical to the stability of institutional budgets” (Foreword ix-x, Seidman). Because of the connections between retention and revenue, many institutions have implemented retention programs on their campuses, some of which require the participation of faculty.

Faculty, however, aren’t always as committed to improving retention as administrators, seeing “themselves as dedicated to student learning in their classrooms, [rather than] keeping students in college” (Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot 6). By 2008 retention scholars, however, began to focus the retention spotlight on the practices of the teacher in the classroom (rather than on student entry characteristics), and faculty found themselves involved in retention efforts whether they wanted to be or not, often in the form of advising programs or learning communities that emphasized “social as well as academic integration into college” (Powell 669). Although Tinto is leery of endorsing “add-on” programs for retention, he does see the value of learning communities that

enroll the same students in several classes so they get to know each other quickly and fairly intimately in a way that is part and parcel of their academic experience. By asking students to construct knowledge together, learning communities seek to involve students both socially and

intellectually in ways that promote cognitive development as well as an appreciation for the many ways in which one's own knowing is enhanced when other voices are a part of that learning experience. ("Taking Student Retention Seriously" 7-8)

Studying the learning experiences of students offers a key to retention because "students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that foster learning," or, as Tinto succinctly states, "Students who learn are students who stay" ("Enhancing Student Persistence" 5). Thus more attention is being given by retention researchers to the learning fostered in college classrooms.

In 2008 the *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* series devoted an entire volume to the impact classroom practices have on students' decisions to withdraw or persist, titling it *The Role of the Classroom in College Student Persistence*. In his introduction as editor of this edition, John Braxton emphasizes "the complexity of the role that college and university faculty members play in shaping persistence and departure decisions of undergraduate college students," hoping that the chapters in his book will aid faculty in assuming more responsibility "for the part they play in student persistence" (*Role 2*), rather than declaring it "not my problem." Because of the ties that retention scholarship has made to teacher practices and pedagogy, it is difficult for a teacher to maintain that the issue of retention on campus is not worth her attention.

Why Compositionists Should Pay Attention to Retention

But why should compositionists, in particular, concern themselves with retention on their respective campuses? Compositionist Pegeen Reichert Powell published two articles in 2009 making the case for "first-year writing instructors to pay attention to the

discourse of retention in higher education,” (“Retention Risks” 3). Her argument bears significant review as it is relevant to the goal of my study in gleaning what we can from students’ stories of withdrawing from FYC in order to inform teacher practices in the FYC classroom.

“What would it mean for our work as writing professionals if we take seriously those moments when our work intersects with the problem of retention?” asks Powell in her 2009 CCC article, “Retention and Writing Instruction: Implications for Access and Pedagogy” (666). Powell acknowledges that faculty are primarily focused on “teaching and learning rather than simply keeping students in seats” (669), but she argues that composition faculty should join the discussions about retention efforts on their campuses because of the following reasons:

1. “the unique context of the [first-year] writing classroom as an interface between students’ past and future educational experiences, as an introduction to the discourse practices of higher education, and as one of the only universal requirements at most institutions” (669).
2. “so [we] are not recruited to participate in [retention] efforts that run counter to our own goals and pedagogies” (669).
3. “we have a disciplinary history of institutional critique and discourse analysis that would provide an important context and a healthy skepticism about retention efforts” (669-70).
4. “we know first-year students well, simply because we see so many of them in the intimate settings of the writing classroom and student conferences” (670).

5. “we have a commitment to pedagogy that most of us, at least, would be unwilling to compromise in the name of keeping tuition dollars in the institution” (670).

At least a couple of Powell’s reasons for FYC teachers to care about retention are hinged upon the sometimes conflicting roles of being a teacher in the classroom and also a managed worker in an institution. The bottom line goals of a campus administrator versus a classroom teacher can sometimes be at odds, such as when the administrator in charge of recruitment and retention is focused on keeping students happy in their seats, while the teacher’s goal is to educate them (“Retention Risks” 16).

But sometimes administrators’ goals cause educators’ goals to be adapted or delayed. In a paper presented at CCCC in Milwaukee in 1996, Kevin Griffith spoke of the direct impact retention was having on his English department’s ability to get funding for a WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum) program since the provost had stated that “he could not move forward on any funding until the university had developed a comprehensive and coherent way to address the first-year retention problem” (3). His WAC program held in hostage, Griffith turned his attention to retention, noting that “most compositionists tend to be rather cavalier about this whole issue. Retention is never discussed, as far as I know, in graduate composition courses, and new faculty are arriving on campuses unprepared to illustrate [the] value of first-year composition, Writing Centers, and WAC programs with regard to retention” (3).

After researching the factors that lead to retention, Griffith proceeds to situate FYC teachers as important promoters of retention because we have greater access to our students due to our smaller class sizes and a pedagogy of writing, sharing, and revising

supported by conferencing, peer feedback, and collaborative projects (6). Even though Griffith may have initially felt forced to deal with the issue of retention in order to get his WAC program off the ground, he stresses that addressing retention should not be seen as “preserving turf or pleasing the higher ups” (10). Rather, he reminds us that “keeping our students in college, keeping their eyes toward a successful future is of course a noble goal in itself” (10).

A Compositionist Tells One Student's Story

While I agree with Griffith that FYC teachers are positioned to know their students better than many of the students' other first-year teachers, I argue that we still don't know enough about the lived experiences of the leave-takers in our classrooms. As FYC teachers, we may be susceptible to confusing or oversimplifying the factors that affect our students' decisions to withdraw if we don't seek student input on this matter. Powell must have sensed this too, as she, along with Danielle Aquiline, interviewed students who withdrew from their first-year writing courses in order to find out the factors affecting these students' decisions to leave (“Retention Risks” 5).

Aquiline and Powell's interview with Jenelle, a student who had dropped her first year writing course, is included in the article “Retention Risks: One Student's Story.” The co-authors describe their involvement in The Student Faculty Partnership for Success (SFPS), a program that brought them together with at-risk students like Jenelle and other completers of the summer Bridge program (4). The purpose of SFPS, according to Aquiline and Powell, was two-fold, the first being “to learn from students themselves about the many complicated factors that lead some students to decide to enroll in subsequent semesters and others to leave our institution” (4) and the second, “to

intervene, when it's both possible and right to do so, to help students address problems that might otherwise lead to decisions to leave" (4). Despite Jenelle's participation in the SPFS program, she ended up dropping Powell's Writing and Rhetoric 1 course, and together Powell and Aquiline invited Jenelle to campus to interview her as part of their commitment "to listen carefully to individual students' voices, and to figure out what [they] can learn by doing so" (4). The article sharing this student's story was published in 2009 in the journal *Open Words: Access and English Studies*. Aquiline and Powell chose to use a double column format, printing Jenelle's words on the left in one style font, and their corresponding teacher reflections integrated with retention research on the right in a second style of font. The authors defend their "format and the frantic nature of the reading required of it" as illustrative of their "difficulties of going back and forth between students' voices and retention research, [their] struggle to reconcile both of these discourses into one tidy narrative, and the disjointedness of their understanding of retention" (5).

Jenelle's Own Words

Before including Jenelle's own words, Aquiline and Powell provide some background on Jenelle's high school preparation. Jenelle had moved between her mom's place in the suburbs and her dad's in the city, getting involved in gangs and then trying to get out of the gang when her friend was killed (5). Rather than opt for a GED, Jenelle "re-enrolled in her original high school and, in her words, 'I killed my senior year. Killed it. Came out with A's and B's' " (6). After working so hard her last year of high school, Jenelle was disappointed to have been placed in the Summer Bridge Program at the college she wanted to attend in the fall. She recounts the day she received the letter

informing her of the contingencies of her acceptance:

My mom read the letter first, though, and out of her mouth was, I told you this wasn't going to work and all this. But I was pissed, like, man, I wrote good on that essay. There should be no reason. But then I thought about it. They probably looked at my high school and, you know, my test scores, and they probably figured, you know. But I couldn't blame them for that because I wasn't showing up, so what the—you know? So, I told my mom—she told me I couldn't do it, and I said, watch. (7)

Jenelle went on to successfully complete the Bridge Program and was paired with Aquiline in the SPFS program, but she remained apprehensive about taking five classes all at the same time rather than the two she took for the Bridge Program (8). Aquiline and Powell acknowledge that many forces outside of the classroom seemed to conspire to prevent Jenelle from successfully completing her first semester of college: besides working 25-30 hours per week and frequently arguing with her mother, she got in a car accident, her father took her laptop away as punishment for wrecking the car, and her mother stole \$400 of Jenelle's savings (13-14). Jenelle describes her response to her father's fury after assessing the damage to her car:

I could see his whole face turn pale. And gets to where he about threw up. And I looked at him and said, at least I'm not dead. You know? That's all I could say. I didn't know what to say, you know? My car looked horrible. And he was just like, don't talk to me right now. And I said, OK, that's fine. I just walked away, and I came back about ten minutes later,

and I said, well, what am I going to do about my car? And he looked at me, and his white face turned to red, and he started screaming at me, telling me how I'm fucking up my life, how he don't know what's going on in my head or what I'm doing. And I just—I, at that point, like with the accident and everything, I had no energy. I had no reason to scream. (14)

After this, Jenelle decided not to register for classes for the following spring, choosing to work full-time instead. When asked if she was sure that she would graduate in the next five years, she answered, "I'm going to graduate eventually. Just eventually. But I do know for a fact that if I don't have my stuff together by the age of, like, 20—I said 21, but I'm saying 20—I'm going to the military. I already—I have no other option" (15).

The Impact of Students' Stories on FYC Pedagogy

Whereas it might be tempting to blame Jenelle's decision not to register for spring classes on a lack of parental support, Aquiline and Powell invite us to take a broader view of Jenelle's situation:

The stressors that Jenelle names [time, family drama, and money] are fairly typical. At times, the stress she was under might have been different in degree, but not necessarily different in kind, than the stress that all of our students and our colleagues experience. Why does this stress prevent some people from succeeding, while others are able to manage? And to what extent can retention efforts deal with these factors? (13)

I will explore answers to these questions by borrowing from the work of social cognitive theorists on the concept of resilience when I discuss the case studies in Chapter Four and again when I consider implications for composition pedagogy in Chapter Five. For now, I

urge scholars to listen closely to story's like Jenelle's—and the stories of the former students I represent in Chapter Four—mining them for ideas regarding ways in which we can support students who don't receive enough family support to believe they can continue pursuing a degree.

Reflecting on Jenelle's story, Aquiline and Powell admit that “while [they] don't know as much as [they'd] like to know about retention, what writing instructors do know is pedagogy” (5) and, unfortunately, there was “very little in [Jenelle's] story that tells us what we should do differently, as faculty or as institutions” (14). Warning readers that every student's story is unique and therefore it is difficult to extrapolate from one student's set of experiences to another's (4), Aquiline and Powell remind teachers that the one factor that we, as teachers, *can* impact is how that student's time is spent in our classrooms (15). “The issue of retention should frame our thinking more than it currently does,” the coauthors claim, prodding FYC teachers to ask themselves, “What should our course goals be, when we consider that many may never take another college class?” (15). Aquiline and Powell begin to form an answer to this question by following the advice of Tom Fox, given at a CCCC panel on retention in 2008, where he called for “participation, not preparation” (qtd. in Aquiline and Powell 16). The co-authors interpret Fox's advice to include “designing courses that invite students to *participate* right now, in our classrooms, in consequential, engaging work that involves substantial writing and reading” (16).

But do we have enough information to design courses that promote student participation and engagement? The question of deciding what needs to be taught in an FYC classroom where 20% of the students will become leave-takers could be better

informed by the stories gathered locally from the leave-takers of our classrooms. How can we design the “consequential [and] engaging work” that Aquiline and Powell recommend if we do not know what our students care about outside of class or how they frame their FYC in-class experiences?

Getting to Know the Leave-Takers

In *Time to Know Them: A Longitudinal Study of Writing and Learning at the College Level*, Marilyn Sternglass gained insight into her first-year writing students’ lives by interviewing them twice a year throughout their tenure at the City College of City University of New York (xii). Although Sternglass’s six-year study was designed to document the development of writing in students over their college years, students often shared stories of their personal lives in response to her query: “What seems to be the most significant thing that happened to you this semester—or this year?” (197). In introducing the four case studies written up from her research, Sternglass reminds readers that

[t]he life stories shared by the students in this study consist of their interpretations of their life experiences. These interpretations may be presented to excuse or justify certain actions or to account for decisions that affected their academic or personal lives. To reiterate, although this study does not attempt to reconstruct all the salient factors in students’ lives, whatever experiences were shared contribute to fuller insights into the reasons why students make certain choices or performed in certain ways under particular academic situations. (198)

Sternglass’s study closely follows the development of academic writing ability in her subjects, but she also stresses the importance of “taking into consideration nonacademic

factors that influence academic performance” (26). In order to understand writing development in our students, she urges us to “consider how academic preparation, personal life factors such as working hours and family responsibilities, instructional settings and approaches, and the nature of instructional tasks interact as students respond to the writing demands placed on them” (27). Sternglass was able to look at the interactions of these factors in students who completed her study, but of the 53 volunteers who began, 18 dropped out, and so their data was incomplete (xiii). Sternglass acknowledges that “not enough information is known about the students who leave the college” (xiii). My study seeks to fill in gaps such as these regarding how little we, as FYC teachers, know about the leave-takers of our classrooms. This study can particularly aid reflective teachers of FYC committed to both access and persistence for their students as it invites teachers to ask of themselves my original research question: “In what ways can students’ stories of withdrawing from FYC inform my composition pedagogy?” This is the question that I will repeatedly return to as I present seven case studies of former students who withdrew from FYC at CCGC.

Squinting at the Bigger Picture

In asking what I, as an FYC teacher, can do in the classroom to help students become completers rather than leave-takers, I have to be prepared that in some cases, the answer might be reduced to a word I don’t want to hear: *nothing*. What I mean by this is that there are factors influencing students’ decisions to withdraw from or persist in FYC that are beyond the immediate control of the teacher. In Powell’s review of retention research, she notes that “money problems are a major reason for student departure” (“Retention and Writing Instruction” 657). She warns readers “not to dismiss the role of

writing instruction in the effort to improve access and retention, but to place that role in a larger context” (675). Unfortunately that larger context includes more borrowing and reduced earning power as “half of entering first-year students borrow money to pay for college, one-fifth of those borrowers drop out” and are “twice as likely to be unemployed as borrowers who earned a degree and more than ten times as likely to default on their loan” (Powell 675). In his rather bleak article titled “The Pedagogy of Debt,” Jeffrey Williams rightly points out that it is impossible to work your way through college as tuition has risen at three times the rate of inflation (157). The reduced ratio of Pell Grants to student loans, documented by Adolph Reed in his 2004 article in *The Progressive* alarmingly titled “Majoring in Debt,” causes more students to need to borrow for tuition (25). This increase in student borrowing obviously contributes to the burden on a student while benefitting the banks enormously. Because the federal government has guaranteed the loans, the banks take no risk, yet, as Williams claims in 2006, “Sallie Mae, the largest lender, returned the phenomenal profit of 37%” (161). We should all share Williams’ outrage as he states, “Something is wrong with this picture” (161). Williams connects debt to pedagogy as he calls for teachers to be responsible to their students:

Debt is not just a mode of financing but a mode of pedagogy. We tend to think of it as a necessary evil attached to higher education, but extraneous to the aim of higher education: if instead we see it as central to people’s actual experience of the current university, what do they then learn? Especially if we are instructors and professors, we have a special charge to investigate the lessons of debt and what we are actually teaching when we usher them into the university. (162)

Rather than giving up in a fit of helplessness amidst economic realities such as those William describes, we can ask ourselves what we as FYC teachers can do to create more opportunities for success for the students who were able to secure enough financing to remain enrolled, and now occupy the desks in our classrooms at the beginning of each semester. How can we help these students make it to a degree—so at least they will have something to show for their student loan debt?

Making Connections between Access and Retention

In their collaborative article Aquiline and Powell make a two-pronged argument for why compositionists should pay attention to retention: 1. We, as scholars and FYC teachers, have information about and experience with first year students that could inform current retention efforts on our campuses (so, for the institution's benefit), and 2. For our own benefit in terms of reconsidering our pedagogy. In her longer article published that same year (2009) in *College Composition and Communication*, Powell adds one more reason why compositionists should care about retention: because we already care about *access* (6). Composition scholars Mike Rose and Tom Fox have written extensively and consistently about remediation and basic writing, arguing for increased access for underprepared students. Their motives might be attributed to an innate decency of character or a highly evolved sense of empathy, or . . . they could be political and philosophical, based on their understandings of the purpose of education in the United States. In his book *Defending Access: A Critique of Standards in Higher Education*, Fox claims that “lack of access remains our most crucial problem [in higher education]” (1). Fox expounds upon the purpose of higher education: “If higher education is going to serve democratic purposes, that is, if higher education is going to be a means of

redistributing wealth and privilege to people of color, women, and other marginalized groups, then increased access is the critical first step” (1-2). Rose devotes an entire book, *Why School?*, to reflecting on the question of what education in the United States is for, asking about the “purpose of a college education and the nature of higher education in an open educational system and an open society” (17). Rose sees value in a society that gives people second chances, and thus he is an advocate of “well-funded and intellectually vibrant programs of remediation” (23). And if the students in our FYC classes are not the beneficiaries of a good high school education nor a “vibrant program of remediation,” what then, do we as FYC teachers do? Fox follows Michael Holzman’s motto “to stop doing harm” (qtd. in Fox 17). “As writing teachers,” Fox succinctly states, “we are institutionally positioned to gatekeep. To create access, we must go against the grain” (17), a notion I will discuss further in the next paragraph.

In his article “Working Against the State: Composition’s Intellectual Work for Change,” Fox laments that administrators and colleagues at his institution see the primary work of FYC as fixing students’ use of language in service to the disciplines of their majors (92). If this “language repair” is not completed by the end of the semester, then FYC teachers are expected to flunk these students, preventing them from advancing in their majors and thus serving the “gatekeeping function” Fox references in *Defending Access* (17). Going against this grain, Fox proposes his goals as a compositionist: “I seek—through the intellectual work of composition studies—to find ways both to function ethically and politically within institutions and to find ways to change them” (92). One such institutional change that Fox successfully lobbied for included the elimination of a junior level writing test called the Writing Effectiveness Screen Test

(WEST) (95). The only supporters of eliminating the WEST were, Fox notes, “the three or four of us who studied rhetoric and composition” (95). And, I would imagine, most of the institution’s students, if only they would have been allowed to vote on the matter. Meanwhile, the test was “popular with the administration, who saw holistic scoring as faculty development” and with “instructors across campus because they believed that the test screened out unbearably terrible writers from their upper-division courses” (95). “The main complaint,” Fox reports, “was that the test didn’t fail enough students” (95). “Going against the grain,” in this case, meant fighting to abolish a test designed to keep students from advancing in their majors in order to spare professors in other disciplines from having to deal with the “broken” language of their students.

Looking at Disconnections between Access and Support

In an article aptly titled “Access without Support Is Not Opportunity,” retention expert Vincent Tinto and co-investigator Cathy Engstrom cite alarming numbers from the National Center for Education Statistics revealing the disparity between high and low income students embarking on a four year degree: 56% of high income students will earn their degree within four years, compared to only 26% of low income students (“Access” 1). In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey warns of the dangers of such a class-based disparity:

. . . a society to which stratification into separate classes would be fatal, must see to it that intellectual opportunities are accessible to all on equable and equal terms. A society marked off into classes need be especially attentive only to the education of its ruling elements. A society which is mobile, which is full of channels for the distribution of a change occurring

anywhere, must see to it that its members are educated to personal initiative and adaptability. (101-102)

If we, as educators in a democracy, are committed to the continuation of the mobile society that Dewey advocates, then we must look for ways to address the needs of *all* the students in our classes, not just the well-prepared ones. The purpose of Tinto and Engstrom's longitudinal study was to research "the impact of learning communities, and the collaborative pedagogy that underlies them, on the success of academically underprepared, predominantly low-income students" ("Access" 1). They found that creating safe and supportive places for students to learn increased students' chances of succeeding as it helped them to experience a sense of belonging in college. The title of Tinto and Engstrom's article is reiterated in their conclusion:

Access without support is not opportunity. That institutions do not intentionally exclude students from college does not mean that they are including them as fully valued members of the institution and providing them with the support that enables them to translate access into success. . . . To promote greater student success, institutions have to take seriously the notion that the failure of students to thrive in college is not just in the students but also in the ways [institutions] construct the environments in which they ask students to learn. Institutions have to believe that all students, not just some, have the ability to succeed under the right set of conditions—and that it is [the institution's] responsibility to construct those conditions. (4)

Although the goal of my research is to inform composition pedagogy in order to increase persistence, institutional retention efforts can also be informed by FYC pedagogy. By sharing successful strategies for the promotion of persistence, FYC teachers could participate in exploring “those conditions” that optimize students’ abilities to succeed and share their findings with administrators.

Access IS Retention

“Throughout the discourse of access as it circulates in the professional literature of composition studies,” observes Powell, “there is not much said about retention” (670). Because Powell is the primary compositionist currently applying the scholarship of retention studies to composition pedagogy, I return to her work again and again to help establish connections between retention and composition. While she claims that retention is not often discussed between compositionists, access frequently is (670). She employs a useful metaphor I would like to borrow to help explain the relationship of access to retention:

think of access and retention as two sides of a Mobius strip—at any single point, each appears to be on its own discrete path, but if you follow a line on either side through to its endpoint, you realize there is actually only one path and no real endpoint. Presumably, arguments about access are not just about getting students in the door, but about providing students with an education; retention is about keeping students long enough to accomplish this. (670)

Because of this inextricable link between access and retention, Powell argues that those who are interested in increasing access in higher education must be abreast of the

research on retention (670). For example, if institutions are being evaluated (with potential ties to funding) based on their retention rates, then wouldn't it be tempting for an institution to deny admission to students whose entry characteristics label them "at-risk"? Powell relies on retention researcher Alexander Astin to "review data provided by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) derived from surveys of 56,818 students across the country in order to identify those factors that correlate with a tendency to withdraw or persist" such as "emotional health, popularity, artistic ability, attendance at religious services as well as the more predictable factors such as high school grades, parents' educational level, socioeconomic status, and so on" (671).

Astin concludes that institutions could use student entry characteristics to predict which students will graduate before they have even entered the institution of higher education, and consequently, "retention could determine access" (Powell 672). In other words, if a perspective student has a background that includes many of the factors that predict a high probability of dropping out, the institution could simply refuse to admit that student based on the statistical probability that he or she may withdraw or fail. Tinto also warns against using "aggregate rates of graduation" to determine state funding because it "may lead some institutions to respond to accountability pressures by reducing the number of low-income and under-prepared students they admit, hoping that restricting access will immediately improve aggregate graduation rates" ("Enhancing" 8). The irony of tying graduation rates to funding, Tinto points out, is that open admissions schools dedicated to serving the neediest students are punished for letting these students in the door ("Enhancing" 8). However, as colleges increasingly compete for students in a down-turned economy, many colleges can't avoid taking at-risk students. Therefore

putting money into programs that enhance retention of these students into their second semester can become as important to these institutions as the money spent on recruitment of new students for the following school year.

Reconsidering Gatekeeping

Although the following composition scholars are more likely to be associated with the discourse of access than that of retention, Powell credits the work of “Victor Villanueva, Keith Gilyard, Jaqueline Jones Royster, Linda Brodkey, and Mike Rose” with identifying “the ways that the language practices in the academy in general, and first year composition in particular, are complicit in excluding those who are not white and middle class,” thus forming a gate to the academy to which not all are given equal access to opening (672). But I think Powell makes an important semantic point about the term *access*:

Once students are in our classrooms, they have already, by definition, achieved access to higher education [so] gatekeeping is no longer the issue. What we’re really talking about when we’re talking about the exclusionary practices of academic discourse and the rules of Standard American English that writing teachers are expected to enforce is *retention* [emphasis added], the question of whether or not students will persist once they are in. (673)

What if the many conversations composition scholars have been having about access all these years have really been about retention? Powell’s claim causes me to reconsider everything I’ve ever read about gatekeeping and FYC in the academy, taunting me to re-read this scholarship, to try substituting the word *retention* every time I see the word

access to see if it fits. Although I see connections, I am not sure if the terms are interchangeable: the notion of *retention* implies an institutional point of view, with an emphasis on the benefits to the institution, while the term *access* applies to individual and groups of students. Although my study is about attrition of students in FYC and the factors that lead to this attrition, a goal of my research is to increase the chances for more students to succeed in FYC. Thus I am reluctant to give up the imagery that accompanies *access* for me: shaking the chain link gates at the edge of the academy.

But how ethical is it to fight for access for students to gain admission into the academy while denying them the support they may need to succeed in that very same academy? Therefore teachers and scholars committed to access must become educated on issues of retention; the two concepts deserve to be considered in tandem. Powell quotes various retention experts who remind us that “we know that minority students drop out at higher rates than their non-minority counterparts” (673), but “being African American or Hispanic” . . . “is not the cause for leaving” (674). Rather, Powell posits that some of their reasons for leaving are under the influence of faculty and institutions: “the environment they encounter when they are on campus, the mentors and role models available to them, and the type of curriculum through which they move” (674). FYC teachers are in a position to make pedagogical decisions that can impact curriculum, promote mentoring, and lead to an inclusive environment for students who might otherwise decide to take leave of the academy.

A Compositionist's Call for Further Research

If reviewers of the trends in retention research (such as Jennifer Crissman Ishler and M. Lee Upcraft) are correct in identifying and tallying the student entry

characteristics that can predict whether a student will take leave or persist before he or she has even entered the classroom (33-35), what impact can an FYC teacher and her pedagogy have on this decision? As a compositionist reviewing retention research, Powell sees a gap in the intersection of these fields:

What remains largely unknown is the extent to which institutions can actively and positively address some of those factors [affecting students' tendencies to withdraw or persist] once they are on campus. In other words, too much research focuses on predictors of student success or failure, rather than explanations. (673)

This dissertation is one attempt to gather the explanations that students give for withdrawing from FYC with the hopes of informing a composition pedagogy that increases FYC students' chances to become completers. In 2007 The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) issued a report calling for more data regarding “who leaves, when they leave, and why they leave” and to involve faculty in a discussion of local answers to these questions (McClenney 146). The case studies I present seek to provide answers to why students leave FYC at CCGC.

Pedagogy for Persistence

There are compositionists who have been and continue to teach FYC with a pedagogy designed to increase the “academic and social integration” of students into the academy, which Tinto has proven leads to retention. Perhaps ahead of his time, Kevin Griffith published “Making the ‘Service’ Course Matter: Integrating First-Year Composition with a First-Year Retention Program” in *Research and Teaching in Developmental Education* in 1995. The following year Griffith presented his ideas at

CCCC, acknowledging the ways in which FYC pedagogy was “already amenable to the goals of retention” (“First-Year” 5). Citing a survey of first-year students at his home institution that revealed the number one reason for students to persist into their sophomore year was “contact with faculty,” Griffith concludes that the small class sizes and frequent conferencing of composition pedagogy maximizes this student/faculty contact (“First-Year” 5-6). Certainly one-on-one student/teacher conferencing has been a part of composition pedagogy for a few decades now—even before its promotion by Donald Murray in *A Writer Teaches Writing* (originally published in 1985). But perhaps there are other ways that faculty can interact with students outside of the classroom—through involvement in student clubs and community activities or simply attending a play or movie or literary reading together. If contact with faculty can help a student’s integration into the academy, then shouldn’t a compositionist committed to student persistence be looking for productive ways to increase student/faculty contact?

Griffith also credits peer group involvement (as demonstrated by the collaborative assignments commonly given in an FYC course) with potentially strengthening social bonds between students: “this bonding, feeling part of a group, is especially important in the freshman year—that is why student-athletes have such high retention rates” (8). Griffith recommends that the specific assignments we give in FYC can also be focused on the transition these students make from high school to college, helping them “gradually feel that the college experience [is] part of their identity, and that they [have] a stake as citizens in this new community” (9).

Other compositionists have also used the transition to the first year of college as the topical focus of their FYC courses. In *Teaching Composition as a Social Process*

Bruce McComiskey outlines an FYC course that asks student to study the cultural values inside the college and the social values outside of college, with the aim of helping students both critique and identify a place for themselves inside the academy (93-98). Ellen Cushman has her students “apply sociological theories of culture shock to their first-year experiences at the university, an assignment [she] adapted from Malcolm Kiniry and Mike Rose’s *Critical Strategies for Academic Thinking and Writing*” (359).

Although not all FYC teachers who structure their curriculum around themes of transition—or practice frequent conferencing—or encourage peer involvement—would claim to be “teaching for retention,” the social relationships these practices foster make students more likely to persist. Retention researcher John Bean states, “Students of any age form social bonds with others at the college and such attachments, when strong and focused on the positive aspects of learning and developing, help a student fit in with others at the school. Weak social attachments, or those that reinforce destructive or avoidant behavior, can hurt retention” (227).

Griffith, like many compositionists, places student texts at the center of his curriculum. His writing assignments are designed to build positive social attachments between students as they share “personal experiences regarding the transition from high school to college,” engage in “collaborative research into the history, traditions, and rituals of the college,” and discuss “controversial issues raging at the college at that time” (“First-Year” 8).

Other compositionists embrace service learning as a way to integrate their students into social and academic communities. Mary Hutchinson goes so far as to subtitle her 2010 article, “Service Learning and First-Year Seminar” with the phrase

“Pedagogy for Persistence,” claiming that “first-year service learning programs can structure engaging academic and social opportunities for students that increase their effort and involvement in the college experience” (1). While I don’t argue with the claim that a curriculum designed around service learning can enhance persistence, the “pedagogy for persistence” that I am suggesting doesn’t see persistence as an incidental goal, but a deliberately studied and crafted one. What would it look like, from day one of every FYC course, if the primary goal were to see every student to completion? How would that change what—and how—and why—we teach?

Composition Pedagogy, Persistence, and the Community College

Community college composition teachers Howard Tinberg and Jean-Paul Nadeau claim that it is often even more difficult for community college students (than those enrolled in four-year schools) to navigate FYC “given the varied levels of student preparedness and the extent of work and family demands. So many students fail to persist when confronting this very demanding first semester of college” (1). As reflective teachers and researchers, Tinberg and Nadeau asked themselves the following question: “To what extent does writing instruction play a part in acclimating students in that first semester or, indeed, in placing a formidable obstacle before them?” (1). I read this to be a form of the gatekeeping question in FYC pedagogy: to what extent do we, as FYC teachers, contribute to the persistence or the withdrawal of the students in our FYC classrooms?

Because Tinberg and Nadeau’s research focused on the systematic study of writing instruction on their campus, they conducted surveys and interviews with both FYC teachers and students. The disjuncture in responses between teachers and students

of FYC (regarding what each group expects and values in the FYC classroom) are significant enough to cause Tinberg and Nadeau to call for more community college teachers to become researchers of their own students (8). Based on both the results of their study and their experiences working at writing centers, Tinberg and Nadeau offer these recommendations for FYC teachers designing writing assignments:

1. “Show students what success looks like” (116).
2. “Spell out criteria for success” (117).
3. “Suggest processes for succeeding” (117).
4. “Develop incremental stages for complex writing tasks” (117).
5. “Allow for formative and substantive feedback” (117).
6. “Provide opportunities for drafting” (118).

These suggestions for writing assignments might seem obvious to many FYC teachers, but perhaps an even greater benefit of the study was its impact on the researchers as they came to know their students in situations outside of the classroom:

They [the students] didn’t have to stop by to see us, but they did, doing so at times meaningful to them. We were thus in a good position to assess the challenges faced by our students day to day, and, perhaps helped by simply listening to their stories. [. . .] We emerged from such conversations with a renewed respect for our students’ resilience in the light of these challenges. (127)

Nadeau noted that his outside-of-class experiences with the students in the study significantly changed his composition pedagogy as he shares the following insight:

I am currently striving to have each class meeting be less about me and more about students. By this I mean that I consciously try to get students involved on a more regular basis—and to resist the urge to jump in while a student is midsentence. I am trying to continue to listen so that I don't return to making false assumptions about what my students already know and expect. (129)

The changes to Tinberg's pedagogy are more specific:

While I continue to revise my writing assignments based on students' responses, it is my feedback on student drafts that has been most influenced by this research [. . .] My approach has become increasingly developmental, fine-tuned for individual students as I get to better understand them. Early in the semester I respond with more directive than non-directive comments, but gradually work to encourage more decision making on the part of the writer. My goal is to encourage students to make bold decisions by beginning with simpler choices. (130)

By spending time listening to students outside of class, both Tinberg and Nadeau are motivated to customize their pedagogies in their quests to create more student-centered classrooms.

Composition for Persistence

In line with Tinberg and Nadeau's project, my study relies on surveys and interviews of first-year students, culminating in case studies intended to reveal the experiences of community college students at CCGC navigating their way through FYC. Like Tinberg and Nadeau, I am committed to opening channels of communication

between teachers and students of FYC, particularly those students whose expectations regarding instruction may not have been addressed by FYC pedagogy. My hope is that the pedagogy of the FYC teachers at CCGC, including me, can be informed by these local stories of students in such a way as to enable us to design assignments that invite more students to persist in FYC. By conducting their study, Tinberg and Nadeau learned that

Our students have stories to tell and we intend to let them tell those stories. Too often community colleges and the students who attend them are mischaracterized and reduced to simplistic stereotypes (students who cared little about high school and care even less about college or those who opt for community college because it poses few challenges). This is their time to set the record straight. (20)

I, too, want to pay attention to my students' stories and to share these stories with my colleagues in order to inform best practices in composition pedagogy.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

- CHAPTER ONE: EXPLORING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN RETENTION, FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION, AND COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY:
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter begins with a scene from my early teaching at CCGC tracing the origins of this study, then flashes back to a story of my personal connection to the issue of retention. It includes my research question, my goals as a researcher, and reviews literature establishing connections between retention, composition

pedagogy, access, and community colleges. The chapter ends with an overview of all five chapters of this dissertation.

- CHAPTER TWO: SITUATING THE PROBLEM OF PERSISTENCE OF FYC STUDENTS AT CCGC: LOCAL CONTEXT OF THE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter begins with a description of the neighborhood of my home campus, including the history of the institution and the student demographics. It introduces the extended narrative assignment I give in FYC and highlights a response from one student struggling to complete this project. This chapter also introduces narrative research as a way to make connections between the individual and the social. The mixed methodology of my study is described and the collecting and coding of questionnaires is explained. A pie chart previewing information gathered from the questionnaires regarding the factors influencing students' decision to withdraw from FYC is introduced and described.

- CHAPTER THREE: VOICES FROM THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM: QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONDENTS' COMMENTS ABOUT WITHDRAWING FROM FYC

This chapter relies on information gathered and coded from 597 questionnaires distributed and collected at the end of each long semester from 2006 to 2008 to the students who successfully completed FYC. These students were asked if they had any previous experience of withdrawing from FYC and if they had seriously considered dropping FYC that semester. Over 30% of questionnaire respondents had either dropped or come close to dropping, so their responses were coded and

highlights are shared in this chapter. Their comments revealing student attitudes toward both the subject of writing and the practices of teachers are presented as these are the primary categories influenced by composition pedagogy.

- CHAPTER FOUR: VOICES FROM THE EDGES OF CAMPUS: SEVEN LEAVE-TAKERS TELL THEIR STORIES

This chapter begins by explaining Catherine Kohler Riessman's dialogic/performance approach to analyzing transcripts of interviews, making the case for why it is an appropriate framework for my study. Seven case studies are portrayed and analyzed according to this approach while also coded for thematic content.

- CHAPTER FIVE: IMPROVING THE CLASSROOM PRACTICES OF COMPOSITIONISTS: CONCLUSIONS, CONNECTIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter answers the research question regarding what can be learned from students' stories of withdrawing from FYC that can inform composition pedagogy. It draws connections between aspects of the study and offers recommendations regarding "best practices" in composition pedagogy in order to promote student persistence in FYC. This chapter also considers how my recommendations for a composition pedagogy for persistence intersect with recommendations by retention scholars regarding the role of the classroom in increasing retention. Chapter Five concludes by investigating what we can learn from social cognitive theorists to positively impact the self-efficacy of our students in FYC in order to become "sponsors of persistence" who are involved and invested in our students' success.

CHAPTER TWO

SITUATING THE PROBLEM OF PERSISTENCE OF FYC STUDENTS AT CCGC:

LOCAL CONTEXT OF THE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

Local Context of the Study

Description of the Campus of My Home Institution

I still remember the first time I laid eyes on the campus of CCGC seven years ago. Having moved seven hundred miles to secure a new job after receiving my master's degree, and armed with the desire to begin a new life after a painful divorce, I was a stranger in a strange land, as far south as I had ever been. As I drove the twenty miles between my new housing and the campus, I couldn't help but notice that the closer I got to the college, the more deteriorated the buildings appeared to be. Every day I passed a former tire shop whose roof had collapsed, exposing the swollen insulation that had mostly turned from yellow to grey. Turning left off the main commercial street into the residential neighborhood next to the college, it wasn't uncommon to spot a house with boarded up windows, the fade surface of the plywood revealing the years of abandonment. I remember saying to myself, "This looks like a war zone," the scenery eerie enough to cause me to double-click the electric locks on my car doors.

I gradually became accustomed to these surroundings and even came to enjoy checking out the daily specials of the down-home restaurant a block from the tire shop, the one that caused my stomach to growl every time I drove past its faded pink roof with white hand-painted writing declaring its name: "This Is It!" A portable sign blocking the sidewalk listed abbreviated versions of the menu—grits & grav, frd chic, gumb—tempting the *Wheel of Fortune* player in me to fill in the missing letters.

Along with the homespun restaurant, the neighborhood surrounding this community college of 3000 students on the Gulf Coast of Texas had other cultural riches. Across the street from the college a three-story Vietnamese Buddhist temple seemed to cast its protective gaze upon the college, sharing the peacefulness of its lotus gardens and overgrown bamboo forest. Six blocks to the east, street signs designated one square block the “Area of Peace,” housing a Vietnamese Catholic church and several businesses, including a restaurant, a clothing shop, and a clinic, whose marquees were written exclusively in Vietnamese. I asked my colleague once to meet me at this Vietnamese restaurant for lunch, but she, a twenty-year resident of the city, said, “Oh, let’s not go to that one—they don’t want Caucasians there.”

The other side of the campus is bordered by the Intercoastal Canal that allows tankers and barges to steer their cargo all the way from Houston to the Gulf of Mexico and back again. I am embarrassed to admit the cultural and geographical ignorance demonstrated by the fact that I taught at this campus for nearly a month before realizing there existed a channel of water on the other side of the brick wall bordering our campus. One day as I drove towards that brick wall, I gasped at the size of the “house” moving down the “street” on the other side of the wall. Turns out it wasn’t a house at all, but the top of the biggest ship I had ever seen. I soon learned to slow down as I drove the last block towards the campus parking lot, hoping to catch a glimpse of a massive ship floating apparently magically in this manmade canal.

Derek Owens contends that “place” plays a more important role in the teaching of writing than we may realize, posing the following medley of questions to composition instructors: “How do you negotiate between the various sites you need to pass through en

route to work and home? Are you connected to these places? Disconnected? How do the spaces direct you, shape you, make assumptions for you? And to what degree do these landscapes influence the writing our students compose on a daily basis . . .?” (365). It’s true that I learned more about the community surrounding CCGC through the writing of my students than from my daily commute. I learned that the city that housed this college was known for its gangs and racial strife, particularly between African-Americans and Vietnamese, but also between Catholic and Buddhist gangs, both of whom were primarily Vietnamese. One of my students wrote a persuasive essay about the pressures—and hypocrisy—of having to choose between two gangs that had been formed around peaceful religions. I still remember the last line of his paper: “Why can’t we all just live in peace?” he had asked.

Through conferencing with students and reading their journal responses to writing prompts, I learned that the parents of many of my students had relatively well-paying jobs wearing Nomexes and working at “the plant,” which is what they called any of the numerous nearby oil refineries. The first semester I taught at CCGC, I also became aware that many of my students’ parents suffered from physical ailments perhaps associated with the risks of spending thirty-years working in the petro-chemical industry. I had never taught at a place where so many students lost their parents to cancer (four that first semester), and many of these parents were barely in their fifties. The local news station periodically warned of “poor air quality” days, but the warning wasn’t really necessary: we could see the haziness, smell the burn-off from the refineries, and feel the grit on our skin. I could not avoid breathing the air at work, but I made sure not to drink the city water, hauling cases of purified water to my office and splitting them with a colleague.

I never got used to the poor quality of the air, but after three years of working at CCGC, I finally felt safe enough to join the ranks of the locals who walked or jogged along that brick wall that everyone called “the seawall,” enjoying the reflection of the sun on the waves, the seabirds rising and landing. During the daytime, that is. At night, police cars regularly patrolled the seawall, but walkers could still find evidence the next day of the rumblings of the night before: broken beer bottles, abandoned clothing, used condoms and needles. I never walked there after dark. Nor did I venture more than three blocks to the north of campus at night, as students’ stories once again informed me of the realities of the surrounding community: what was once a flourishing downtown district now looked like a bombed warzone, and nearby 9th Avenue had become the central area of drug trafficking and prostitution not only in this city of 70,000, but in the surrounding area of nearly half a million people.

The greater metropolitan area around CCGC includes seven other cities that “lie within twenty-five miles of [our campus] and form the heart of the upper Texas Gulf Coast where approximately 350,000 people live” (2006-2007 *Catalog* 1). Two other two-year institutions of higher education also serve this metropolitan area, as does one four-year university.

History of the Institution

My home institution began as a business college in 1909, established by one of the founders of Texaco for the purpose of “train[ing] people for the petrochemical industry” (2006-2007 *Catalog* 1). In 1975 the 64th Legislature of Texas approved the merger of this business college with the four-year university fifteen miles away and our campus temporarily became known as an extension center of the larger institution until

the legislature voted to drop this designation two years later. Six years after this, the Legislature voted to “provide operational funding to [this campus] on the same basis as other state-supported institutions of higher education,” (2006-2007 *Catalog* 2). The significance of these changes is this: a drastic increase in enrollment (from 151 students before the merger in 1975 to around 3000 students in 2006) was made possible by the unusually high level of state funding for a two-year institution publically perceived as a community college (1). The merger with the four-year university was abolished in 1995, but my campus, along with two sister institutions, retained part of the name of the four-year university (2). This shared moniker can lead to confusion for students, so they often refer to our campus by the name of the city in which our campus resides rather than the actual name of our college. As I mentioned in the footnote on the first page, I will refer to this state-funded community college on the Gulf Coast of Texas as CCGC or “my home institution” or “our campus” interchangeably.

Student Demographics at CCGC

The students at my home institution represent the ethnic diversity of the surrounding community. According to the college’s *Report to the Community 2007-2008*, 51% of the students enrolled in CCGC are white, 28% are African-American, 14% are Hispanic, 5% are Asian, 1% are Native American, and 1% are designated as International Students (2). The average age of our students was nearly 27 in Spring 2007, and the number of female students often doubles the number of male students, as it did in Fall 2006 when there were 1543 female students compared to 736 males (2). Although the ratio of part-time students to full-time students varies by semester, a look at the four *Report to the Community* pamphlets covering the years of my study (2004-2008) reveals

that there are always more part-time than full-time students on our campus, with the ratio ranging from 2:1 to 3:2. The split between academic majors and technical programs remains close to 1:1, ranging from 1000 to 1300 students per semester for each of these divisions. In the technical area, students can earn certificates in twenty-one different programs ranging from Drug & Alcohol Abuse Counseling to Welding Technology. In the academic division, students earn associate of arts degrees in seven different majors including criminal justice, music, and teaching; an associate of science degree in academic studies; or an associate of applied science in many of the same programs that grant certificates (*2006-2007 Catalog* 50). In Fall 2006, 71 degrees were awarded and 97 certificates; in Spring 2007, 91 degrees and 35 certificates were awarded. Considering an enrollment of 2270 students in Fall 2006 and 1998 students in Spring 2007 (*Report 2*) (and disregarding the fact that some students earn multiple certificates along with degrees), this means that in Fall 2006 and Spring 2007, 7.4% and 6.3% of the students enrolled those semesters ended up earning certificates and degrees, respectively. Even allowing for the incidence of part-time students who may take four or more years to earn a two-year degree, the ratio of students who enroll to students who graduate reveals that many students are leaving CCGC without earning certificates or degrees or matriculating to a four-year university.

Informally Surveying My Students

Although CCGC does not publish the percentage of our student population who are first-generation college students in its annual report to the community, this information is often revealed to me by my students through their writing or our conferencing. In any given semester, the percentage of my FYC students in each

classroom who are the first child in their families to attend college is significant—often reaching 30%. The number of students who come from a family without a parent who has attended college rises even higher, commonly including more than half of the students in my FYC classrooms. Since I, too, am a first-generation college student, I have a sensitivity to the disorientation these students might feel in the college classroom as they wonder if they have what it takes to make the grade, to find a place for themselves in the academy.

In my first year of teaching at CCGC, I was alarmed by the number of students who dropped or stopped coming to FYC, an average of four or five students in every class of twenty-four. As a new member of the faculty, I didn't want to draw too much attention to my attrition rates, but I needed to know if my experience was within the range of normalcy for this institution. So I asked my two tenured colleagues if they, too, experienced this level of attrition in their FYC courses. "Yes," they both concurred. "Twenty percent sounds about right," answered the colleague who had been at CCGC for fifteen years. Since my prior college teaching experience consisted of being a graduate teaching assistant at a four-year state university where only one or maybe two students dropped per semester, this "20%" statistic did not seem typical to me.

After four more years of teaching at CCGC, I have collected over a hundred FYC drop slips in the top drawer of my office desk. As I periodically sort through them, I look at the names, trying to conjure up a face, a journal entry or other writing assignment that might provide some clue to explain their disappearance. Was I not sensitive enough to the plight of these first-generation students? Was there something I said—or assigned—or didn't attend to? Did the personal nature of the narrative assignment scare them away?

Or did the sheer volume of required writing resulting from the accumulation of all course assignments overwhelm them?

Regarding the Assignments I Require in FYC

After twenty pages of handwritten responses to journal prompts, every semester I ask my FYC students to write a book length narrative (22 typed, single-spaced pages) on a topic of significance to their lives, an assignment I borrowed from my mentor, Claude Mark Hurlbert, and excerpted from his FYC syllabus. I have collected and read over a hundred of these bound “books” per year, and many of these books have provided me with glimpses into the lived experiences of these students and the way they have framed these experiences. I do not judge their experiences—though as their professor I do grade the crafting and revising of these narratives. My primary task, however, is to bear witness—to read each story as a sacred exchange from one human being to another, and in this shared experience, for as long as the spell lasts, neither reader nor writer is alone in trying to make sense of a culture that sometimes seems more committed to consumerism and economic growth than to social justice and personal growth.

In the process of drafting their “books,” I periodically coach my FYC students to fill in the blank at the end of this statement: “My book is the story of _____.” More often than not, the story shifts beneath their plans, and these shifts are generally accompanied by some sort of discovery. So a book about getting busted for driving under the influence becomes the story of how a community promotes the abuse of substances, and the story of an athlete getting injured and losing her track scholarship becomes the story of the commoditization of college athletes. More than any well-rehearsed campaign speech, these students’ stories go far in collapsing the distance between the personal and

the political. Just like the students in Hurlbert's composition classes, my FYC students "are writing to locate themselves, to plot directions," ("A Place" 356). Their stories often demonstrate courage in the face of hardship, and though my courage pales in comparison to theirs, these stories also require courage on the part of the reader.

Reminiscent of Tom Cruise's character in the movie *A Few Good Men* when told by Jack Nicholson's character, "You can't handle the truth!", I sometimes wonder if I have the strength to bear witness to some of my students' lived experiences. The bits and pieces shared with me when students have asked me to sign their drop slips sometimes discourage me, their confessions forming a memorized chant in my mind: "My mom says she will kick me out if I don't stop writing about elementary school when she was gone all the time, working as an exotic dancer, and my best friend was my dog Laddie," says Daniel . . . "My boyfriend found my file on the computer where I wrote about our abusive relationship, so he pushed me down the stairs," says Delilah . . . "My dad was just diagnosed with cancer, and I need to be with him," says Vu. . . "I'm pregnant—with twins—and the doctor has ordered bed rest," says Alicia. "Since the hurricane, I've been roofing sixty hours a week; I get home at ten, shower, and then all I want to do is go to bed," says Pete, and the one John gave last week: "I can't write a book. I just can't do it. I'm blocked and can't get unstuck."

One Student's Struggle to Complete My FYC Assignment

Based on this medley of responses, it would seem that most factors affecting students' decisions to withdraw from FYC are beyond my control as a teacher in the composition classroom, tempting me to feel helpless in these situations. But every once in a while, a student communicates with me before deciding to drop, like Maria, a night

student, who frantically phoned me because a classmate encouraged her to do so. I advised her to begin her narrative project by freewriting about her sense of inadequacy, which she did:

I'm not sure where to begin on writing my book and I'm very nervous about it. I have had a very crazy life, which means I should be able to write a damn soap opera about it, but I'm still not so sure if I can even do this book, or if I would like to share that much of my personal life with others. I am very insecure about myself in many different ways; I have been broken down in every way imaginable, which makes me keep to myself a lot and I'm also very shy. I have even thought about dropping this class. Well, I actually called, and I came to the conclusion that is not the route to go. That would be the easy way out of writing this book, and there's nothing easy or free in this world. You have to work hard to be able to accomplish things in life. One of the reasons I'm so insecure is that I used to take the easy way out when things would get hard and I sometimes still do it. Yes, I am very ashamed of it and hate for someone to judge me for something I did over ten years ago, but I quit school in the 10th grade. I just now took my GED this July, 2006. Of course, I didn't think I was going to pass, but did I prove myself wrong. I passed!! Boy, was I so excited. The first thing I thought was that there is nothing that can stop me now from bettering my life and getting a better education, but there are things and certain situations that, well, scare the hell out of me, and this is one of them. I also feel that I am not very imaginative or

creative. I keep asking myself these questions. Can I do this? Will I be able to do this? Do I want to do this? Should I just give up? I'm still not so sure but I do have faith in myself that I can do this. My book may not be as good as others, but it will be done, and it will be mine. I'm just going to go with the flow and see what I will come up with; hopefully it will be something worthwhile. (1)

Maria went on to complete the semester, turning in a book about the kind of mother she wanted to be for her son, Adam, focusing on the example of educational achievement she wanted to set for him. I credit the bond Maria made with Cheryl, a non-traditional student in the class, for helping Maria believe there was a place for her in the academy. During that semester and the subsequent one, I watched Cheryl mentor several other students, and many benefited from her listening ear and compassionate responses.

Stories Connect the Individual to the Social

Though our students' stories are sometimes difficult to hear as they may lead to feeling a sense of helplessness, Gian Pagnucci reminds us of the importance of inviting "the narrative life" into the academy:

Living the narrative life is about figuring out what counts. It's about becoming a seeker and teller of stories. The narrative life isn't for everyone. Stories can be full of pain. Stories can bring life into too sharp a focus. Stories can hurt us. But, in the end, they're all we have. Stories are what we believe in. Narratives are what form our ideology. (55)

Like Pagnucci, I choose to embrace a narrative ideology that "wants to reinvent school, to retell it, by placing stories at the center of our teaching and learning" because I, too,

“believe in the power of stories” like the one Maria struggled to write (Pagnucci 54).

Though at first glance it might seem easy to dismiss Maria’s story as a unique reflection of a unique experience, historian Mary Jo Maynes and sociologists Jennifer Pierce and Barbara Laslett caution against this hasty interpretation in their book *Telling Stories*:

For scholars who analyze personal narratives, it is important to recognize that stories that people tell about their lives are never simply individual, but are told in historically specific times and settings and draw on the rules and models in circulation that govern how story elements link together in narrative logics. What people do and their understandings of why they do what they do are typically at the center of their stories about their lives. (3)

If we look back at Maria’s story, her doubt and fears about being in the academy are nearly palpable—and perhaps understandable for someone who felt ashamed for dropping out of high school. But Maria’s story also speaks for me, a graduate student with a whole lot of A’s to bolster my self-esteem, yet still terrified that I might not have what it takes to write a dissertation acceptable to the academy. I am amazed at the resonance of Maria’s words applied to my own experience, if I just substitute *dissertation* for *book*: “My book may not be as good as others,” Maria states, “but it will be done, and it will be mine.” The authors of *Telling Stories* argue against “regard[ing] life stories as primarily idiosyncratic” because of the social connections:

Individual life stories are very much embedded in social relationships and structures and they are expressed in culturally specific forms; read carefully, they provide unique insights into the connections between

individual life trajectories and collective forces and institutions beyond the individual. They thus offer a methodologically privileged location from which to comprehend human agency. (3)

After teaching the book project for fifteen semesters in FYC, I have come to value the social connections created between my students when they share stories of their struggles. Many times students have written (in their final reflective assignment) that prior to workshopping sections of their narratives, they did not realize anyone else at college was dealing with similar struggles. When many people are experiencing the same problem, it is no longer just a personal issue; it is now a problem of the community. When students recognize this, they write of “feeling less alone,” a necessary precursor to organizing around social issues. Although I expect my students’ stories to be personalized, I am also looking for the ways in which their stories—and therefore their lives—connect to issues faced by many FYC students at CCGG.

Methodology

Conducting Interviews

In order to recruit interviewees, I created a list of 120 names and I.D. numbers taken from the drop slips of students who had been enrolled in one of the sections of FYC taught by me at CCGC between 2004 and 2008. Because I could have access to students’ addresses as a teacher but not as a researcher, the IRB recommended that I give this list to the registrar who then sent out letters inviting my former students to participate in the study (see Appendix A). In the letter I emphasized that their stories had the power to impact how composition is taught at CCGC, that I desired to become a more informed teacher of FYC, and that their stories could help me achieve this. I also shared with

students my own background of withdrawing from three different institutions of higher education, hoping to develop rapport with potential participants. I asked interested participants to call me or e-mail me, and included my contact information.

My initial plan was to interview twenty subjects for this study, and to choose four or five to write up as case studies. However, not only is it difficult to make contact with former students whose addresses have changed, but it is also difficult to find people willing to speak about a moment of failure or loss in their lives. If students don't even want to make eye contact when they hand a drop slip for a professor to sign, then they probably don't want to schedule an appointment with that same professor to come back and talk about it! There were seven students, though, who responded to my invitation to participate in this study by being interviewed. I met these former students at the location of their choice—a conference room in the library, my office, a local coffee shop, or their home—and asked them to sign an informed consent form as approved by the IRB. Interviews took about an hour and were stored on a digital audio recorder.

I asked permission to use a recording device before I began the interviews and each of my interviewees agreed to this condition. After asking students to choose a pseudonym, I asked their age, ethnic identification, and dates of enrollment in FYC. I then asked each former student to share the story of his or her experience of dropping FYC, prodding, “How would that story begin? . . . What would be in the middle? . . . And how would that story end?” Then I tried not to interject but to sit back and listen while also taking field notes.

After the student seemed to be finished telling her story, I showed her a list of categories created by me and my three FYC colleagues at CCGC regarding the factors we

believed influenced students' decisions to withdraw from FYC. I then asked, "Reflecting back upon the story you just told, to what extent did the following factors affect your decision to withdraw?" and provided the choices of "Definitely," "Somewhat," or "Not at All." (See Appendix B for this list of factors as well as a list of the interview questions). After reading through the list, I asked each interviewee how dropping FYC had affected their academic or career plans. Then I asked students if anything could have been done to help them persist, offering them a chance to convey their messages to FYC teachers regarding what they wanted teachers to know or understand about students' particular experiences. I ended the interviews by asking if there was anything else they wanted to include about their experiences of enrolling and then withdrawing from FYC.

In transcribing these interviews, I rely on thematic coding, but I also utilize elements of Catherine Kohler Riessman's "dialogic/performance analysis" because this approach pays close attention to the context of the interview and the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. In promoting this approach, Riessman points out that "narrative investigators, even working with the limitations of single interviews, can bring hidden dimensions of power into their readings" (*Narrative Methods* 115). She adds, "What close narrative study of a single case can add is displaying how larger social structures insinuate their way into individual consciousness and identity, and how these socially constructed 'selves' are then performed for (and with) an audience, in this case the listener/interpreter" (116). By using dialogic/performance analysis on the transcripts of one of her subjects, Riessman was able to "locate the personal narrative in broader historical and economic contexts, noting how public issues are buried in a personal story about the last day at a factory job" (116). Because the persistence of a particular student

is connected to larger historical and socio-economic issues, Riessman's dialogic/ performance analysis is an appropriate lens to use when interpreting stories embedded in the case studies of students who withdrew from FYC. I will describe this approach more specifically in Chapter Four as I introduce and frame the seven case studies.

Besides interviewing former students, I also interviewed my three FYC colleagues at CCGC, canvassing their knowledge and collecting their speculations of why students dropped their FYC courses. These interviews, along with five interviews I conducted with administrators at CCGC regarding the issue of retention on our campus, are not included in the write up of this study as they are not pertinent to my original research question.

Collecting and Coding Questionnaires for FYC Completers

Because I value the experiences and the opinions of the students who remain in FYC at the end of each semester, I wanted to find a way to incorporate their input regarding persistence and leave-taking at CCGC. So in the second year of my study, I sought permission to add to the methodology of my research, incorporating a questionnaire for FYC completers (See Appendix C). I received permission from both the IRB of IUP and the administrators on my campus to distribute these questionnaires to the completers of all FYC courses at the end of each Spring and Fall semester from 2006 to 2008. My colleagues helped me distribute and collect these, along with the department secretary, and after three years I had 597 questionnaires completed by students who made it to the last week of their FYC courses. Thus my study became one of mixed methodology.

Because the classmates of students who withdraw are often privileged with information regarding the leave-taker that the teacher is unaware of, I asked the persisters of FYC to speculate why their classmates did not finish, and from this, to generalize the most common reason they believe students drop FYC. The four questions from the survey are listed below, the first three questions inquiring about the respondent's direct experience with withdrawing from FYC, and the fourth question asking the respondent to speculate about his absent classmates' reasons for leaving:

1. Have you ever dropped and/or stopped attending a college composition course? If so, what course(s) and when?
2. If you have dropped a course in first-year composition, briefly describe how you came to sign up for that section, and then tell the story of how and why you decided to withdraw from that course.
3. Did you consider dropping your English composition course this semester? If so, please write from this place of doubt or discouragement. What were the factors or circumstances that impinged upon your decision? What made you ultimately decide to "stick it out" and finish the course?
4. Consider the empty desks previously filled with fellow students in your composition classroom. Why do you think your classmates dropped this course or stopped coming to class? Generalizing from this, what do you think is the most common reason that students withdraw from first year composition courses?

Preview of Results of Student Survey

Every long semester after grades were turned in from 2006 to 2008, I read and analyzed the questionnaires. I should not have been surprised by the incidence of completers who had dropped out of FYC in a previous semester (a total of 67 out of 597 respondents equaling 11.2%). After all, I knew that a 20% attrition rate for FYC students was considered “normal” for CCGC. But I had not expected there to be so many students who made it to the end of the course but had considered dropping some time during the “current” semester—the one in which they filled out the questionnaires (a total of 131 out of 597 respondents resulting in 21.9%). Adding these categories together while subtracting for those who were in both categories—the 17 who had previously dropped FYC and had also considered dropping that semester—a total of 181 out of 597 respondents or 30.3% of students surveyed had personal experience with withdrawing or considering withdrawing from FYC. If the questionnaire respondents are representative of all FYC students at CCGC, this would mean that nearly one out of every three FYC students making it to the end of the semester has had some degree of first-hand experience in making decisions around withdrawing from FYC.

Allow me to repeat this alarming statistic: **one out of three students who completed FYC seriously considered dropping this course sometime during the semester.** What were the factors that tipped the decisions of these students contemplating departure, ultimately causing them to persist? What can we learn from their stories of almost dropping but ultimately succeeding? In order to find possible answers to these questions, I will delve into these respondents’ experiences in Chapter Three as they are pertinent to my original research goal of gathering the stories of those who withdrew

from FYC. My ultimate goal is to glean what I can from these students' experiences in order to inform Composition pedagogy.

The entire set of 597 questionnaires, however, deserves some attention as it led to the creation of categories for coding the factors that students perceive as major influencers on their decisions to persist or take leave from FYC. As I read through these questionnaires, I looked for the repetition of key words students used to explain the causes of leave-taking, such as *time, money, illness, stress, overwhelmed, not ready, unprepared, other priorities, too hard, boring, partying, too lazy, apathy, easy way out, and personal problems* and filed the questionnaires accordingly. I then re-organized the sorted piles of questionnaires along lines of agency—asking who or what has the power to impact that potential cause of student attrition. This resulted in the larger umbrella of categories I am calling *divisions*, labeling them with the following titles: Student Circumstances, Teacher Practices, The Subject of Writing, and Institutional Policies. Hurricane Ike had a division of its own as many students evacuated and did not have housing to return to, although this could technically be considered a category within the division Student Circumstances. These divisions are not necessarily discrete, but they aid in contributing a visual component to the argument of why FYC teachers should pay attention to retention, as evidenced in Figure 1 on the following page.

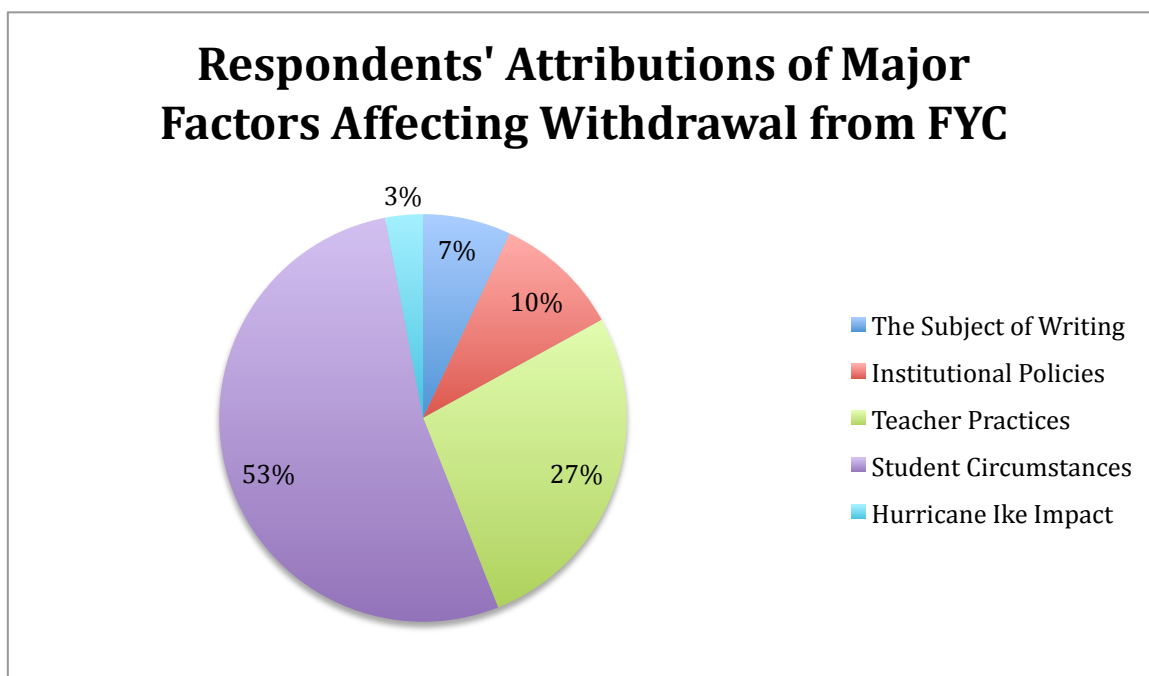


Fig. 1: Responses of 597 Respondents Who Completed FYC in Current Semester

Figure 1 shows that, according to the opinions of nearly 600 students canvassed at the end of the semester in FYC classrooms, in over half the cases there is relatively little a teacher can do in the classroom to impact student persistence. We cannot control the health or wealth of our students, we cannot grant them more time or money, or reduce the demands made on them by the workplace or the caretaking of their families, factors included under the largest division (53%) labeled Student Circumstances. However, if you look at the division labeled Teacher Practices, perhaps even combining this with the category “the subject of writing,” these are areas that can be impacted by FYC pedagogy. To look at the glass (more than) half-empty, in two-thirds of the circumstances teachers can have little impact; but to look at the glass (less than) half-full, one-third of the circumstances can be impacted by a teacher’s approach to language, literacy, and her FYC students. One-third of the drop slips from my stack alone would equal forty students over the span of four years. Multiply that by the four teachers who teach FYC full-time at

CCGC, and we could impact the decisions of forty students per year who might have withdrawn due to the ways we teach composition and/or our effectiveness in changing students' attitudes towards writing. Fighting an institutional policy that limits the remediation opportunities for his students (EO665), Tom Fox stresses the crucial role of composition pedagogy: "If students fail our courses and are excluded from our university, in as many cases as possible, we need to make sure that it is *not* [emphasis added] because of our pedagogy or our curriculum" ("Working Against" 98). I share his fervor as I, too, want to make sure I am doing all I can to promote the persistence of every student who has found a way to fund his or her dream of earning a certificate or degree.

In the next chapter I will present my coding of explanations given by the 181 questionnaire respondents who previously dropped FYC or seriously considered dropping it the semester in which they were questioned. I will pay particular attention to the comments these students make about teaching and learning in the FYC classroom and the impact their experiences could have on a composition pedagogy invested in promoting student persistence. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of all participants, including interviewees and questionnaire respondents. Genders of interviewees have not been changed, and attribution of genders of questionnaire respondents rotates between both masculine and feminine pronouns.

CHAPTER THREE

VOICES FROM THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM:

QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONDENTS' COMMENTS ABOUT WITHDRAWING
FROM FYC

Survey of FYC Students at CCGC

Introducing the End-of-the-semester Questionnaire

Every Spring and Fall semester from 2006 to 2008, I waited until the last day of class in each of my four FYC courses at CCGC to pass out a survey to my students, asking for their perceptions about the non-completers in these courses. “Take a look at the empty desks around you,” I would say as I retrieved my roster from the first week of classes and counted the number of students who had disappeared since the beginning of the semester. “We started out with twenty-two students, and now we have sixteen. Do you remember the names of the students who are not here?” I typically asked. In each section, many of the students remembered at least two or three names, but I usually had to read from the roster to fill in the blanks: “Remember Stephanie? What about Sylvester?” Sometimes a remaining student responded with an “Oh yeah, he sat in the back” or “Didn’t she have the bob hair cut?” or “Wasn’t he the guy who moved here from Austin?” Between the roster and our memories, we gradually gave names to the ghosts in the room—the ones whose voices wouldn’t be heard through end-of-course evaluations. Although I had hoped to gather second-hand knowledge of these “ghosts in the room” from those who potentially know them best—their peers—I had no idea that many of the students completing the questionnaire in front of me had direct experience of withdrawing from a previous section of FYC either at CCGC or a neighboring institution.

Since my three fellow FYC teachers at CCGC also distributed this optional questionnaire to their FYC students in the final week of each long semester from 2006 to 2008, I ended up with nearly 600 completed questionnaires. The narrative design of this questionnaire (see Appendix C) invited students to share their comments and experiences. Because my study is concerned with what compositionists can learn about improving pedagogy from students who withdrew from FYC, I will emphasize the stories and anecdotes of students whose decisions surrounding withdrawal were impacted by the division of reasons I labeled Teacher Practices.

Results of the End-of-the-semester Survey

Introducing the 30% with Direct Experience of Dropping or Considering Dropping FYC

Asking FYC completers to hypothesize why their classmates may have withdrawn or stopped coming to class (Question 4 in Appendix C) resulted in less useful data than that gleaned from those who wrote about their direct experience of withdrawing from FYC. While students described their own circumstances with specificity and complexity, they tended to explain their classmates' disappearances from FYC in a word or two such as "lazy," or "immature" or "too busy." However, students' responses regarding their own histories of withdrawing or nearly withdrawing from FYC (see Questions 1, 2, and 3 of Appendix C) provided valuable data based on first-hand experiences of withdrawing (or coming close to withdrawing) from FYC. As I mentioned near the end of Chapter Two, a combined 30% of the questionnaire respondents had either previously dropped FYC (67 students or 11%) or had considered dropping FYC (131 students or 19%) during the semester in which they had filled out the questionnaire. Their comments shed light

both on the larger realities of students' lived experiences and on their specific responses to Composition pedagogy at CCGC. This chapter looks at the comments of respondents with direct experience of withdrawing from FYC in order to explore the self-reported factors and/or considerations affecting the tipping points of whether these students decided to stay or leave a particular section of FYC. To help contextualize this study, I will rely on respondents' voices to describe their own experiences as I directly quote their answers to the questions from the questionnaire, thus including their own words.

Similar to the way I had coded the full set of 597 questionnaires (see Figure 1 on page 65) along lines of agency (asking who or what has the power to affect change or exert control over the factors reported by questionnaire respondents as causes for their decisions to drop), I initially relied on the divisions of Teacher Practices, Student Circumstances, and Institutional Policies in coding the questionnaires of the 30% of respondents who had dropped FYC in a previous semester or had considered dropping in the current semester. However, I found these divisions to be both too specific and not specific enough to represent the sometimes ambiguous or overlapping reasons students gave for their considerations of withdrawing from FYC. For example, the category labeled Absences could include decisions to drop because of Personal Problems (a category included in the division of Student Circumstances) or because of a rigid attendance policy (connected to the division of Teacher Practices). Therefore I created a division to include both possibilities to accommodate this ambiguity, labeling this new division the following: Overlapping Teacher & Student Responsibilities.

In the comparison of all respondents' speculations about reasons for withdrawing from FYC (see Figure 1 on page 60) vs. the reasons provided by the 30% of respondents

with direct experience of dropping (see Figure 2 following), I am most interested in the increased emphasis on the impact of teacher practices. While 27% of all respondents cited some form of teacher practice as the major reason for their classmates to have dropped FYC, **50%** of those with direct experience of dropping cited teacher assignments, grading methods, or attitudes towards students as having the greatest impact on their experiences of withdrawing, as portrayed in Figure 2 below:

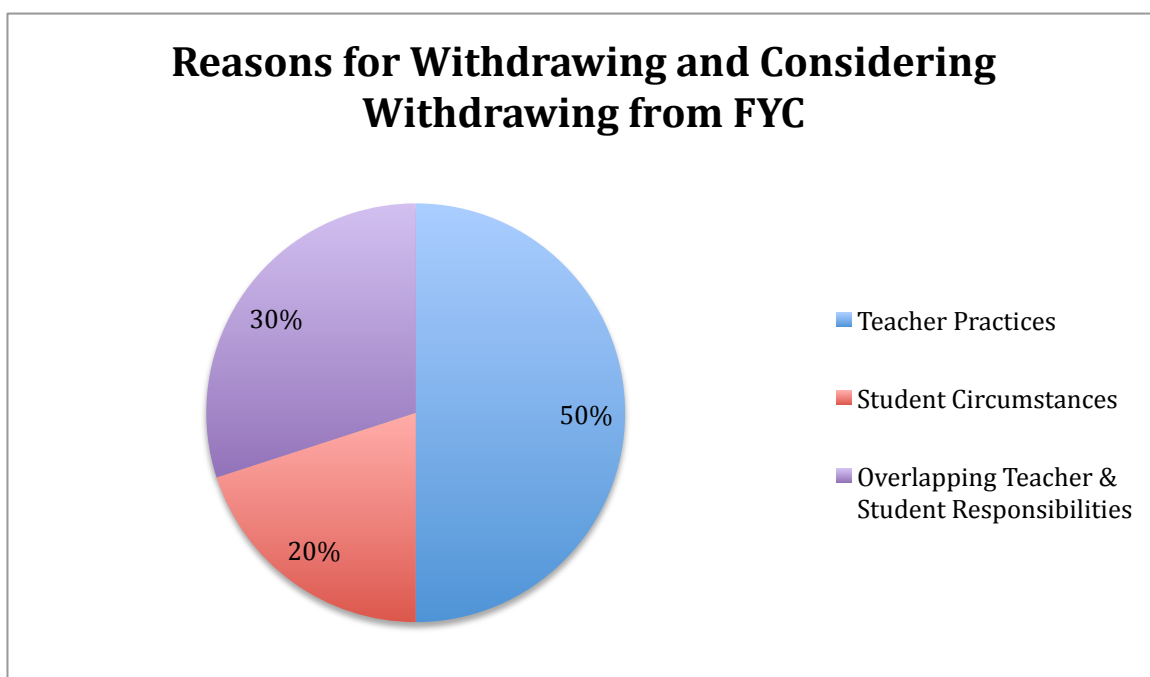


Fig. 2: Responses of 198 Questionnaire Respondents Regarding the Major Reason They Had Previously Dropped FYC or Had Considered Dropping During the Current Semester

Overview of the Divisions of Agency

The Teacher Practices division includes comments made by students regarding teachers' assignments, including reading, writing, and oral presentations. Comments on teachers' grading methods are also included in this division as 15% of those who previously dropped FYC cited "getting a bad grade on their first essay" as the primary reason for their decisions to withdraw. Still other respondents with a direct experience of

dropping wrote about a teacher's unwillingness to help her students as having an impact on their decisions to withdraw, and therefore the category of Teachers' Attitudes is also included in this division.

The next division, Student Circumstances, includes reasons cited by 30% of those with direct experience of dropping or nearly dropping FYC. The largest category in this division is labeled "personal problems." This category includes comments students made about issues of health and welfare that affected their decisions to withdraw from FYC. Their stories include deaths in the family, transportation issues, incarcerations, miscarriages, and other undisclosed personal problems. Many others spoke of not having enough time to do their homework due to the demands of their work schedules or family obligations. A few spoke of how foolish they had been when they dropped FYC many years earlier, having been "too young" and involved in "too much partying" to care about studying or about who was "footing the bill."

Along with the category of "absences/attendance policy," the Overlapping Teacher and Student Responsibilities division includes the category labeled "procrastination/falling behind/late work policy." Initially it might seem that this category belongs exclusively under the domain of student agency and thus the division labeled Student Circumstances; after all, if a student turns in work late, it is his or her fault. But if an FYC teacher's late work policy makes it nearly impossible for a student to pass the course, then this student will most likely be forced to withdraw. The final category represented under the division Overlapping Teacher and Student Responsibilities might seem an unlikely one: "self-confidence." Many students, however, spoke of their wavering confidence in themselves, and because a teacher is in a position

to impact a student's belief in his or her ability to complete a course, I categorized "self-confidence" under the shared responsibility division. I will discuss each of the categories more thoroughly as I mine the comments of respondents for insights regarding their reasons for dropping. But before I look at the responses of the 30% of questionnaire respondents who had dropped or considered dropping FYC, there is a division that emerged from the entire set of questionnaires that is connected to the practices of FYC teachers and thus bears looking at: respondents' comments on the subject of writing. Because FYC teachers are positioned to change students' attitudes and beliefs towards the subject of writing, I will include comments shared by students via questionnaires regarding their attitudes towards writing.

The Subject of Writing

"They Probably Did Not Like to Write": Resistance to the Subject of Writing

Initially, I did not take seriously the reason "because they dislike writing" that thirty (out of nearly 600) students gave on the end-of-the-semester questionnaire as the most common cause of students withdrawing from first year composition. I wanted to dismiss these answers as a form of begging the question or circular reasoning, ("Students don't like a writing class because they don't like to write.") But enough students answered with a variation of the claim that students withdraw from FYC because they don't like writing that it made me pause and reconsider: does the subject of writing come with its own unique set of difficulties? Many students identify themselves by saying, "I am not a math person," or "I am not good with numbers," and this is socially acceptable in many circles even inside the academy. But do just as many students feel the same way

about writing, only it is not as acceptable to admit to our English teachers, “I’m not good with words”?

Many of these same respondents spoke of the “fear of writing.” One student went so far as to label it “essay anxiety,” stating the most common reason for dropping FYC is “because they [FYC students who dropped] are intimidated by so much writing.” She added, “There are a lot of people who have ‘essay anxiety.’ I bet the drop-out rate is equivalent in public speaking courses.” I thought this student made an interesting comparison, and I wondered if—and how—we, as composition teachers, make allowances for the terrified students in our FYC classrooms. Certainly we did not plant this fear of writing in our newly enrolled students’ psyches, but how much space do we make in our classrooms for the anxiety that students drag, like a ball and chain, with them on their first day?

When I taught swimming lessons twenty years ago, the first request I made of my students was this: “Please tell me about your experience with water.” As a composition teacher, my first journal prompt to FYC students is similar: “Write about your relationship with writing.” Sometimes they responded with humorous (but sad) analogies, such as “My relationship with writing is like a one-night stand.” The purpose of this prompt is not only to get students thinking about their past experiences with writing, but to invite affective responses into the classroom, giving students permission to acknowledge the fear and anxiety they bring with them. Sometimes this fear might not even have anything to do with my particular classroom . . . but is incumbent in the first-year experience. As one respondent stated, “The reason many students usually drop an English class is the fear of writing papers, essays, etc. The first year/semester of college

is hard; you have to get a routine and for some people this can be very difficult.” One student cast her net wide in response to “What do you think is the most common reason that students withdraw from FYC?” but her answer was reduced to four short words: “Fear of the unknown.” The problem with this generalized type of fear is that it can cause us to “build a cage around ourselves. To prevent others from shutting us down, we do it for them. Trapped by our own fears, we then pretend we’re incapable of having what we want” (Huffington 7), which in this case might be a college degree.

Other questionnaire respondents described this fear of writing more specifically, sometimes referring to the fear of a blank screen or a blank piece of paper staring back at them. One respondent explored the dimensions of this fear: “Composition requires in-depth thought and then putting [thoughts] into words. Some people are afraid of judgment, some are afraid of their own thoughts, and some people don’t know how [to put their thoughts into words],” and perhaps they don’t believe they can be taught this craft, either. Another respondent stated that the most common reason students withdraw from FYC is because “the class may involve too much writing or thinking . . . and these might not be the student’s strong points.” Since many composition teachers are proud of the thinking promoted in their classrooms as they seek to foster the connections between writing and thinking, maybe the FYC classroom is a dangerous place for a student who doesn’t want to get involved with “too much thinking and writing.” Another student frankly stated, “Writing just isn’t for everybody and just because people are in college doesn’t mean that they have developed writing skills.”

While many of the students at CCGC are working towards associate of arts or science degrees with the intention of transferring their core curriculum credits to a four-

year university, slightly more students are enrolled in two-year technical programs in fields that include automotive, refrigeration, medical, and cosmetology. This might explain why so many respondents commented that writing is not relevant to their future occupation of, say, being a manicurist, or an automotive service technician, or an x-ray technician. At CCGC teachers are evaluated in their annual reviews on their abilities to establish the relevancy of the material in their courses to their students' lives. Therefore some teachers make it a point to explicitly point out the relevancy of literacy to various jobs and degrees. Not surprisingly, a few respondents mentioned the convincing cases their teachers made regarding the relevancy of writing to the students' future careers.

Many more respondents wrote of the unique challenges that writing poses to students. One such respondent considered dropping FYC and wrote about her uncertainty about the course along with her reasons for sticking it out for the semester:

Yes, [I considered dropping]. I play on the softball team so my time is very limited. I'm not the best writer. I know what I want to say, I just don't know the words to use. I've never had a good English teacher, so English is very scary for me. I didn't drop because of disappointing my mom and because of softball I wasn't allowed. Now that the year is over, I'm glad I didn't drop.

This same respondent stated that the most common reason students withdraw from FYC is that "they give up on themselves." Although many student athletes are motivated to persist in FYC since withdrawing would affect their eligibility for scholarships, these same students have less time to devote to the practice of writing.

Several respondents stated that “English is not my subject,” and therefore much harder for them than for the average student. One student shared her thoughts about dropping:

I was nervous at first when I took this course and I have to admit I did think about dropping it, since English is my weakest subject. But I pulled through and got over that state [of fear], and began viewing it as a challenge, a chance to face my fear of writing and now I am doing great.

When asked what the most common reason is that students withdraw from FYC, this same student wrote, “I believe it is out of a fear of failing and having it [recorded] in his/her GPA, but then again everyone has his or her reason that we do not know of,” I was surprised to find that a few students (10 out of 597, to be exact) refused to generalize about the most common reason that students drop FYC. I found this refreshing, in a way, as they felt comfortable stating, “I don’t know” rather than making assumptions about their classmates. Their indeterminate answers confirmed the need for my study in the first place, as one respondent’s final words on the questionnaire were, “I don’t know—why don’t you ask THEM?”

“I Know What I Want to Say, I Just Don’t Know the Words to Use”:

Struggles Unique to the Subject of Writing

Maybe these students who mention the fear and resistance that assigned writing can engender have an insight into the complexity of the subject of writing. In Wendy Bishop’s textbook *The Subject Is Writing*, various scholars weigh in on the teaching and learning and practice of writing. In the first chapter, “Changing as a Writer,” Audrey Brown opens her essay with an excerpt from a diary she kept when she was nine years

old: “I don’t like to write. I never did. It always takes me a long time to get done” (Brown 13). She follows this with an update: “Eleven years later and I still feel this way. So what am I doing?” She admits that she keeps writing because “once in a while [she] likes what comes out” (13). The assignment for this essay anthologized in Bishop’s textbook was “to trace the development of [her] voice” (13), but Brown spends the beginning of the essay resisting the assignment. By the end, however, she has figured out why she dislikes writing:

The reason I struggle with my writing is because what I write is usually not exactly what I feel. Instead, it is what I feel is a proper presentation of what I feel. It’s the same thing as smiling when someone asks you how you are and just saying Good, thanks, when you are actually feeling lousy or even when you are feeling really great. (Brown 19)

So Brown’s struggle, as I see it, is a struggle for “authenticity” in her writing, for writing something that is meaningful to the writer, rendering her experience as truthfully as she can muster. But writing is not just a matter of expressing oneself in a vacuum. In another essay in Bishop’s anthology, Kevin Davis emphasizes the difficulty of writing, even for English majors:

Learning to write within an academic discourse community is not a simple procedure. First, we have to learn to put down words and ideas in community acceptable ways. We have to internalize and apply the form limitations of the discourse community; our writing has to look like writing in the community is supposed to look . . . But there is more. We also have to learn to explore ideas by exploring the intellectual manners

that are important to a particular field. We have to accept and use the epistemic process of the discourse community. (103)

Davis's description is reminiscent of the process summarized in Bartholomae's "Inventing the University" that I quoted in Chapter 1 to explain the difficulties I personally experienced as a student trying to make the necessary adjustments to my writing in order to be accepted by the discourse community of the first-year writing classroom at St. Olaf in 1980. In her essay "How Writers and Readers Construct Texts," Jeanette Harris delves more deeply into the complexity of the writing process:

The construction of a written, physical text involves not just a single movement from mental to physical text, but . . . a series of recursive movements. It is, in fact, this recursive motion between the mental and the physical texts that characterizes the process of constructing a text. The writer constructs a mental image of the text and then attempts to construct a physical text that reflects it. (118-19)

But there is still more to this process than shuttling back and forth between these two steps, for "the writer's mental text keeps changing" (Harris 119), based on the writer's re-reading of the physical text. Harris continues to describe this recursive process: "Just as the mental text shapes the physical text, so the physical text shapes the mental text" (120). To further complicate matters, the reader also creates a mental text of the physical text the writer has written, adding another dimension to the whole process. Based on this model, Harris concludes, "Writing is not a gift of the muse nor a mysterious process you cannot understand. Nor is it a simple one, two, three process. Writing involves mental as well as physical activity, involves readers as well as writers, and involves going

backward—to the internal mental text—as well as going forward—to the external physical text” (121). It is not surprising then that 5% of the total respondents to my questionnaires described writing as difficult, deeming it “too hard” for those who withdrew.

The fear of writing can also be tied to stages of the writing process, as Hephzibah Roskelly suggests in her essay “The Cupped Hand and the Open Palm.” She breaks down the fear of writing into these common manifestations: fear of starting (“searching for the perfect sentence opening” (132), fear of stopping (“once [you] get the good thought said, [you’ll] be left with nothing but dead air time” (132), and fear of flying (“having a personal stake in your writing” and letting “your writing soar”) (133). Roskelly emphasizes the importance of group work for students to help each other overcome these fears, summing up the struggle of writing:

Writing is not some sort of contest between you and everybody else in the class, with the one who has the best grade—the fewest red marks—winning at the end, and that’s why the cupped hand is a poor metaphor for what happens when you produce writing in a classroom. The struggle, the contest, is internal, between your desire to talk on paper and your fear or distrust of it. The group helps us compete with the real opponent of creative, critical thought—inertia, the fear of making a move. (133)

But having students share their writing in groups can also trigger other writing fears in the FYC classroom, as Kate Ronald has observed of students trying “to sound ‘collegiate,’ to be acceptable and accepted” (172). “There’s also a real fear of writing

badly,” she continues, “of being thought stupid, and so it’s tempting to be bland and safe and not call too much attention to yourself” (173) . . . or never to begin at all.

Academic Procrastination

Half a dozen respondents cited the tendency to procrastinate as the cause of their classmates’ departures. Although procrastination is not exclusively associated with the subject of writing, a combined search on Google Scholar displays over 14,000 hits for “Procrastination and Composition” compared to less than 2500 for “Procrastination and Calculus,” both of which are courses often taken in the first year of college (4 September 2010). Estimates cited by Piers Steel of the American Psychological Association claim that “80-95% of college students engage in [academic] procrastination, [with] 75% considering themselves procrastinators” (65). I have included procrastination under the umbrella of issues associated with the subject of writing because “psychologists often cite such behavior as a mechanism for coping with the anxiety associated with starting or completing any task or decision,” and thus the fear of writing and the procrastination of writing tasks often go hand in hand for the students in our FYC classrooms (“Procrastination”). Steel points out that academic procrastination is often misinterpreted as laziness, both by teachers and, as evidenced by the entire set of questionnaires, by 13.4% of their classmates (80 out of 597 respondents) who cited laziness as the number one reason former students stopped coming to FYC.

Curiously, not a single questionnaire respondent who had previously dropped FYC blamed the decision on his or her own laziness. Two respondents who cited the lack of helpfulness by the teacher and the boring nature of assignments, respectively, as their major reasons for withdrawing from FYC, turned around and claimed laziness as the

number one reason why their classmates dropped in the current semester. Two other students emphasized their busy-ness while pointing out their classmates' laziness. The frequency of this disconnect between students' direct experiences with dropping FYC and their speculations of former classmates' experiences leads me to suspect that the category of "laziness" might be a misunderstanding of the more complicated category of "procrastination." Steel endorses research that links procrastination to fear of failure and low self-esteem (69) and describes one manifestation of procrastination as "task aversiveness" claiming that "the more people dislike a task, the more they consider it effortful or anxiety producing, the more they procrastinate" (75). Interestingly, the most common task listed by respondents of a study of task aversiveness was . . . drum roll please . . . writing term papers! (75).

Besides supporting the adage "it is easier to see the speck in someone else's eye than the log in your own," this disconnect between students' self-reported reasons for dropping FYC vs. their speculations regarding their classmates' reasons leads me to value comments regarding direct experiences over generalized hypotheses. Therefore I will return now to anecdotes shared on the subset of questionnaires—those filled out by the 30% of the respondents who had dropped FYC previously or had considered withdrawing during the current semester—to explore their reasons for dropping. I begin with the division containing the most frequently cited reasons for dropping: problems with class assignments, grading methods, and teacher attitudes towards students. I lump all of these issues in the division labeled Teacher Practices.

Teacher Practices

Discouraged by the Grade

Not all students bring a fear of writing into the FYC classroom. Some even love to write, only to have this love “graded” out of them. One respondent expressed the discouragement he felt as he considered dropping FYC: “It seems like the harder that I try to make my paper outstanding, it’s always being shut down, with a letter grade of a D or F. And I love writing, so I decided that I wouldn’t quit.” Another respondent mentioned stresses from work, family, and relationships before admitting, “Some, no, most days I feel like giving up. I would get a C instead of an A or B like I used to [get in high school]. I didn’t care. I started smoking because of the pile up of work.” Extrapolating from his own experience, this respondent assumed that others quit because they, too, had lost hope. When students come into our classrooms carrying so much stress, are we, as FYC teachers, aware of the power of a grade on a single paper to push them over the edge?

Contemplating the Tipping Point Between Hope and Discouragement

What does it mean to lose hope, and why do some students get discouraged more easily than others? What causes a respondent to have the confidence to state: “I have never dropped any class [nor] will because I like to finish what I started”? Responding to the very next question on the questionnaire, he did, however, admit that he had considered dropping his FYC course that semester. Here is his explanation:

I kind of thought of doing that [dropping], but I reconsidered my option. I have never dropped a class because I don’t want to consider myself a failure. Even though it wouldn’t affect my transcript, it will still be

recorded there. As a result, my future employer will see and consider me not responsible and a drop out. This is why I stayed, but I also enjoy [my teacher's] method of teaching [FYC]. It's different from other classes.

Once again, teacher practices impacted a respondent's decision to withdraw or complete FYC. Though this student mentions his teacher's ability to make the class enjoyable as a subordinate factor in his decision to stick out the semester, I am struck by his earlier statement: "I didn't want to be a failure."

Contemplating Failure

What does it mean to be labeled a failure—whether by yourself or another? What does it mean to fail FYC? Several respondents commented that students probably dropped due to a fear of failure. If a student drops, is this considered less of a failure than if a student simply stops coming to class? One student shared that it was more honorable for him "not to turn in homework than to turn it in and have it not be good enough." Two respondents wrote about the phenomenon of turning away from their problems, the first stating, "It's easier to run from your problems than to face them (or so it seems)." The second said, "Students tend to 'run away' from a numerous amount of work, especially a class where a lot of writing will take place."

So if you hate to write—if you perceive it as "the educational equivalent of hiking across Death Valley in a snowsuit and sandals. Difficult, absurd, and scarcely necessary" (Minerva and Rawls 186), and writing takes place every time you step foot in your FYC classroom, then isn't that the last place you will find yourself? What if slithering to the sidelines is an act of survival—of keeping one's self-respect or sense of identity in tact? This may explain the decision of John, the student I mentioned in the Introduction who

approached me in the hallway with a drop slip three years ago, “I can’t do this. I can’t write a book. I’m blocked. I’m stuck. I give up.” No amount of coaching or cajoling could convince him to stay in the class. I had never before encountered a student so convinced of his inability to complete an assignment. And maybe John was right; maybe he couldn’t finish the task I had set before him that semester, and at least he knew himself well enough to get out early.

Complicating Success

Perhaps those labeled “successful” students in the composition classroom, the ones who make it to the end of the semester, are successful because they succeeded in pleasing the teacher. After reading the responses of nearly 600 questionnaires, my own distinctions between failure and success seemed murky at best. In *How Children Fail*, John Holt, father of the “Unschooling Movement” of the 1960’s, wrote extensively about success and education:

success implies overcoming an obstacle, including, perhaps, the thought in our minds that we might not succeed. It is turning ‘I can’t’ into ‘I can,’ and ‘I did.’ Success should not be quick or easy and should not come all the time [. . .] Of course we should protect a child, if we can from a diet of unbroken failure. More to the point, perhaps, we should see failure as honorable and constructive, rather than humiliating. Perhaps we need a semantic distinction here, between nonsuccess and failure. (67-68)

I’m not sure such a distinction—between *nonsuccess* and *failure*—is readily available in the academy. After all, if a student doesn’t succeed in receiving passing grades on most of the assignments in a given semester, he or she will most likely be given a failing grade

for the course—earning or not earning the credits, but never earning a portion of them for the time and effort and money invested.

Loss of Composure vs. Safety

Perhaps it wasn't the size of the book assignment I gave to John that caused him to drop. After all, he had begun the assignment and was ten pages in before he asked me to sign the drop slip. "Writers experience all sorts of turmoil, uncertainty, and discomfort when they write," state Hurlbert and Blitz in *Composition and Resistance* where they recognize composing as "the way in which we attempt to introduce incoherence—a loss of composure—into 'the entrenched order of things'" (1). Several questionnaire respondents reiterated the notion that "many students are not comfortable with writing," citing this as the most common reason their classmates withdrew from FYC. In generalizing the socio-psycholinguistic view of the teaching and learning of writing, Don McAndrew credits this theoretic school with "argue[ing] that learners must feel comfortable enough to risk making a mistake because this is the only way to learn; without risk there is little important learning" (96). The idea of taking risks in writing, however, might be more complicated than it seems. As Ronald DePeter implies in "Teaching Toward Risk," if we make it totally safe for our students to experiment with creating text, then in what ways are these students actually taking risks? (164).

I find the notion of helping our students become "comfortable" in the writing classroom troublesome. Certainly we, as compositionists, want our students to feel welcome and thus comfortable in our classrooms, but we also want them to take risks and to grow as writers—which tends to involve some discomfort along the way. In an

interview titled “Stop Being So Coherent” originally published in *Writing on the Edge* in 1999, David Bartholomae gives the following advice to new teachers of writing:

Moving forward [in writing] is always going to have to involve putting students in positions where they become less adept and sometimes less comfortable and less happy with you and the class. I think one of the really hard things in a writing class which is small and fairly intense and where you’re responsible for organizing this work over time is that if you do your job well, there is a point that’s sort of scary, where students aren’t writing very well and they feel very much at sea and you have to be able to know how to pull that together by week fourteen. Sometimes it feels as though the bottom is falling out. But that’s progress. (264-65)

Maybe the teeter-totter determining whether a student stays or leaves FYC pivots on a fulcrum of how comfortable [read: safe] a student feels in the FYC classroom. I believe this continuum between safety and risk-taking is contemplated by many conscientious teachers of writing who apply Mary Louise Pratt’s notion of “The Contact Zone” to their FYC classrooms. Whether the FYC teacher directly addresses the issue of safety in her classroom with her students or not, the students get the message, even if it is implicitly gathered from the affective atmosphere and culture of the classroom. The classroom atmosphere is influenced heavily by a teacher’s theory, philosophy, pedagogy, and personality. It doesn’t take students long to ask and answer the following question for themselves regarding their FYC classrooms: How safe is it to write what I want to write about in the way I want to write it?—a question concerning the acceptability of style and format as well as subject and theme. Since a teacher is largely (but not solely)

accountable for creating a classroom in which it is safe to take the risks that Bartholomae implies are necessary in order for a writer to “move forward” (264), in the following section I will move on to the next umbrella of reasons students give for why their classmates dropped: namely, because of the teacher.

“The Professor Holds the Deciding Straw”

Whether in reference to the writing assignments given by the teacher, or the textbook and readings chosen for the course by the teacher, or the way the teacher talks to her students, many respondents connected the most common reason that their classmates withdrew from FYC with factors under the teacher’s control. Over one hundred and sixty questionnaire respondents had something to say about teacher practices in the FYC classroom at my home institution, and we, as compositionists, could learn much by listening to these stories.

Numerous respondents felt that the writing assignments were “too hard,” and that “the teacher wasn’t really helpful.” Some completers thought that classmates who dropped early in the semester did so due to institutional lore: “they had heard how hard the professor was,” and this was enough to scare them into dropping early, before they even gave the teacher a chance. Several completers mentioned that they, too, considered dropping the course early, in response to a bad grade. One such student commented, “When I got my first paper back and I failed it, I was a bit discouraged and considered withdrawing.” Another respondent offered that the main reasons for her classmates dropping was that they either did not like the topics of the assignments given to them, or “all the corrections all the time discouraged them.” For many, they believed it wasn’t the topic of the assignment but the “amount of writing” that caused their classmates to drop.

One of my former students commented that her classmates probably dropped because they “got overwhelmed with the thoughts of having to put a thirty page book together.” Another student seconded this sentiment: “I honestly believe that perhaps [those who withdrew] felt overwhelmed. I know I often did. The massive amount of writing sometimes felt like it was just too much.” Another of my former students who had dropped explained her decision: “I took the course for my core [curriculum]. I dropped it because I was not at a time in my life where I felt like writing a book on personal experience.” One respondent contemplated dropping because “we had to read what we wrote a lot.” I assume she meant sharing her writing with the rest of the class. A separate respondent stated, “Comp is very personal at times, and most students fear that.” Some students detest journal writing because of its personal nature, and one respondent mentioned that this requirement could be a factor in whether a student decides to drop a particular FYC course. A few students connected dropping with the required assignment of oral presentations, and this correlated with conferences with two extremely shy former students of mine who dropped out of my courses when I was inflexible about offering them an alternative assignment. One respondent pointed out that the leave-takers might have been students who get “embarrassed or feel uncomfortable asking questions,” and thus they don’t get clarification of their assignments. Another respondent considered dropping because her “instructor assumed that students already knew how to do the assignment and wasn’t very clear on what and how to do the assignment,” then added, “but I was halfway through the course and decided to stay in it.”

“It Was a Lot of Reading”: Discouraged by the Reading Load

For students who don't like to read or have slower reading rates, the reading assigned in their Comp classes on top of the reading assigned in their other core courses perhaps based on the banking model of education (history, biology, government, etc.) can overwhelm them early in the semester. Nearly twenty respondents mentioned that they considered dropping due to the reading load, referring to “the pressure and deadline of reading the assigned book in time.” One student stated, “Reading is very time consuming and many people don't have the time to do it.” Another wrote, “Maybe they [the students who withdrew] cannot handle all the reading on top of other classes.” A third added, “Most students are parents or have jobs and it's hard to do everything.” I, too, was once a student as well as a parent of three young children, and I easily recall the days of trying to squeeze my reading assignments between their soccer practices. Once I even fell asleep on my back at the edge of the school's soccer field, my Norton Anthology no longer blocking the sun but crashing down on my forehead and waking me up.

For some of the respondents, the problem wasn't the quantity of the reading but the difficulty: “Students withdrew from my class,” conjectured one student, “because the readings were more difficult than the readings we do in other composition classes. I really have a hard time reading *The Iliad* and *Agamemnon*.” Another respondent stated that she considered withdrawing because “the reading material was a lot to take in. By the time I realized I wasn't doing all that well, the course was almost over so I decided to stay. But I think [the most common reason students withdraw from FYC] is because of all the reading in such a short period of time.”

For some students, the subject matter of the selected texts can draw them in or push them away. One respondent confessed, “I enjoy writing essays, but reading stories about sad women isn’t my cup of tea. I waited too long to drop.” I wondered if these “stories about sad women” were chosen by a teacher, or if they were student-generated texts. If the latter, isn’t this akin to “I don’t like hearing about my classmates’ lived experiences?” Or maybe, like Lad Tobin’s admission of disdain for “narratives that focus in clichéd language on acts of machismo” in *Reading Student Writing* (58), this student is simply being honest about the texts he privileges or detests.

Sometimes, however, a perfect match between what the teacher assigns to read and what a student wants to learn happens in the course of a semester, and this can be the determining factor in whether a student stays or leaves, as testified by the following:

Yes, I considered dropping this course. I had a full load of classes (13 hours) plus my age, I’m fifty. I also work and my job is extremely stressful –I’m a nurse. I “stuck it out” for several reasons. I need this course for my degree (A.S.) in nursing. Also, the book we read in this course, *Life is So Good*, helped to convince me. It was about a man who learned to read at the age of ninety-eight. I figured if he could go back to school and learn to read at ninety-eight years old, then I could stick it out to earn my degree at fifty.

Though I was not the teacher who assigned the text that inspired this student, her response reminds me of the power that stories sometimes exercise in changing a reader’s mind. Testimonials like this student’s also encourage me to reconsider my sense of

audience when choosing texts (if any, other than student-generated material) I assign in the FYC classroom.

Where's the Textbook?

I have not adopted a textbook for FYC in over five years, and this has generally been greeted positively by most students (if for no other reason than saving the textbook fee), but every once in a while a student signs up for my section of FYC and asks, “Where’s the textbook?” (Reminding me of the old “Where’s the beef?” television commercial of the 1970s). Via e-mail response to the questionnaire, a non-traditional student who dropped my Comp 2 course within the first two weeks communicated her dismay at my lack of textbooks in the course, reminiscing that when she took Comp 1 (at a neighboring institution), “We studied a lot of examples [of the rhetorical modes] from the books we had purchased.” Explaining her decision to drop my section of FYC, she wrote, “I don’t feel I was denied adequate education just because you used a different manner of teaching. It was my choice to leave. I only felt that I wanted to learn proper composition technique from books that were used in class, with examples.”

Maybe this student’s response illustrates the point that students should have the choice of what kind of composition course they want to take—based, hopefully, not on hearsay or chili peppers beside names on Rate-my-professor.com, but on the required book list for the course, browsing through the university bookstore. This has certainly aided me in choosing both undergraduate and graduate courses in which to enroll.

The Big, Expensive Handbook

Just as one student might drop because the course is not centered on an official textbook, another might drop because a course is dominated by one. Certainly English

teachers cannot please every student with the course reading list (nor should pleasing the students necessarily be the teacher's aim), but FYC teachers should consider the impact that the course text(s) can have on student persistence. One respondent who had previously dropped FYC told the story of her miserable first assignment the second time she took the course: "I dropped [the second time] because of one particular assignment. We were supposed to read a section from *The Little, Brown Handbook* and then write ten thesis sentences. "Hours later, I closed the book and dropped the course. Fear confirmed." Yet another respondent summed it up succinctly when generalizing why students withdraw from FYC: "They don't like reading in order to write." This is a brief but powerful statement that often separates the pedagogy of compositionists teaching Composition from literature specialists teaching Composition, the former more likely to keep student-generated texts at the center of the FYC curriculum, and the latter more likely to structure their courses around professional models of writing.

"Writing Is Not Relevant to My Life"

A few questionnaire respondents described FYC as "boring" and speculated that their classmates dropped because they saw Comp as a "waste of time." One student wrote, "Comp takes up a lot of time, and most people don't want to put that much effort into something they don't believe they will need to get by in life." If a teacher is able to establish the relevancy of writing to a student's present and future life, the student is more likely to find FYC useful, as claimed by one respondent in the following testimonial:

I did consider dropping this course. I thought I was a good writer until we got into all the technicalities of writing. I felt like I was going to fail the

course. I decided to stick it out because the instructor was upbeat and positive and informed us over and over that no matter what you decide to become, as far as your profession, career, or just a job, you will be held to a standard of basic professional English writing. She was very convincing.

It occurs to me that this respondent might experience the teacher's attitude toward the subject of writing and the teacher's attitude toward her students as inseparable. The enthusiasm for one seems to include the other, and this helps convince the student that writing is important to her present and future success. Teachers at CCGC must answer a question on their annual reports regarding how effectively they accomplish the objective of communicating the relevancy of their topics and assignments to their students. Along with the teachers of other subjects housed with English in the Department of Liberal Arts at CCGC (History, Speech, Music, and Theater), full time FYC faculty are held accountable by supervisors for their ability to convince their students of writing's relevancy.

"The Assignment is Too Difficult": Resistance to Writing Assignments

One respondent admitted that she did not know anything about the FYC course her advisor had signed her up for, and thus ended up dropping after the first assignment. She shares the following experience that I am guessing arose from a current-traditional FYC course: "I had to write my first essay in class—only forty-five minutes to write a two-page essay. I can't think with too many people looking and I don't like computers. So I dropped." Based on her experience, she concluded that others dropped because "they, too, can't write proper English grammar." Another student assumed her classmates

dropped “because of essays and taking quizzes on vocabulary words,” assignments she herself disliked.

Bad Grades on an Early Essay

Of the respondents who previously dropped a section of FYC, 15% cited getting a bad grade on an early essay as the cause of their withdrawal. Of those who didn’t drop but considered doing so during the semester in which they participated in my study, 20% were tempted to drop due to a low grade early in the semester. It is not unheard of at CCGC (with the cap size of twenty-four in FYC) for teachers to give students bad grades early on in order to reduce class size and thus fit in computer labs whose maximum occupancies are twenty. In this case, institutional constraints lead some FYC teachers to teach towards attrition rather than persistence.

An Overwhelming Assignment

Several of my former students commented on the overwhelming nature of the book assignments that I require in both Comp 1 and Comp 2. One of these students had contemplated dropping because, as he described his semester, “I felt rushed and got discouraged because we had a twenty-two page book to do, and I work every day and be tired.” Another respondent admitted that he, too, had considered dropping my course. “The book assignment seemed really difficult,” he wrote, “and because of my other classes, I started to feel burned out. But I decided to stay and do my best to pass the class.” Many other questionnaire respondents wrote about the sheer amount of time required to complete this overwhelming assignment. I have since learned to break the project down into smaller components, but writing necessarily takes time outside of the classroom.

Pivotal Moments of Decision

I have always been interested in these pivotal moments of decision—when we decide to stay or to go—whether it is a classroom, a college, a workplace, a relationship, or a home—how do we decide when to stick with something and when to abandon ship?

One of my former students gave a descriptive account of a moment of doubt he experienced in his first semester of comp:

At first, Yes! [I did consider dropping FYC] because I heard my teacher saying I had to write a book. I was like, “Oh my God,” slamming my head on the desk. But what made me stay [were] the words of my older sister: “If you think [this community college] is hard, imagine UT.” That freaking book. So I sucked it up and stayed in order to prove to myself that I’m qualified for UT.

But what if this student hadn’t had a sister to challenge him, or a goal in front of him? What happens to those who doubt themselves and these doubts are reinforced by the ways teachers respond to students’ completed assignments? How do the attitudes of teachers towards their students and the atmospheres created in FYC classrooms impact students’ decisions to drop FYC? In the next section I will share respondents’ perceptions of their teachers’ helpfulness in the classroom. But first I will present Figures 3 and 4 on the same page in order to magnify the differences in responses between the 67 respondents who previously dropped FYC (See Figure 3) and the 131 respondents who considered dropping in the semester in which they filled out the questionnaire, but chose to stay in the course (See Figure 4):

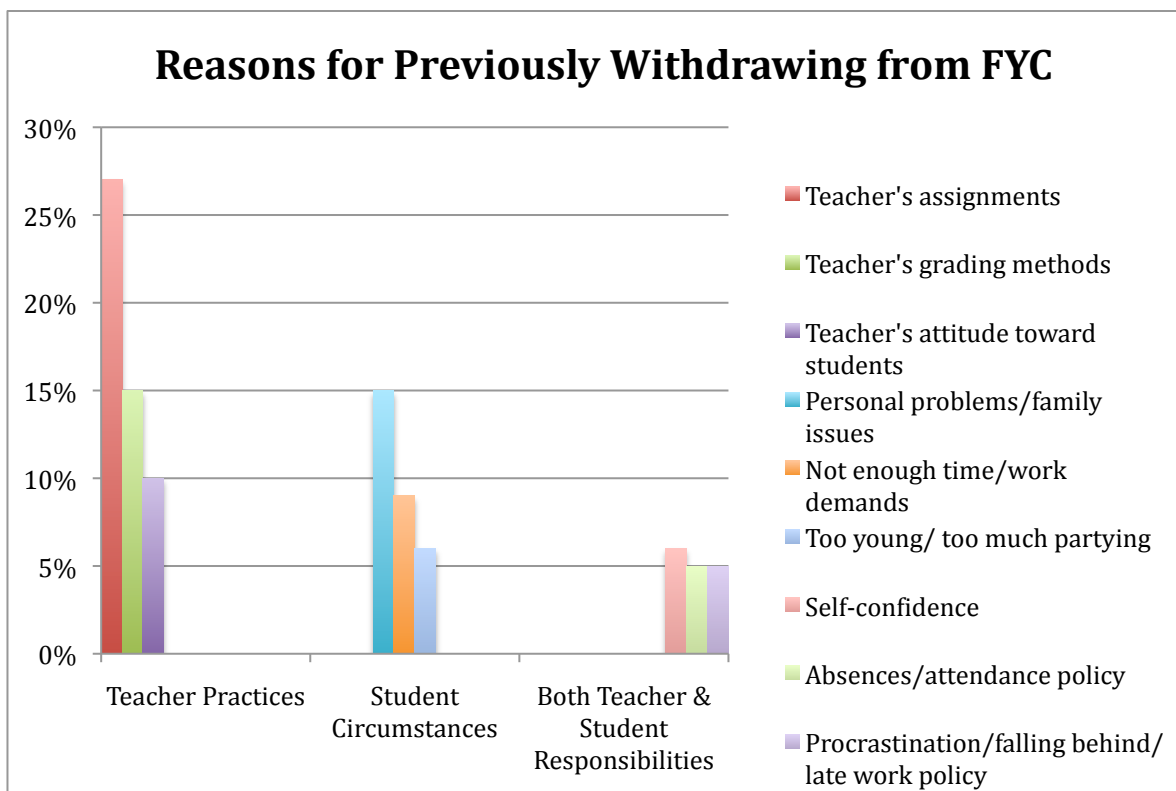


Fig. 3: Responses of 67 Respondents Who Had Dropped FYC in a Previous Semester

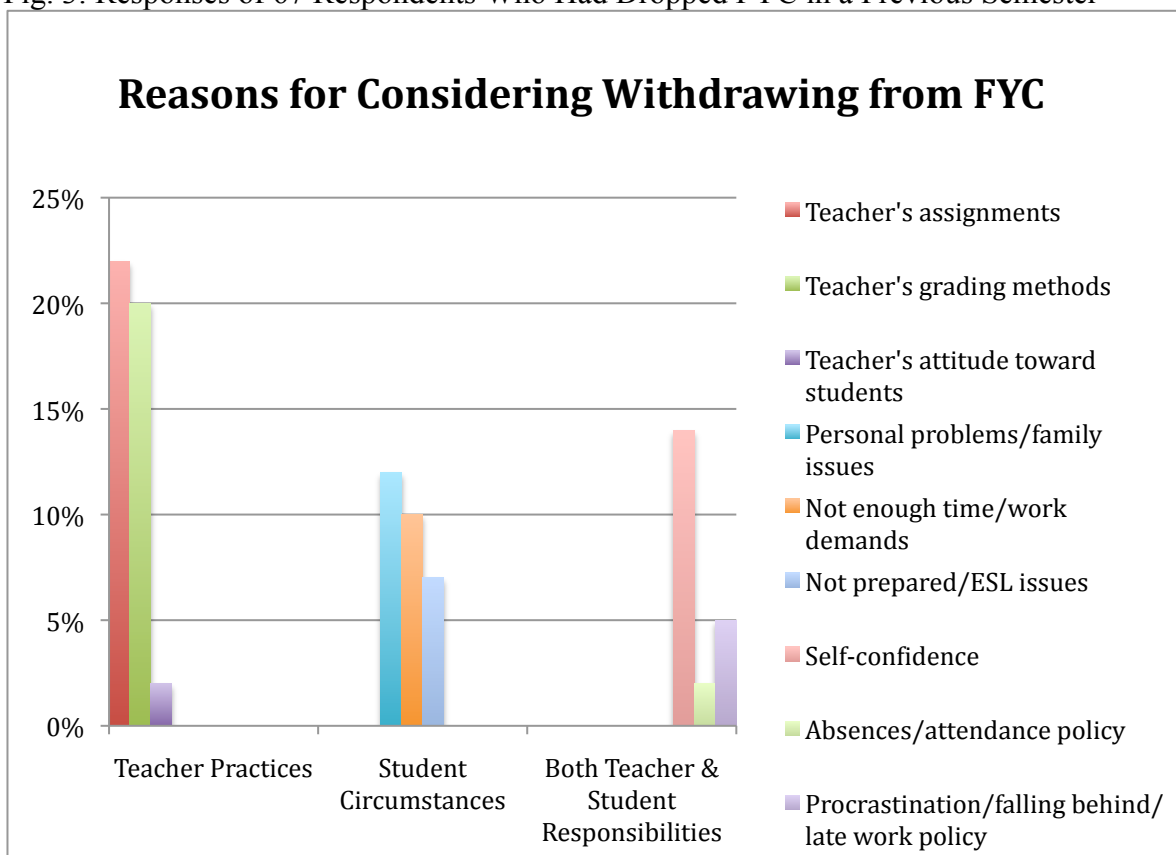


Fig. 4: Responses of 131 Respondents Who Considered Dropping in Current Semester

Although Figures 3 and 4 reveal mostly similar percentages under the categories of reasons respondents cited for dropping or nearly dropping FYC (listed in the legends on the right of each figure), there are two striking differences worth noting. First, respondents who had previously dropped FYC cited teacher attitudes as playing a much more important role (10% vs. 3%) in influencing students' decisions to drop. Second, those who considered dropping (but ultimately decided to stay in the course) commented on the fluctuating levels of their self-confidence: when their confidence was low, they considered dropping, but when it was restored, they stayed in class. This begs the question, "What can FYC teachers do to help FYC students gain the confidence necessary to stay in the course?" Before we can begin to answer that, we must look at the importance that questionnaire respondents give to the impact of teacher attitudes on students' decisions to drop FYC.

"I Didn't Like My Teacher"

Two dozen respondents shared their negative experiences regarding former composition teachers, some claiming the number one reason their classmates dropped was because "they didn't like the teacher or the teaching techniques." I found their responses to be a form of silence-breaking, as students are rarely allowed, much less invited, to discuss their dissatisfaction with the teacher-student relationship. Two dozen respondents mentioned that a comp teacher gave assignments that were "too hard," commenting that their teachers were out of touch with the lived experiences of her students who were often juggling jobs, child rearing, and homework. Some accused the teachers of holding expectations at a higher level than could be reasonably achieved, making statements such as the following: "More than half of the class is missing due to

the work in class; there is too much to do for one class.” Another respondent pointed out that “some teachers can be very hard on students, and some students just can’t take the pressure. They believe that they could possibly enroll in an easier teacher’s class.” One of my former students shared her story of looking for the “easy A”: during advising, she had asked for the easiest grader of the English teachers, but she was unable to get into that teacher’s section. She ended up writing a final reflection in my FYC course about how writing a book was “the most difficult, while at the same time, easiest assignment [she] had ever been given,” meaning that the project took a lot of effort, but because she got to choose her topic, the story seemed to write itself at times, pouring out of her in the early morning before she went to work. This student credited the book assignment I give in Comp 1 with bolstering her self-confidence (Thomas 1). Due to her success in writing a book, this student claimed the following:

I was transformed from the reluctant student who just wanted to make average grades and get my college experience over with, to one that wanted to do well in college . . . to do my best while I was there! And, my dreaded class of English became my favorite class and inspired me to take [Comp 2] as one of my electives.” (Thomas 1)

Sometimes a single teacher can make an enormous difference in the persistence of a reluctant student. A final reflection from another former student, Lisa, reveals the disappointment of a previous attempt at FYC the summer before enrolling in my course:

Last summer I started a freshman English class at another school. The teacher was about my age so I was hoping that it would be a pleasant

experience. Boy, was I wrong. Our first paper assigned was a descriptive essay so I chose the Sistine Chapel. I was excited to share the wonderful experience that I had there. She let us all write a rough draft and then asked to see our work in class so that she could give us some guidance. I took my paper up to her desk and she started reading the first paragraph. She glanced over at me with this look of disgust and asked me what my thesis was. I told her verbally and she asked that I point to it on my paper. When I did, I thought she was going to hit my hand with a ruler. She gives me another one of those looks and quickly hands my paper back and says, “Your thesis is not the last sentence of the first paragraph. This is unacceptable.” She barely read my work and was ready to make this judgment. I dropped class the next morning. (Capelli 1)

It is painful for me, as a compositionist, to hear this student’s story—to admit that there are those in my field today who are turning students off to the power of writing rather than trying to find a place for their voices in the academy. This same student—whom I find incredibly insightful and articulate—recognized the cost of producing the formulaic writing her teacher wanted, recounting the following:

My whole life has been spent trying to be myself and be appreciated for who I am. Academia and the working world have tried to mold me into this person they dictated was perfect. I have lived most of my life believing that if I wanted to succeed, I had to be that person. Deep down in my heart I knew that I was bigger than that” (Capelli 1).

The Importance of Feeling Heard

Story after story shared with me via questionnaires and final reflections highlighted the importance of liking a teacher and feeling seen and heard by him or her. Another questionnaire respondent shared his experience with failing FYC: “I took this course once before and failed. My decision [this semester] was ‘to stick it out’ because I knew I could pass the course the first time, but I didn’t like my teacher so I didn’t stay focused.” It might be tempting to dismiss this comment as a form of passing the buck—blaming the teacher for the student’s limited attention span—but it has been well documented that we learn better when we are emotionally engaged. From David Bleich’s theory of “subjective criticism” to Jerome Bump’s development of “emotional literacy” and Sondra Perl’s application of “felt sense,” scholars have established that the way we feel affects the way we remember and the way we learn.

Other respondents hinted at the emotional power of the composition classroom, a power that can be channeled into productivity and hope, but if undirected can coalesce into anger or despair. One respondent described her emotional experience of dropping FYC: “I dropped in the first year twice because of stress at home and the professor’s son went to prison and she talked about it a lot. I couldn’t bear to hear it because I had just had a son and the whole thing just messed with my head.” And for some students, the decision to drop is a reaction to both the subject of writing and the teacher teaching it. One such student ended up dropping FYC at a neighboring campus the previous year because, as he succinctly put it, “I don’t like English. My teacher was old and boring.” But he enthusiastically endorsed his current comp course in responding to the question, “Did you consider dropping this course this semester?”: “Hell no, I really liked this

class,” he exclaimed. “Why would I drop it?” He doesn’t specify what he liked about the course he is currently completing, but it is clear that his feelings toward the course—his affective response—has a significant impact on his desire to be in the course.

“The Teacher and I Just Couldn’t Come to an Understanding”

Several respondents suggested that their classmates dropped because “they couldn’t take the criticism” of the FYC teacher. One such respondent claimed to have inside knowledge, stating, “I know two who dropped because they felt [the teacher] ‘did not like them.’” Another respondent stated that a fellow student dropped because “she took it personal and thought the instructor was making fun of her.” Yet another respondent considered dropping because, as she wrote in her questionnaire, “I wasn’t understanding what the teacher was talking about.” She stayed though, and concluded, “As I got more into the class, I started grasping the information.” But what enabled her to exercise the trust and patience required to stay in a course that she “didn’t get” in the hopes that if she kept coming to class, it would begin to make sense?

One student was very critical (perhaps justifiably so) of the FYC course she took at a neighboring campus. Here is her story:

I am a nursing student and [FYC] is a requirement for my degree. I dropped the class because myself and the instructor just could not come to an understanding. I didn’t like her method of grading my papers. She would give an assignment and grade it very fast. She just didn’t care. Out of a class of 15, only 6 stayed.

I wondered if anyone else besides the students—say, some administrator or colleague of this teacher, was paying attention to these numbers and therefore appropriately alarmed

by the **60%** drop out rate. This same student declared that what made her stay in her current FYC course at CCGC was “[her] belief in God.” She wrote, “I prayed that what happened [at the neighboring campus] wouldn’t repeat itself [on this campus] and that the instructor would be understanding and caring and take into consideration the many walks of life [we] students have had and grade us on our abilities and give us a chance.” After reading this student’s response, I wondered on how many counts I could be indicted for not being the “understanding and caring” teacher every student deserves and most aspiring teachers want to be. This student’s comments also remind me that getting to be taught FYC by a teacher who is trained and qualified to teach composition shouldn’t be as random as playing the lottery.

When Process Pedagogy is Threatening

Ultimately, however, getting a “good” comp teacher is a matter of students’ expectations for their FYC teachers. All of these expectations are contextual, and many of them are based upon product-oriented high school English courses. A professor who had taught writing as a process at what she calls a “BWI” (Big White Institution) shared the exasperation (of both her and her new students) when she tried to bring process pedagogy into her new job at an HBCU (Historically Black College or University):

My manner irritated these students. If I knew the answers, why didn’t I act more authoritative and provide the answers? Why would I want to be called by my first name? Why didn’t I give normal assignments like five-paragraph themes? What did any of this freewriting nonsense have to do with college-level writing, and wasn’t freewriting some kind of hippy-dippy enterprise anyway? And what if this all seems like a game? The

five-paragraph theme was one game (and one they knew how to play), and the process paper another. Pleasing the teacher was the familiar way to win, but students could not figure out how to do so when I offered responses and strategies, but no formulas or promises, and no letter grades until a series of drafts had been completed. (Minerva 189)

Just as many of Minerva's students did not readily accept her composition theory and pedagogy, not all of the surveyed students who had enrolled in my sections of FYC appreciated my theory and pedagogy. Although occasionally a student has shared with me that she felt spiritually guided to sign up for one of my sections of FYC, the majority of my FYC students feel neither guided nor blessed to be in the courses I teach. Many of them have been taught in high school under the "old paradigm" as Art Young labels current-traditional courses that value the product over the process and have clear guidelines such as "two fragments and you flunk" (162). My courses with their Freirian aim to develop "critical consciousness—that is, an attitude of questioning and analyzing the world as it has been given to us"—are understandably threatening to a student who has been trained "to be a passive learner, [rather than] an active one" (Young 163).

A student who ended up completing one of my sections of FYC admitted that he had considered dropping that semester, but the determination he learned from his military training made him want to prove me wrong. Here's how he put it: "I was not going to get defeated by an assignment given by a woman who on the second day of class said she had a problem with the military." I don't remember stating this in class, but it is true that I have a deep-seated distrust of the military, especially since my brother's life was claimed by a helicopter ill-maintained by the Air Force. Even when we as composition

teachers try to hide our personal beliefs, our biases reveal our histories and affect our teaching.

“The Teacher Cared about Me”

As I pointed out when introducing Figures 3 and 4, the impact of a teacher’s attitude toward her students may have an amplified effect (more than double) on students already on the brink of deciding to drop or to stay in FYC. One student credited his FYC professor with creating “a nice atmosphere to be in.” It might seem easy to dismiss this as trivial, but “nice atmospheres” draw us back to them again and again, a credo that Starbucks has admittedly built its franchise upon. And if the neighborhood you live in is filled with unsafe streets, and your workplace has cameras that monitor your every move, maybe “a nice atmosphere” to be in just three hours a week is more important than it might otherwise be. Although very few students referred to the “atmosphere” or ambiance of their FYC classrooms, twenty-six respondents who considered dropping credited their teachers for helping them stay in FYC. Here are ten of these testimonials reporting on the powerful impact a teacher’s attitude can have on a student’s decision to stay in class:

- “My professor’s style of teaching, her attitude towards us, and her friendliness are the factors that impinged upon my decision. I decided to stick to this course because my professor made it fun and worth learning.”
- “I thought about dropping this class in the beginning of the semester. With the encouragement of my teacher and her understanding, I stuck with it until the end. She brought my self-esteem up.”

- “Yes, I considered dropping at some points, but the fact that the teacher was willing to help made me stay.”
- “My teacher helped me so much. I don’t know how I would have made it without her. Sometimes she helped me through her lunch period.”
- “The teacher gave me the confidence that I could finish the class.”
- “I thought of dropping this course but I enjoyed the way she taught, so that is one reason I stayed. The other reason was because I had to.”
- “I decided to finish this course because I found the professor’s teaching very appealing.”
- “Yes, [I did consider dropping] because I was working too much and fell behind on some response papers. My teacher is really good, so I decided to stick with it.”
- “Yeah, I thought about it [dropping this course] because I didn’t have my book done. My teacher was awesome and gave me extra time, and one of my classmates offered to help me and told me she wouldn’t let me give up.”
- “Last semester I signed up for Comp because I needed it, then I realized my schedule was too busy so I dropped. I [considered dropping this semester] because my schedule was sooo busy but since you gave me chances to finish, I stayed. Thank you.”

Maybe getting an FYC teacher that you like in a classroom that is appealing and functional is like winning the lottery—and once a student experiences that, he or she doesn’t want to give up his or her ticket and take a chance on buying another winning

ticket the next semester. Overall, these testimonials from student respondents demonstrate the pivotal role that teachers potentially play in decisions to persist in FYC. What we as teachers say, when we say it, and how creative and flexible we can be in working with students under stress—any of these actions at any moment can become the determining factor in whether a student decides to let go of finishing or, conversely, commit to completing FYC. Without the positive attitude of these students' teachers, 26 more students could have been added to the list of "those who dropped" rather than being part of "those who considered dropping."

The Importance of Teachers Paying Attention to Students

Many other respondents who had *not* considered dropping in the current semester also commented on the positive impact that their teachers had on their FYC experiences. One such respondent stated, "No, [I never considered dropping] because [the teacher] seemed to be easy to talk to, so if I had any problems, I believe I could come to [the teacher]. So I put trust in myself and in [my teacher]." I am struck by that student's phrase—*I put trust in myself and in my teacher*—because I think it is a simultaneously rare and necessary thing to do in order to achieve the learning required to receive a degree. Another successful student wrote, "No, I never considered dropping this course. I wanted to stick with it because it was a 'do or die' opportunity for me to allow the writer to come alive in me. Which [my teacher] helped me to discover." This same student had dropped another section of FYC two years earlier because she was told that "she could write her essays at home," but then found that she had to write them in class and that her teacher "took off five points for every grammatical error." Having been enrolled in both a current-traditional FYC classroom and one based on liberatory pedagogy, this student had

a two-pronged explanation for why students drop FYC: “I feel [the students in my current section] waited too late to get started on their assignment (‘the book’). The other composition classes lose students because the teachers are hard hitters with the red markings they sub for everything.” I wondered what could be included in the “everything” this student mentions. Is close copyediting a tactic teachers employ in order to avoid conferencing with students? Is it easier to mark grammatical errors on their texts rather than engage with students in one to one conversations where it is infinitely more possible to express concern or practice patience or offer guidance and understanding? One respondent wrote about this lack of interaction quite succinctly: “I think the most common reason that students withdraw from [FYC] is that professors do not interact with them directly. Students then find no value in a class with professors that don’t value their students.”

What do teachers value in the FYC classroom if not their students?—correctness? conformity? creativity? risk-taking? revision? critical inquiry?—and how is this reflected in the assignments they give to their students, who perhaps should be the most valued entity in the classroom? Maybe it’s time to re-ask ourselves the question Hurlbert and Blitz pose at the beginning of *Letters for the Living*: “as teachers of composition, are we prepared for the truly powerful stories our students are ready to tell?” (1).

“It Wasn’t Like a Normal Comp. Class”

Because I, too, value students’ stories enough to invite them into the academy, I drastically altered my curriculum for FYC after returning to graduate school at IUP. Convinced first by Hurlbert’s students who shared their testimonials with my cohort of graduate students during that first summer of coursework, and then by my own students

who wrote books about their lives and entrusted them to me, I continue to teach “the book” to my Comp 1 students, asking them to write an extended narrative on a topic of significance to their lives. A single testimonial from a student at CCGC cemented my decision to keep teaching this assignment. This student had written about an unplanned pregnancy in high school that resulted in the birth of her son. Her book was the story of being transformed by motherhood, and it was brave in its brutal honesty. When asked on the last day of class what she planned to do with her copy of her book, she replied, with tears in her eyes, “I am going to put it in a time capsule for my son, and when he turns eighteen, he can read it.” At that moment, I was struck by the thought that perhaps no student in the history of the current-traditional approach to teaching composition had bundled up their essays satisfying the rhetorical modes and put them in a time capsule for a loved one to read twenty years down the road. Once I saw how potentially meaningful this assignment could be for a student, there was no turning back for me as a teacher of the extended narrative in FYC.

Many of my former students who were familiar with the book project commented on the connections between this assignment and retention. A few respondents mentioned that they never considered dropping because they liked the book project. One stated, “No [I never considered dropping] because I liked the idea of being able to freely express one’s thoughts, and it helped me discover myself.” Another stated, “I was informed by a friend that I would be writing a book in this course. I think [students in other sections drop because] they don’t like writing essays, but I enjoyed writing a book, especially writing one about things I already know about and have lived.” One student valued the book project enough that it kept her in the course, stating, “Yes, I have considered

dropping this class. But I felt that me writing this book was what I needed—to get my life on paper and see how far I’ve come.” This student seemed to be utilizing narrative as a pathway to agency, looking at where she has been in order to perceive new possibilities, demonstrating Nigerian Storyteller Ben Okri’s claim that “if we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives” (qtd. in King 153).

Writing and Healing: “Letting It All Go”

Another former student testified to this connection between writing one’s story and shaping one’s life in her end-of-the-semester reflection:

I forgot about a lot of things about my past, good and bad. Writing about some of them helped me realize the kind of person I was, am and want to be. It made me commit to memory the family that I love and miss. My book helped me remember my goals I set for myself and what my priorities were and still are. It also made me recognize how proud I am of myself for getting through all the tough times; how after everything I have been through I can still move forward and accomplish many things and still improve on myself and my family. I learned that nobody and no family is perfect, but I don’t see any problem with being as perfectly happy as you want to be . . . When I was writing my book I felt a huge sense of relief and the desire and strength to finally be able to let it all go. It helped me on so many levels, I just feel so better than I can finally grow, love, feel and do whatever I want with no holdbacks or restrictions. (“Fuentes” 1).

After reading dozens of testimonials like this, I am convinced that the book project gives students a chance both to catalog the stories planted in them and to deliberately plant new ones in themselves—thus increasing their agency in directing their own lives and, by extension, impacting their future trajectories in their chosen communities.

Another respondent who appreciated the book project gave the following answer to whether he had considered dropping comp that semester: “No, I never considered dropping this class even though I had things that could’ve made me. I really believe if I had been in a regular English comp where essays and themes are written, I would’ve had to. But I enjoyed this class.” The tagging of my courses as “not a regular English class” or “not like a normal comp class” repeatedly showed up in the responses of students who had been in one of my FYC sections, primarily penned by those who were surprised by my approach to teaching writing by assigning a book length project that often caused them to end up liking writing. The affective response should not be dismissed as many respondents stated that they stayed in the class because they “liked it from the start.”

“The Book Is Not for Everyone”

Even respondents who liked the book length project recognized that it might not meet their classmates’ needs. One respondent who thought the assignment was a good fit for her noted that “not everyone wants to write a twenty-two page book.” She went on to speculate that “maybe some students have too much going on in their home life so they don’t have time for the assignment. Maybe writing essays is the best thing for their home style.” I like this phrase—*home style*—as it reminds me of another one: *mother tongue*. As teachers of language, do we enact a form of violence against our students if we don’t understand or value the homes and communities they come from? Do we increase or

decrease their chances of succeeding in the academy if we block ways for them to bring their home language into the FYC classroom? I want to claim that if we value a student's "home style," that should go far in terms of inviting that student into the academy. But then I fall into the idealistic trap exposed by Elspeth Stuckey in her powerfully disturbing book *The Violence of Literacy*:

If communities—particularly disenfranchised communities—are valued, then, the thinking goes, the mechanisms that disbar them not only lose their force but dominated people begin to realize ways to assert their rights. The idealist extension of this idea is that a society whose energies have been on maintaining inequality can also come to realize the benefits of parity. (111)

Stuckey goes on to conclude that "students of non-standard languages in the United States do not fail because of language failure; they fail because they live in a society that lies about language" (122). What would it look like then, in the FYC classroom, for both teacher and student to begin to tell the truth?

In their introduction to *The Subject is Story*, Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom tell their readers that one of the purposes of their book is "to focus on story as it relates to your lives, with an awareness of how a person's life outside college overlaps with that person's life inside college—and of how the outside/inside distinction is indeed more of a false story (a tall tale) than a true one" (ix). I continue to teach "the book" in FYC because I believe it is a viable way of building on truths as we examine the discrepancies between our dreams and our realities.

A Student's Right to Choose

Although I continue to teach extended narratives in FYC, I want students to have many choices when it comes to picking a section of FYC, hopefully finding a teacher with a teaching philosophy and pedagogy that can help rather than hinder his or her chances of completion. Informed choice, then, might be a necessary component for “composition for persistence.”

One student acted upon this choice when he transferred from my FYC class to a colleague's section because he believed that another teacher's assignments would be “less time-consuming.” A student who stayed in my class believed that the students who dropped did so “due to the extensive work we have [in writing a book].” He continued, “It's long and consistent and many don't have the mindset to do a class like this.” Another student who appreciated my class (because it allowed her to write a personally meaningful book) recognized the extensive time and effort she had put into her project and thus speculated about those who withdrew from her classroom:

Maybe they were overextended time-wise and felt they would take this class when their load was lighter. Maybe they were intimidated by having to write a book or short story, not knowing that you work closely with the students to help guide them to the end of the process. I think the latter is the most common reason.

From this student's comment, I have learned that sometimes I have forgotten to remind my students of my investment in their success, almost as if I keep my willingness to help students a tidy secret. This is illogical, especially since much of my pedagogy is dependent upon one-to-one conferencing, so I am learning to be more explicit when

communicating to students about my willingness to work with them outside of regularly scheduled conferences.

Another former student of mine also believed that the most common reason classmates withdrew from her second semester FYC course is “that they did not want the challenge of writing a book since it is so different from other English Courses.” She added, “Maybe they didn’t have the courage or enough self-esteem to write the multi-genre book.” A former student who had enrolled in a sophomore American Literature course I taught in the spring of 2007 sent me an e-mail responding to the question of why students drop FYC:

I know many students, especially their freshman year are wanting to ease their way into college and are so intimidated by a heavy schedule or difficult teachers or college in general that they drop the classes before they actually give them a chance. It’s a shame though, because they probably could have stuck it out like all the other [students] and been that much closer to completion.

The Intersection of Teacher Practices and Student Self-Esteem

Once again I return to the underlying question: what makes some students choose to “stick it out” while others give up easily? Is this a function (or an extension?) of each student’s self-esteem? The same sophomore quoted above went on to share her philosophy of dropping courses, even those outside of FYC:

I, personally, didn’t drop my comp classes. I’ve never dropped any classes. There have been instances when I was initially intimidated by the class or the teacher, but after a few classes, I convinced myself that if I

stayed on top of all my work and bust my butt, then it didn't much matter who the teacher was, it was the same material, regardless.

I could argue that this sophomore's claim that "it was the same material" does not apply to the FYC classroom (where course content has been up for grabs from the inception of the culture wars in the 60s to the 2007 Wardle and Downs CCC article proposing that "Writing Studies" should be the content of writing courses), but my primary focus here remains on the following question: "What makes students like this sophomore able to convince themselves that they can do what it takes to pass the class while others can't?" Another respondent echoed this student's conclusion: "At first it [FYC] was overwhelming, but after looking at the overall requirements (the essays and required readings), I deemed it possible and continued to participate." Every time I read this part of the respondent's statement—I *deemed it possible*—I am struck by the speech-act capability of this utterance. It seems that once he believed it was possible for him to be able to meet the assignments, then he was able to continue in the course.

This student's comments remind me of Jenelle's earlier story as framed by Aquiline and Powell. In looking for the root causes of Jenelle's decision to work full time the following semester rather than sign up for classes, Aquiline and Powell recognize that it is "not just a student's ability to pay for school that influences retention, but [whether] a student believes that the cost exceeds the benefits" (13). Once again belief is an important component in a student's ultimate decision to stay in college or to take leave.

The same student who deemed it possible and stayed in class also portrayed a psychological scenario explaining why students withdraw from FYC: "After the first few weeks the drop-outs become mentally burdened with the work involved and just didn't

have the motivation or the self-confidence that they could pass the course.” Out of nearly six hundred questionnaires that I collected and coded, his is the only one that uses the word *drop-out* as a label for a classmate rather than using the term *dropping out* as the description of an event. This is significant if you subscribe to the view that language controls thought or if, like Vygotsky, you recognize that “it is not only the content of a word that changes, but the way in which reality is generalized and reflected in a word [that changes]” (121-22). In other words, stamping labels on people can result in changing the way we perceive them, ultimately narrowing our choices and our thinking, and hence our perceived possibilities—what some might call “hopes and dreams.”

If labels potentially have the power to either limit or inspire the one labeled, do students have to brand themselves winners—or at least “completers”—in order to pave the way to succeed in the academy? How do students’ perceptions of themselves influence their responses to teacher practices, their views of teacher’s attitudes? If an FYC teacher organizes her curriculum around the deficit model, seeing students as “deficient” when they walk through the classroom door, isn’t a student with lower self-esteem more likely to internalize this belief—that he or she is not quite smart enough or skilled enough to be in the academy? In her book length study of self-esteem published in the early 90s, Gloria Steinem cites a University of Chicago survey that “looked at 70,000 schools in an effort to identity the major factors affecting success in the classroom” (129). The number one factor influencing student success was not poverty or single-family households or lack of funding for a school; rather, it was “an intangible: teachers and parents who had high expectations of the student” (130). Steinem criticizes an educational system where 80% of students start out with high self-esteem in first grade,

decreasing to 50% by fifth grade, and 5% upon graduation, coming to the horrific conclusion that “schools cause self-esteem to plunge for everyone” (130). She calls on educators to face their culpability in this matter by “acknowledging the ways in which our current education is suppressing self-esteem by treating students as if they were empty vessels” (129). Thus teacher practices have an impact on student retention as teachers can potentially play a pivotal role in helping students find reasons to believe they can succeed in the academy.

Since thirty-one questionnaire respondents reported that their classmates probably dropped “because they didn’t believe in themselves,” the self-esteem of a student is an important factor in a student’s decision to withdraw or persist in FYC on my campus. Low self-esteem, like a snake in the dark, slithers beneath many a student’s reasons for dropping FYC.

In the next chapter I present the case studies of seven students who previously withdrew from FYC and allowed me to interview them. The hope is that their stories can inform a pedagogy committed to student success in FYC, allowing us to begin envisioning and then delineating a pedagogy for persistence in the field of composition.

CHAPTER FOUR

VOICES FROM THE EDGES OF CAMPUS: SEVEN LEAVE-TAKERS TELL THEIR STORIES

Introduction of the Case Studies

This chapter includes case studies of the seven students at CCGC who had dropped either Comp 1 or Comp II between 2003 and 2007 and granted me interviews in May of 2007. Because I was seeking explanations for why former students withdrew from FYC, the “explanatory” case study approach that emphasizes “how” and “why” questions is particularly suitable to my study of the factors influencing students’ decisions (Yin 1). Case study design expert Robert K. Yin notes that a case study can serve as an empirical inquiry when it “investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (13). Researching the phenomenon of student attrition in FYC at CCGC by interviewing students who withdrew is a useful method in exploring the contexts of these students’ decisions. One case study researcher goes so far as to say that “the central tendency among *all* [emphasis added] types of case studies is that it tries to illuminate a decision or a set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result” (qtd. in Yin 12). While Yin describes this definition as limiting, it does describe the topic of my case studies—that of looking at the decision making of students regarding when to stay and when to leave FYC.

At the beginning of the interviews, I invited the interviewees to choose their pseudonyms and the spelling of these pseudonyms. They also chose the location of the interview: two of the interviews were conducted at coffee shops, three in my office at

CCGC near the library, and two in the homes of the interviewees. All seven of the interviewees had formerly been enrolled in at least one section of FYC taught by me, although the stories they tell sometimes involve other teachers' sections of FYC as well.

While conducting the interviews, I invited each participant to tell me the story of the semester they withdrew. Like Riessman, I understand that “a primary way that individuals make sense of experience is by casting it in narrative form” and that “this is especially true of difficult life transitions” which might include dropping out of college (*Narrative Analysis* 4). In her study on divorce, Riessman noticed that most of her participants told long stories of the marriage before they spoke about the divorce (*Narrative Analysis* 3). Therefore I began my interviews by asking participants how they came to sign up for FYC at CCGC, inviting them to tell this story first. In *Narrative Analysis* Riessman observes that “respondents narrativize particular experiences in their lives, often where there has been a breach between the ideal and real, self and society” (3). Entering and withdrawing from either a single course or college altogether can be considered one such “breach” between the ideal of working towards a college degree and the reality of dropping out.

Coding the Transcriptions of the Interviews

During the interviews, I relied on narrative inquiry whose guiding principle, according to Clandinin and Connelly, “is to focus on experience and to follow where it leads” (188). Narrative inquiry is an essential frame for a study such as mine that requires participants to reflect and then represent their experiences, thus meeting the apt description of narrative inquiry as “an experience of the experience” (Clandinin and Connelly 189). Although I attempted to be “wakeful and thoughtful about all [my]

inquiry decisions” as Clandinin and Connelly caution (184), I also realized that I, as a researcher, bring my own “bag” of experiences to the project, including the ways I interpreted, received, and represented the case studies as I wrote them up. Case study expert Robert E. Stake describes this dilemma:

Even when empathic and respectful of each person’s realities, the researcher decides what the case’s “own story” is, or at least what will be included in the report. More will be pursued than was volunteered, and less will be reported than what was learned. Even though the competent researcher will be guided by what the case indicates is most important, [. . .] the report will be the researcher’s dressing of the case’s own story. This is not to dismiss the aim of finding the story that best represents the case, but instead to remind the reader that, usually, criteria of representation ultimately are decided by the researcher. (456)

Because of the burden of representing each case as respectfully as possible, I looked for a lens to help me interpret the transcripts of the interviews and represent my participants’ stories. I found that lens in the most recent book by Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* published in 2008.

However, before I had discovered the “lens” of dialogic/performance analysis as described in *Narrative Methods*, I had already coded the transcriptions of my interviews, looking for recurrent themes, focusing on *what* was said more so than *how* the stories were performed, for whom and why. Thus I interpreted the data gained from the interviews with an approach Riessman terms “thematic analysis” (*Narrative Methods* 53). Relying on the coding I had used to make sense of the surveys discussed in Chapter

Three (lumping causes of withdrawing from FYC under the divisions Student Circumstances, Teacher Practices, and Both Student & Teacher Responsibilities), I added one more division—Support. This new division was created to include financial, academic, or emotional support, reminding me to pay attention while listening to the transcripts to the ways in which the interviewees spoke about seeking and receiving support from family, peers, or someone associated with the institution of CCGC.

Once I discovered Riessman's dialogic/performance analysis, I re-read the transcripts and noticed that some of the subjects had re-created detailed scenes that described their experiences of enrolling and then withdrawing from FYC; they were no longer simply imparting information, but engaging in narrative performances. Indeed, these shifts into narrative performance helped me to mark significant moments in the interviewees' decisions to withdraw from FYC. Because Riessman's dialogic/performance analysis "interrogates how talk among speakers is interactively (dialogically) produced and performed as narrative" (*Narrative Methods* 105), I chose to add this interpretive lens to help me make sense of the narratives shared by my interviewees. I wanted to take into account how the contexts of the interviews as well as the relationships between the interviewer and the interviewee could impact the content of the interviews. Dialogic/performance analysis supports these considerations as Riessman reminds us in *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*:

Stories don't fall from the sky (or emerge from the innermost "self"); they are composed and received in contexts—interactional, historical, institutional, and discursive—to name a few. Stories are social artifacts, telling us as much about society and culture as they do about a person or

group. How do these contexts enter into storytelling? How is a story co-produced in a complex choreography—in spaces between teller and listener, speaker and setting, text and reader, and history and culture?

Dialogic/performance analysis attempts to deal with these questions. (105)

In applying this form of analysis to interview data, Riessman notes that dialogic/performance analysis “requires close reading of context, including the influence of the investigator, setting, and social circumstances on the production and interpretation of narrative” (*Narrative Methods* 105). To set it apart from other forms of analyzing interviews, Riessman claims the following: “If thematic and structural approaches interrogate ‘what’ is spoken and ‘how,’ the dialogic/performative approach asks ‘who’ an utterance may be directed to, ‘when,’ and ‘why,’ that is, for what purposes?” (*Narrative Methods* 105). Because all seven of my case studies were former students of mine, we had already established roles as teacher and student in the FYC classroom. This previous relationship would necessarily impact the roles we would perform outside the classroom, including those of interviewer and interviewee. Aware that both the researcher and the participants are performing roles during the interviews, I looked to Riessman’s strategies for applying dialogic/performance analysis to interpret narratives within interviews, paying attention to roles performed and contexts created. Therefore I read through the transcriptions of my interviews yet again, this time coding them according to the linguistic features described in the next section.

Applying Dialogic/Performance Analysis

In dialogic/performance analysis, the researcher pays close attention to dramatic presentation. Riessman claims that “by choosing to *dramatize* rather than simply report

what happened in a more distant way, a narrator's plea for commonality cannot be easily ignored" (*Narrative Methods* 112). Riessman lists four linguistic features that are characteristic of the performance genre: direct speech, asides, repetition, and expressive sounds (*Narrative Methods* 112-13). She also reminds researchers to pay attention to verb shifts, changes in tone or pitch, and the length of pauses and silences (*Narrative Methods* 117). "Even working with the limitations of single interviews," Riessman suggests, "narrative investigators can bring hidden dimensions of power into their readings" by detecting linguistic features (*Narrative Methods* 115). In Riessman's work, she uses dialogic/performance analysis "to uncover the insidious ways [that] structures of inequality and power—class, gender, and race/ethnicity—work their way into what appears to be 'simply' talk about a life affected by illness" (*Narrative Methods* 115). I, too, hoped to "uncover the insidious ways that structures of inequality and power" (*Narrative Methods* 115) revealed themselves within my former students' stories of withdrawing from FYC, looking for connections between the personal and the political. Dialogic/performance analysis can be an effective way to answer "C. Wright Mill's call to make public issues out of what seem on the surface to be personal troubles" (Riessman *Narrative Methods* 115). "What close study of a single case can add," Riessman advocates, "is displaying how larger social structures insinuate their way into individual consciousness and identity, and how these socially constructed 'selves' are then performed for (and with) an audience, in this case, the listener/ interpreter" (*Narrative Methods* 115-16). My role as a researcher applying dialogic/performance analysis requires me to look for the ways in which my interviewees' stories are impacted by larger

social issues, and, consequently, how these larger social issues impact the problem of student persistence in FYC.

As their former teacher and current investigator, I recognize that I, too, am “performing” roles with my interview subjects, such as that of encourager, confidante, institutional messenger, figure of authority, welcomer back to the academy, etc. Along with Riessman, I do not define the term *performance* to mean a portrayal of an inauthentic self, but instead expand it to include a recognition that “we are forever composing impressions of ourselves, projecting a definition of who we are, and making claims about ourselves and the world that we test out and negotiate with others” (*Narrative Methods* 106). Since, as Riessman contends, interviews are composed of “stor[ies] coproduced in a complex choreography” (105), including performances that “are expressive, [created] *for* others” (106), I will also include some of the reactions and responses to my students’ stories and comments that I “performed” during the interviews. Like Riessman, I consider myself “an active participant in the narrative and its interpretation” which is a “distinguishing feature of dialogic/performance analysis” (116). This requires that I recognize that my verbal responses, hand gestures, body language, and even my silence- keeping have an impact on the storyteller during an interview, and, like other readers of the transcripts, I cannot help but bring my “positioned identities and cultural filters to interpretation” of these interviews (Riessman *Narrative Methods* 111). Riessman warns that researchers using dialogic/performance analysis “should be prepared to acknowledge that audiences will read the narrative texts they produce in all sorts of ways” (*Narrative Methods* 111). Despite the risk of misinterpretation,

dialogic/performance analysis can contextualize my study because it considers the roles of both researcher and researched, relying on their performances in a single interview.

The following case studies represent seven former students who range in age from under twenty to over forty. Of the seven participants interviewed, five are female while two are male. All seven interviewees live within twenty miles of CCGC, four of them residing and working within seven miles of campus. Two of the five females are single mothers while neither of the males are fathers.

I begin the representation of the case studies with “Miss D” who is the oldest of the participants and has not one but three stories of withdrawing from Comp 1. Because her stories are dramatic and her reasons for withdrawing vary depending upon the semester, the transcription of my interview with her lends itself nicely to dialogic/performance analysis. In fact, the transcript of our interview demonstrates nearly all of the linguistic features that serve as markers in dialogic/performance analysis and thus her case study effectively introduces these features to the reader. I will also end this chapter by returning to Miss D’s story of the semester she finally completed Comp 1, reflecting on her transformation from reluctant storyteller to accomplished student.

Case Study #1: Introducing Miss D, a Returning Student

I don’t remember “Miss D” from the first time she enrolled in my evening section of Comp I as she dropped after the first night of the course. But I do remember her vividly several semesters after this when she enrolled and actively participated in my Tuesday evening section of Comp I. Appearing to be in her forties, Miss D was older than the average student—what some campuses call a “non-traditional” student but

CCCC more commonly referred to as a “returning” student. Like many returning students, Miss D approached her studies seriously, making sure to focus on the requirements of the course. When she asked questions, they were often practical—clarifying what exactly was expected regarding each assignment and how her work would be graded. She meticulously recorded my responses in her notes, and I assumed she used this study strategy in her other courses. Her role as a conscientious student who acted interested and alert in class fulfilled the profile at CCGC of the hard working “returning student.”

Due to her other obligations, Miss D often hustled into class at the last minute. I remember her lobbying to skip our nightly break and dismiss class fifteen minutes earlier so she could get home and make sure her kids had done their homework. Though she was committed to her academic goal of earning an R.N. (registered nurse) degree, sometimes she seemed almost too busy to be a student—squeezing in classes around taking care of her children and working as a nurse’s aide at a nearby nursing home. She was polite and friendly to her classmates, but she also possessed enough self-knowledge to be able to set her priorities and to draw boundaries between obligations to school and her commitment to her family.

I admired the way Miss D claimed her life experience as a legitimate source of knowledge, often relating her experiences to the daily discussion topic. She possessed what Belenky et al in *Women’s Ways of Knowing* termed “the subjective knowledge of the inner voice” (51), her accumulated experiences convincing her that “truth now resides within [herself] and can negate answers that the outside world supplies” (54). Although she had significant life experience as a mother and worker, Miss D was not so calcified in

her ways as to be either preachy or unteachable. She was friendly and generous in sharing her stories with others, plus she was often the first to respond sensitively and encouragingly to the writing of her classmates. So I was surprised when Miss D asked me to sign a drop slip right before Thanksgiving that semester. She would eventually re-enroll in one of my Comp I sections in another semester, marking her fourth (and successful) attempt to complete Comp I. I did not know the details of these attempts nor her mindset until I interviewed her for this study. Our interview included all three of her stories of enrolling and then withdrawing from Comp I, mostly in her own words.

Dropping Comp the First Time: “No Way I’m Gonna Write a Book”

Although Miss D couldn’t remember exactly when she first signed up for Comp I, she surmised that it was four years earlier: “I was looking to take a night class, and Mysti Rudd was offering it at night, 6:30-9:00 or something like that, and so I decided to enroll in it” (1). Miss D described the first day of class as if it were a scene:

You were talking about writing a book, and you had all these little books she [sic] was showing us, and I’m like, “Oh.” I sit back in my seat, and I’m like, “Oh no, I’m dropping this, I am dropping this.” It was just overwhelming, you know, because I just didn’t want to invest that much time. And really, to be honest, I didn’t have anything to, to talk about in a book, I was just leading a social life, you know, nothing exciting to a reader, I didn’t think. So I dropped it. (1)

The shift in pronouns from “you” to “she” that Miss D assigns to me, accompanied by a shift in eye contact (from looking directly at me when stating “you” to glancing at the empty chair at our table at the coffee shop when Miss D switched to “she”) led me to believe that Miss D had gone back in time and was recollecting the way she felt on that

first class meeting of Comp 1 many years ago. This shifting back and forth in time is indicative of the “temporal flow” that Clandinin and Connelly claim influences our “experience of experiences,” declaring that “narrative inquirers need to be sensitive to the temporal shifts that take place in all sorts of ways at any point in time (91).

But Miss D may have subconsciously shifted from “you” to “she” in order to create distance between me as a character in her story (the “bad” teacher) and me as the attentive researcher trying to understand her story. This distance may have made it more comfortable for Miss D to criticize an assignment previously given by me as a teacher that she felt was unreasonable, but the shift in her pronouns also “pulled [me] into the narrated moment” as a researcher, an effect that direct speech has on the listener as reported by Riessman in *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (112). Miss D’s use of the internal dialogue “Oh, no, I’m dropping this,” (1) is also an example of direct speech, adding credibility to her story, another effect reported by Riessman (*Narrative Methods* 112).

Miss D’s storytelling includes *asides*—what Riessman defines as “points where [the narrator] steps out of the action to engage directly with the audience” (*Narrative Methods* 112). When Miss D reflects upon her life then as unworthy of writing a book about, she uses the aside “you know” between the claims that “[she] was just leading a social life” and therefore had “nothing exciting to [tell] a reader” (1). By using asides, Miss D builds rapport with the listener. Miss D also uses repetition (“I’m dropping this, I am dropping this”), another technique in dramatic presentation that serves “to mark the key moment in the unfolding sequence of events” (Riessman *Narrative Methods* 113). In

recreating scenes, Miss D often pronounces “Oh” expressively, a form of creative language also employed to create dramatic effect (Riessman *Narrative Methods* 113).

Miss D’s shift of verb tense into the historical present (“I *am* dropping this” rather than “So I *dropped* it”) emphasizes the agency of the storyteller as she is the one making a choice whether to stay in FYC. In Riessman’s research on disability and masculine identity, she observed in her analysis of interviews with her subjects that “besides making the story vivid and immediate, switching tenses underscores the agency of the narrator” (*Narrative Methods* 113). In Riessman’s interview with Burt, a middle-aged man who lost his job due to the progression of multiple sclerosis, she recognized the significance of Burt’s shift into present tense, remarking, “Burt’s strategic decision to show, rather than to tell, accomplishes a vivid and involving portrait of the man. As our long conversation was ending, he performed his preferred self—responsible worker—not other ‘selves’ he had suggested earlier (lonely man wanting a woman to love)” (*Narrative Methods* 113).

Looking back at Miss D’s presentation of her former self—the self who dropped Comp I in 2004—she did not portray her former self as a victim but rather someone who knew herself well enough to know this assignment wasn’t one she wanted to choose. Miss D’s further descriptions of enrolling and withdrawing from Comp I document the changes in her life that made her willing, even eager, to write a book for FYC.

Dropping Comp the Second Time: “I Just Couldn’t Write Like She Wanted Me To”

Miss D’s second attempt at taking Comp I was not much more successful than her first experience. She enrolled in a section with a teacher whom she described as “An Oxford. She’s from Oxford. I think she’s from *the* Oxford, Oxford University. She wore

these little English teacher boots. Old-school teacher boots. They call em, oh I don't know what they're called, but they're oxfords or something. Little lace-ups. That's how I see, you know, you are the perfect picture of an English teacher" (2). Riessman identifies the repetition of a word or a topic in her subject's transcripts as a linguistic feature which can serve to "mark a key moment in the unfolding of events" (*Narrative Methods* 113). Miss D's repetition of the name *Oxford* four times within the first three sentences and the emphatic way she pronounced the word *Oxford* each time she said it, separating it distinctively from the words uttered before and after it, emphasizes the distance she felt between her own experience and that of her teacher's. Later Miss D notes the discrepancy between her and her instructor's expectations:

But anyway, that class, I don't know, I, I dropped her class, I was real uncomfortable with it because we couldn't use [certain] words in the English language. And I'm like, "How the heck do I write? Oh you can't use this word and you can't use that word and you can't use that word" . . . We couldn't use this word and that word and this word and I'm like, now that overwhelmed me, too. So, that, and I think that was during the hurricane, and when we came back, oh, we had to do this catch-up, and she wanted me to come to class on Saturdays. And I work on the weekends, that's, that's when I do my, my forty hours, on the weekends. But I had already planned to drop her, because I just couldn't write like she wanted me to write, you know. (2-3)

I then asked Miss D, "How did she [the Comp teacher] want you to write?" She mentioned that the teacher did not even want her to use the word *the*. She laughed after

she said this, and I joined her in the laughter. After the laughter, however, she expressed her exasperation by raising her voice as she exclaimed,

That's fucked, everybody uses *the*: T-H-E. I'm like what can we say, what can we write, you know, what do we say? I was just . . . at a loss. But I knew I wasn't gonna do well in her class, you know, because I just write from the heart. It just rolls out, and so, you know, if I gotta be cautious about what words to use, that's just, you know, I didn't think that was just good writing. And I think she made a lot of us drop. Uh, she only had about five, five of us in the class, and we were all just . . . we didn't, we didn't have a clue. (3)

Miss D was not alone in dropping the Oxford teacher's course. To accommodate students whose residences were affected by the hurricane that caused extensive damage to the area in September of that semester (resulting in an evacuation that extended to a six week suspension of classes in 2005), the president of CCGC announced that students could drop their courses without penalty and apply their tuition to the following spring semester without financial loss. This policy benefited Miss D as she dropped Comp 1 for the second time after classes resumed in October.

Dropping the Third Time: "I Just Stepped Back and Decided to Drop Everything"

The third time Miss D enrolled in Comp I, she signed up for my once a week evening sections again. But her mindset was different this time, as she dramatizes that semester by describing it in the historical present:

I'm still trying to get that English out of the way, you know, before I really have to take it. And then it came down to the wire because now I

need upper levels, I need the English. I'm actually enrolled in the [nursing] program. And that's when I said, "Okay, I'm gonna go ahead and try, and, um, tackle this book with Ms. Rudd." So I enrolled in your class, at night, that night. And I was really ready, I . . . I . . . I felt like I was ready to write the book. (3)

This time around, Miss D knew what to expect from my section of Comp 1 and declared that she was "ready to write the book" (3). She was now a member of a nursing program co-hort, rather than a student on a waiting list. In fact, she was eager to get on with the project of writing a book for Comp I, volunteering to be the first student in that section of FYC to have four of her single-spaced, typed pages workshopped by the whole class.

But even with her newfound enthusiasm for writing down her story plus her determination to complete this project, Miss D still encountered problems beyond her immediate control. Miss D reflects on the choice she felt she had to make that semester:

I was enjoying [writing the book]; it started coming easy to me. But, uh, that's when I started running into financial problems. Because I was no longer getting the financial help, you know, through financial aid, I was having to pay. And I, I had to pay my nursing, you know, all that, and in installments. Then it was around Christmastime, and with four kids, who didn't have money, they repossessed my vehicle. And it just got to be really overwhelming. I just stepped back and I just decided, I just dropped everything: your class, my nursing [classes]. I'd just finish up another time and I'm like, you know, I'm just so overwhelmed. And I was enjoying the

class, and . . . and I hate it, you know. I hated to drop, you know. But that time around I was really enjoying the class. (4)

Miss D's repeated claims of enjoying this section of Comp I helped me understand what a sacrifice it was for her to drop Comp that semester. She elaborated further about her financial struggles as the Christmas season approached:

I had dropped, oh, the whole semester. And I was just struggling with the money situation. Being single. Four kids. You know. And, it's November, almost Christmas, I don't have money coming from anything except my job, you know? And I had this \$300 installment I had to meet. And the next semester, I couldn't go on to the next semester until I paid them, and then I had that three hundred some odd dollars. It seemed like a lot, but you know, you got Christmas coming. You know, I just couldn't do that to my kids. So, I . . . I . . . I . . . decided, I . . . my instructor said, you know, "Do what you have to do, this'll be here next year, you know, so do what you have to do." (4)

Miss D mentioned that most of her teachers were understanding about her decision to drop. As a single parent myself, I understood the priority of choosing Christmas for her kids over completing the semester; but as a teacher, I was sad to lose her presence in our classroom as her contributions often helped her fellow writers.

Since Miss D was talkative and generous in sharing her responses in class, I suspected that she had made several friends by midterm of the semester, so I asked if she had discussed her decision to drop with any of them. In response to this question, Miss D re-created the conversation in which she told another returning student, Delbert, who,

along with Miss D, had previously enrolled and then dropped the section of Comp taught by the instructor with the Oxford training:

I told him, I said, “I’m gonna have to drop, I, I just, I’ve run out of money. I can’t enroll in the next semester because I haven’t paid all of this semester. And I won’t have the money for the next semester, so I, you know.” He said, “No, don’t drop her, don’t drop her.” I said, “You know, I’ve taken her before.” “Well, why did you drop her then?” I’m like, “Because I didn’t want to write a book!” (4)

Despite Delbert’s advice, Miss D dropped my evening section of Comp I for the second time. However, this time she looked me directly in the eye as I signed the drop slip and vowed to me, “I’m coming back” (4). I will return to Miss D’s final story of enrolling in Comp 1 at the end of this chapter after the other six case studies have been presented.

Case Study #2: Introducing EZ and Her Struggle for Independence

Upon graduating from a local high school in 2005, EZ moved to a city four hours away with her best friend where they both attended bartending school that summer, and EZ planned to enroll in that city’s large community college in the fall. However, as I learned from the book she wrote for my section of Comp 1, she was determined to get a job the day she graduated from bartending school, “dedicat[ing] a whole day to go downtown and walk up and down 6th Street bound and determined not to leave without a job” (*My Life and Lessons* 15). When she was offered a job by the owner of seven separate clubs in this city, her plans to attend school were deferred. Achieving a college degree remained an important goal to EZ, who proudly told me during our interview that

she was the first in her family to attend college (14). After a semester of being the only one of three roommates to have a job and pay the bills, she decided to move back in with her mother and attend CCGC. She managed to complete the requirements for my section of Comp 1, but she ended up not finishing Comp 2. In the interview she described the factors that affected her ability to succeed as a student.

The transition back home proved difficult for EZ as she had become accustomed to living by her own rules, rather than those set by her mother. They had previously been quite close, as her mom had fulfilled the roles of both mother and father due to a divorce from EZ's alcoholic father when EZ was only a year old. EZ wrote about the return to her mother's apartment in the book she completed for a section of Comp I taught by me in the fall of 2006:

My friends were the same, not much had changed, but my mom had only grown bitter. My mom was one of the best moms while I was growing up. She would always take care of me while I was sick and knew how to make me feel better always. She thought of me first in life, even before herself. When I moved back, I knew she'd be happy because I knew how much she missed me. Only I had grown up a little bit and it ended up being total chaos around the house. I had lived on my own, so I started to form my own rules, and I didn't want to follow her too well anymore. We eventually came to a conclusion and that was for me to find another place to live. (20)

EZ then moved in with a friend and started working at a local pizza place while attending CCGC. Although she missed quite a few classes in Comp I, she completed the project

and was able to pass the course. However, her attendance became a crucial factor in her ability to complete Comp II the following semester. What follows is her account of the story behind her disappearance as a student in the spring of 2007.

Skipping Classes Early in the Semester

Like many college students who become familiar and thus comfortable with a teacher's pedagogy, policies, and philosophy, EZ wanted to sign up for my section of Comp II because she had had me for Comp I. The only section of Comp II that I was teaching that semester was at 9 a.m., MWF. From the outset of the interview, EZ seemed apologetic about not showing up to class consistently and expressed regret about her behavior:

My whole thing about not comin' was, uh, I got discouraged.

I just didn't show up, and then, I got discouraged to go back 'cause I didn't know how you were gonna react. And you weren't the only one that like, I did that to, you know? It was all my classes. I wish I wouldn't have done that. (1)

I asked EZ what she did when she wasn't in class, and she explained her circumstances:

I just wish I didn't like, you know, I would get too sleepy, or like stay the night at my boyfriend's house, and he would be like, he wouldn't go and then I wouldn't go, or I wouldn't go and he wouldn't go. We were both distracting each other. (1)

In an attempt to help EZ feel less guilty, I reminded her that I, too, had stopped attending my classes as an undergrad, and one of these times was because I had fallen in love with

a fellow student. I shared with EZ my own experience of being sidetracked from my goals by a romantic relationship as I stated, “We would get in the car, intending to go to class, and we’d end up driving to the beach or hiking up a mountain” (2). Like EZ, I found that once you’ve been absent from class a few times in a row, it gets harder and harder to go back. “I was afraid you wouldn’t understand,” EZ said to me as an explanation for why she couldn’t force herself to come back to class (2).

Other Priorities

EZ switched to second person point of view, a technique that allowed her to generalize about behaviors rather than claiming them as distinctively her own. One of these behaviors was frequent absences, as she mentioned that attendance in class has “a lot to do with *your* [rather than *my*] priorities—like not just boyfriends, but the things that you do outside of class, like smoking. It’s really hard to get up in the morning whenever you, you know, smoke the night before” (2). I wasn’t sure how to respond to EZ’s reference to smoking this early in the interview—whether I should ask her to elaborate or not—so I quickly changed the subject to the financial support she received to attend CCGC. EZ had previously received financial aid but was currently on suspension after withdrawing from courses the previous semester. Her father was now helping her with college costs. I asked EZ about her father’s reactions to her lack of completion of all four of the courses he had paid for in the previous semester. I am embarrassed to admit that my judgments about some of EZ’s decisions bled into the following transcript:

Me. So, did your father get mad at you [about last semester]?

EZ: He doesn’t know.

Me: He doesn’t know that you dropped?

EZ: Right.

Me: And he—okay. Okay.

EZ: I guess that's bad, too.

Me: No, well, I'm not saying, no—

I tried to recover from my “alarmed parent” reaction (evidenced by my incomplete response above) to the fact that EZ had not told her father she had withdrawn from FYC. My silence perhaps triggered EZ to become a little defensive, causing her to further explain her position:

I just would rather, like, why have somebody talk to you like that whenever you have to do it on your own anyway? You know, like you're beating yourself down anyway, by not going. So why would you want other influences making you feel more like a piece of crap? (3)

Within EZ's explanation, she assumes responsibility for her self-destructive behavior by recognizing that not going to class is a form of “beating yourself down” (3). I mirrored this back to her in the interview as I complimented EZ on being willing to look at her own behavior, stating, “Well said, well said. It sounds like you have emotionally held it against yourself, that you've felt bad about not coming to class, about signing up and then not coming to class” (3). I then revealed to her that many of my interview subjects did not admit to feeling bad or experiencing a sense of shame by dropping a class. EZ succinctly replied, “Maybe it hasn't hit them yet or they're in denial” (3).

Even though EZ's father was not aware that she was repeating two courses from the spring semester during Summer Session I, she had shared the truth with her mother. I asked if her mother had disapproved of her, and she responded, “Yeah, but she's proud of

me now. I actually want to, like, succeed” (3). Obviously EZ felt safer sharing the truth about dropping or failing courses with her mother rather than revealing this reality to her father. I recognize EZ’s mother as a strong supporter of her daughter, maintaining a constant belief in her daughter’s ability to succeed.

EZ’s New Resolve to Succeed

In the middle of our interview, EZ abruptly stated, “I think I’m grown up now” (5). In the book she wrote for Comp I, she mentions that after evacuating for the hurricane that hit CCGC, she drove eighteen hours on her own to stay with relatives in Ohio. “To drive that far showed I had grown up and wasn’t a little kid anymore,” she wrote (20). But in the interview, her maturity is revealed by her resolve to make better choices than those made by her father or her boyfriend. When I asked what caused her to grow up, EZ described the lunch she had with her father the previous day:

He told me that he smoked from 1978 to 1995. That’s almost 19 years—my age. And he thinks he has Alzheimer’s. He doesn’t. The fact that his brain is just, you know, fried. And I don’t know, I don’t want to be like that. I don’t want to end up like him. And I don’t want my boyfriend to end up like him either. [My boyfriend] is twenty-seven years old, and he’s still going to college, you know, and he hasn’t even finished a semester yet (5) . . . He’s like, “I’ve wasted a quarter century of my life, and I have nothing to show for it.” I don’t know, I don’t want to be twenty-five and like, not have an education. The faster I graduate, the faster I’ll make money. (15)

Throughout the interview, EZ associates success with a college degree, even though her mother got a job with a telephone company right out of high school and worked her way up to earning \$25 an hour. After thirty years with this company, EZ's mother plans to retire in a year and then travel. She has offered to pay EZ's rent, wherever EZ wants to live—California, Texas, wherever—and all EZ has to do is pay the utilities and provide a place for her mother to land between the destinations of her travel adventures (12).

Another Hurdle to Clear: Passing Math

Having the financial and emotional support of her mother increases EZ's chances of succeeding in earning a degree, but EZ has another hurdle to clear: math. In order to continue to make progress towards a degree, EZ has to pass Developmental Math, a course that has caused her considerable frustration:

This is my third or fourth semester to take it [developmental math], cause I keep on dropping it because . . . I don't know. I got discouraged, I guess. Because I took the THEA [a state mandated college entrance exam]. I made a 228 and you're supposed to make a 230. I was two points away from not having to take a developmental math. So it's like two points! Like why couldn't you give me those two points or that one question that I could've gotten right? And this was like right after high school that I took the THEA. And it costs like fifty dollars to take the THEA, and, what if I take it again and make the same thing or . . . you know?

EZ shared the stress she felt about passing this class as she described her typical day:

I go to my first class [from 8 a.m. to 9:40]. And then, I have two hours in between classes. And I either sit outside on a bench, and do my homework

or go into the library and read a little bit. And then I have my Developmental Math class upstairs in the _____ Building at 11:40 with Mr. _____. I've always wanted Mr. _____, and they've never given me Mr. _____, and now that I have him, I'm like happy, you know. (8-9)

The fact that EZ repeated the name of her preferred teacher three times in two sentences emphasizes her belief that her success is dependent upon being assigned a particular instructor.

Planning to Succeed

EZ continued to describe the rest of her day, emphasizing the importance of having a planner:

Week by week, I have to do everything that's in the planner so I can feel good about myself. Whether it be cleaning my car, or doing my laundry, or going to eat lunch with my dad, paying my cell phone bill, my bills online, things like that. And then I go to work at four until [the restaurant] closes at nine. Like a job from four to nine wouldn't get in the way of school, you know. (9)

The problem, however, lies in the temptation to socialize with her co-workers after work, especially her two close friends who helped her get the job. EZ acknowledges the temptation to party after her shift is over:

Everyone there smokes. Like at least ninety percent of them. There's probably about ten percent that don't. And I mean like everyone in the kitchen, everyone that works in the bar. Everyone that works on the floor.

You know, cause everyone has that fat cash, and it's just tempting because they [restaurant managers] don't [require a] drug test. And there's another thing that's out there: Lorcets. Like, I don't even touch those. It's like a painkiller. Everyone that's on them, they're like, "I feel good." You know what I mean? (10)

At this point in the interview I once again became uncomfortable with the subject of drug abuse/recreational drug use, but I tried to sound reassuring, nodding in agreement, "Mmm-hmm," to encourage EZ to continue.

They're like [clicks mouth]. It's like a speed up. But I don't, I don't think you should have something that's a form of something you can already do on your own. Like, I do—I do the smoking thing to relax me . . . or as a reward or something. (10)

I have no idea what EZ means by her edict that you should not do a drug "that's a form of something you can already do on your own," but I am still too uncomfortable in my role as her former teacher to converse casually about illegal drug use, so I did not ask her to clarify the nature of the altered state caused by Lorcets.

Overcoming the Temptation to Party

I asked EZ if she had been able to resist her co-worker's invitations to stay after work to socialize because of her commitment to the two courses she was taking in Summer Session I. She replied as if she were giving herself a pep talk:

It's hard, I'm telling you, but I can do it. But in a way it's like, I'm gonna be the one that's doing it for me, like you're not getting my college education for me. Like, I have to do that on my own. Like, "Me hanging

out with you is only furthering myself farther away from it.” I would rather have, like, no friends, than, you know, people that distract me and put me down. (10)

These words of EZ’s could be used to set strong boundaries with her co-workers and other “people that distract [her] and put her down,” but they also remind me of the self-coaching we sometimes employ in order to convince ourselves to stay on the straight and narrow path, telling others what we ourselves need to hear. Because EZ’s attendance had been inconsistent in the past, I wondered how much of a struggle it was for her to say no to co-workers, to keep herself on the path that would result in a college degree.

The Legacies with which We Live

EZ sometimes drew a hard line between drug use and college success, but she also acknowledged the rampant use of drugs in the area, estimating that over half, maybe even 70%, of the Comp II class she had been enrolled in during the previous spring regularly smoked pot. She then spoke of the legacy of smoking in her family:

I quit, but I have like, paraphernalia, like a pipe, you know.
And I showed my mom. And I told her I was gonna quit. And she said, “Throw it away.” I said, “I don’t want to throw it away; I want to keep it for my kids.” Because I know my kids are gonna go through the same thing I’m going through, you know, because my mom did it and my dad did it. And my aunts did it and my uncles did it. So it’s like everyone. It just, repeats itself—generation from generation . . . I want to have something vintage for [my kids], you know like I wish I had something that my mom had, you know? (15)

EZ then argued for the legalization of marijuana, declaring that “everybody would be more friendly and there would be more peace” and invoking the commonly cited claim that marijuana is much less harmful than alcohol (16). EZ ended the interview by describing the unfairness of having to hide a joint when a policeman drove by her front porch a couple of weeks earlier: “Whenever cops pull you over and like if you have it on you then you go to jail. It’s like, ‘What was I doing to you to make you, like, am I really hurting you?’ Like, the only person I’m really hurting is myself, if that’s the case.” I am left with those words ringing in my ears: *The only person I’m really hurting is myself.* And I want to add more words to hers, such as the following: *And those who love me. And those who want to see me succeed.*

EZ felt confident about her ability to handle her current schedule, declaring, “These three classes that I’m taking right now during summer, I’m planning on acing those. That’s my goal, like, as long as you do your homework and come to school, there’s no problem. It’s a piece of cake” (11). Like many of her answers to my interview questions, I wondered if EZ was oversimplifying the difficulty of the internal struggle she experienced between being a carefree child and assuming the responsibilities of a mature adult.

EZ’s Goals and Dreams

When asked about her future goals after she finishes at CCGC, EZ seemed less sure of herself:

I don’t know. I know I need to get more focused on myself and not worry about what my boyfriend’s gonna do. You know, cause that’s going on in my head, too, like “Where is he gonna go?” But if I graduate

before he does, and he's still in school, then I'm going somewhere else.

I'm not gonna wait around on him. But if I wait around on him, then I'm

letting . . . you know? (12)

EZ never finished this sentence, but I knew what she meant: then she would be letting her future be determined by someone else, rather than herself. She had witnessed her mother rely on relationship after relationship, only to be disappointed again and again, and she wanted more for herself, as she writes in the final sentence of the book she wrote for Comp I, *My Life and Lessons*: "I have a path for my future and if I just follow my path and reach all my goals, I should become what I've always wanted [to be] in life: a stable adult" (25). This path may not be as easy to follow as EZ would like as her speech seems to fluctuate between stating her convictions ("I'm *not* gonna wait around for him") to voicing her fears ("But *if* I wait around on him . . .").

Interviewing EZ helped me understand the struggles she faces in trying to achieve her dreams of a college degree. Pressures from family, co-workers, and even friends sometimes conspire to cause her to miss class. What could I, as her Composition teacher, have done differently in order to help EZ succeed? What if I would have contacted her after each absence, specifically inviting her to come back to class? Perhaps this goes beyond my role as a college teacher, but contacting her weekly may have made a difference in coaxing EZ back into the classroom.

Case Study # 3: Introducing Kelly: Swirling in and out of the Academy

Like EZ, Kelly is also twenty years old, but unlike EZ, he is not currently enrolled in CCGC. He does, however, plan to come back to college—although he is not sure when or even what institution. As such, he could be considered part of the phenomenon known as *student swirl*, defined by retention researchers Yan Wang and Tom Pilarzyk as “the inconsistent flow in and out of college coursework from term-to- term, institution-to-institution” . . . “and triggered by such stressors as balancing work, school, and family obligations; financial challenges, and health problems” (211).

Kelly had taken my Comp I course a year prior to the interview where he had written an abbreviated chronicle of his life from childhood to adulthood, giving it the sardonic title: *Life’s a Joke on Me*. Because of his success with my Comp I assignment, he had requested to be enrolled in a section of Comp II also taught by me the following semester. Though he did not complete this course, throughout the interview Kelly seemed appreciative that someone from CCGC wanted to hear about his experience, that someone cared enough about what had been going on in his life to ask him to come back to the campus and talk about it.

Unlike many FYC students at CCGC, Kelly actually enjoyed English classes. He liked to write poetry and song lyrics, and his grandmother had spent forty-two years teaching English at one of the local high schools. Regarding her influence, Kelly states, “She made sure me and my other siblings stayed on our P’s and Q’s. And we would catch ourselves pretty much correcting our friends and associates” (1-2). Kelly’s grandmother supported the use of “proper English” over African-American vernacular, “and so if someone said a sentence wrong, she was quick to point it out” (3). This did not prevent

Kelly from being expressive in his writing because, as he stated, “I would usually write and keep it to myself” (3).

When I asked Kelly if he thought he received a good background in English from his high school, he quickly replied, “No,” then added, “Basically I always was ahead of everybody due to the fact that my grandmother was an English teacher” (3). Kelly’s relationship with writing was both personal and academic: writing provided him with an outlet for expression and also served as an avenue for correction.

The Story of the Semester of Swirl

In our interview, Kelly shared with me his story of signing up for Comp II and the subsequent problems he encountered. He began that semester with a hopeful, positive attitude, so I asked him what happened to cause his outlook to change. He answered by describing his mental state at the time:

In my personal life, I began to struggle. 'Cause I was feeling distant, and um, pretty much burned out. [I was] getting mentally stressed with myself and with my family because my mother, as a single parent, she was struggling, and then I had ventured off on my own. I moved in with my classmate I had known for years, and me and him stayed together. But the thing was, I had a job, but it wasn't paying too well. And that just added on to more pressure and more stress. And the reason for me not really making it back to your class, and just quit coming all together, was because, like I was burned out. But I felt like while I was in school, I wasn't getting any money. And you know that is the root of all evil, but you also need it to survive. (4)

Like Miss D, Kelly used the phrase “burned out” to describe his mental state before dropping. Both of these students juggled working with being a student, worrying about the competing needs of making money and earning passing grades.

Financial Stress

Throughout the interview, Kelly mentioned the financial struggles of both himself and his family. I understood the ways in which financial stress can trickle down onto the shoulders of our children as I, too, had been a single parent for much of my thirties while also attending college in the evenings. To help alleviate the financial stress that semester, Kelly stopped coming to class as he increased his workload from part-time to full-time at one of his two jobs. Unfortunately, he ended up being laid off at both of these jobs (4). Meanwhile, every time he stopped by his mother’s house, she kept asking him, “When are you moving back in?” (10). Because of the pressure his mother exerted on him to move back in, he found himself visiting her less and less frequently.

When I asked Kelly how many credits he had earned at CCGC, he said, “I have no idea” (10). He knew it would take five or six years to complete his music degree because he would have to transfer to another school to earn credits in music technology. Kelly had some experience with singing, playing the piano, and writing lyrics for gospel rap, and he wanted to channel these interests into becoming, as he refers to it, “a music tech.” After high school, Kelly had wanted to go to college at the University of Miami, but his mother didn’t want him to leave home. She didn’t even want him to go to the four-year university fifteen miles down the road. Kelly recalled the conversation he had with his mother about his college dreams:

She said not to do that [go to the local four-year university] because gas-wise, it would be too expensive. I said, “Well, I could live on campus.”

But I always knew where my mother was going [with her reasoning] and what she really wanted me to do. What was really going on was [that] she wanted and she needed the help at the house with the other two [younger siblings]. So I really didn’t enroll at CCGC; *she* enrolled me here. (10)

The Push and Pull of Being Parented

I asked Kelly if he thought it was better for his success as a student to live with his family while enrolled in college. He immediately replied, “Actually, no, because my mother, she—she’s like a control freak. And if it’s not her way, it’s not right at all. She could be wrong and she’ll find a way to twist words around and make you wrong. And you would have no idea what you just said. And I couldn’t live with that much longer” (4). Kelly’s quest for independence was in direct conflict with living under his mother’s supervision.

As a high school student, however, Kelly had relied on his mother’s strength, intelligence, determination, and persuasiveness. In Chapter Six of the book he wrote for Comp I, Kelly describes his difficult transition from 9th grade to attending 10th grade at the overcrowded high school. The local school board had decided to combine three high schools into one because the school district was in financial trouble. Kelly’s ninth grade year proceeded smoothly as compared to the abrupt shift he would have to make as a sophomore in the new high school:

Well, the joker changed all that. I had no choice. The deal was set. So I was shuttled off to the “great high school.” Did I ever get a shock. The

dealer had put a crooked cut on the deck. The three high schools had been consolidated. The school was crowded, some classes were held in "shacks," and there were not enough books for students in some classes. Book rooms and storage rooms had been turned into classrooms. Students from once rival schools fought everyday. Instead of a joyous return to school, we had resentful students, teachers, and parents. Some were angry that their schools had been closed; others were angry because of job transfers. Still others were angry because they wanted a new [building for the] consolidated school immediately.

I was not angry, and I was determined to be the model of obedience and school pride. I tried to keep cheerful and be satisfied with doing the right things without being praised or rewarded. I had decided to take the hand I had been dealt. (19)

The situation of this consolidation might seem bleak, but Kelly's description of it is quite eloquent, and his decision to make the best of it (rather than get caught up in rivalry) demonstrates his maturity. Because he possessed a large frame, the football coach wanted Kelly to play both offense and defense for the football team, and Kelly obliged, playing his heart out for the new school. He also signed up to sing in the school choir that first semester of tenth grade. Kelly's demeanor reminded me of a gentle giant, and it was in his nature to get along with all types of people. Although he never drank or experimented with drugs, he didn't judge others for doing so. It did offend him, however, when the "bad boys" of the high school enjoyed more popularity with girls than the sensitive, good-hearted guys. While he struggled with the injustice of this, it wasn't until

the following semester that he would encounter direct conflict in this school—and from an unlikely source: the baseball coach. Kelly describes the circumstances in his book:

The spring rains came, the earth renewed itself, and I renewed my interest in baseball. My entry into baseball was not the pleasurable event that I anticipated. After the first practice the new baseball coach informed me that I would have to cut my hair or quit baseball. I was wearing long braids; my hair was more than a foot long. I was quite proud of my braids. (19)

Kelly's mother did not understand why her son should have to cut his braids since all of the other schools had players with braids and no other coach at Kelly's school required this of players, so she requested a conference with the baseball coach. In his book written for Comp I, Kelly sets the scene of this meeting:

When she arrived to talk with the coach, he had assembled a group of four supporters [besides the principal and the assistant principal]: the head football coach, the head basketball coach, and two ex-coaches. The baseball coach was there; he sat in the back of the room and never spoke a word. (19)

But Kelly's mother was not intimidated by this arrangement. Kelly continues to describe the proceedings of the meeting:

The conference began with the principal informing my mother that parents did not seem to realize that educators know more about what students ought to wear than parents. He insinuated that she was uneducated. He did not know that she had completed two years

of college before she married, or that she had gone back later to earn an associate degree. He did commend her for not coming into the conference screaming and cursing as he expected her to do. He did not know my mother well; she could communicate well with him and his crew without resorting to using street tactics. What he did learn was that he and his crew were not going to intimidate her. (20)

Kelly continues to represent his mother's strong argument in his Comp I book: "Let's just end the preliminaries and go straight to the main bout," Kelly's mom said to the principal. "Does your coach have a valid reason for requiring my son to cut his braids off in order to play baseball? After all, his braids will be pinned up on top of his head out of the view of the spectators" (20). Kelly is obviously proud of his mother's intelligence, wit, courage, and poise as he records her response to the principal's defense of the baseball coach who just "wants the boys to look alike" (20):

My mom retorted, "It is physically impossible for all of the boys on the team to look alike. Those boys are Black, white, and Hispanic. They are different sizes and heights. They are not carbon copies of each other. Their hair has nothing to do with the game of baseball. My son is neat, mannerable, and I personally keep his hair neat. He is not a gang member; he is an honor student. Furthermore, pre-conceived notions of how people wear their hair dictating how they behave is a fallacious concept. (20)

The principal then seized on the gang reference and claimed, "The braided looks *do* represent rebels and gang members!" (20). Kelly recognized the unfounded reasoning of

the new requirement, suspecting it of having racist undertones, which he explains in his book: “Now that we had a coach from Vidor, Texas, one of the rules had changed for *one* sport. My mom realized that the brown wall of illogic had closed against any possible reasoning, so she asked them to excuse me so I could return to class,” and then she formally withdrew Kelly from the baseball team (21). Kelly ends Chapter Six of his book by returning to the joker metaphor:

It seems that the Joker was at his games again. What my mom perceived as an injustice was a perfectly reasonable action to all four coaches and former coaches. My mom left school feeling betrayed by the school’s personnel. She [later] told me that she felt just like a knight who had gone out to fight the Crusades, but returned from battle with her armor hammered to pieces by her fellow warriors.

(21)

I wondered about the connection between the “Joker” Kelly refers to in his book and the trickery of living in a racist society, forced to attend a “free” public school that does not have the resources to adequately educate the city’s poorest students. Could it be that the racism of the community contributed to Kelly’s level of stress, perhaps even setting him up for “burn out”?

“But Then the Loneliness Kicks in”

Kelly clearly reveres his mother for her strength, courage, and assertiveness but these same qualities also made it difficult for him at times to complete his journey from boy to man. In high school, after his mother and father got divorced, Kelly’s friends teased him about having to get permission from his mother to go out with them,

badgering him with “Ask her. Why don’t you ask her?” (7). His reply to them was automatic, “I already know the answer. The answer’s ‘no’, ’cause my name is Kelly” (7). He was named after his father, and at this time in his life he felt that his mother’s anger towards his father was often taken out on him since he was his father’s namesake. Kelly went on to describe his own disappointment with his father:

My father always says he’ll do this and he’ll do that. He’ll come.

He’ll come to a performance or something, but . . . he wouldn’t. What he’ll do is he’ll go see my younger siblings instead, and then . . . pretty much I felt, well, I still kinda feel up to this day, I feel like I did most of the stuff on my own. And like I have nobody to show for it but myself.

I worked hard, like, going along the road by myself. (7)

Kelly then reminded me that he had written about these feelings in his book for Comp I, speaking of how “the loneliness kicks in” (7). However, most of these feelings were lightened in the book because his grandmother, the former English teacher, helped him edit his manuscript and didn’t like the darker parts so she “tried to sugarcoat it as much as she could” (7).

Feeling Distant and Burnt Out

I asked Kelly to recall the feelings he had during the semester he dropped Comp II, and he mentioned feeling “distant from everything and everyone. Like my whole world’s coming down on me; just stressed out about what’s going on” (7). I reassured Kelly that a lot of people feel like this at certain times in their lives, and then I urged him to describe the stress he was feeling at that time, asking, “Were you undergoing financial pressures? Relationship pressures? Job Pressures?” (7). Kelly insightfully replied, “A bit

of both financial and family [pressures]. And the girl I was getting to know, she ended up leaving town on me; she wasn't gonna tell me and . . . I hate when that happens cause like I say you know, I try to deal with abandonment issues" (7). I complimented Kelly on his ability to track his feelings to his relationship with his father, and thus face the underlying motives of some of his choices. He accepted the compliment, but assured me that it was a complicated struggle in the journey to know himself:

It's almost like, I'm dealing with it but at the same time I'm fighting with it, but sometimes it gets the best of me. Like, exactly, maybe around twelve o'clock that night. For some reason, I just, maybe, I could be laying down watching TV, and shed two or three tears just for no reason. They just come out of my eye. They just come down. Because I, I felt pretty much abandoned. Since, I was, much younger than when this situation happened. And I guess, what I did was, I started writing a poem piece that I hadn't finished called "'Broken Smile. " (8)

"You Can See It within My Words"

Kelly remarked, "I guess I ended up mastering it [the art of masking his sadness with a smile], but I can't hide it from myself, the sadness behind the smile. But I really didn't want nobody to know what was going on" (8). When asked if anyone suspected how he really felt, Kelly replied. "The only way you probably could tell is if you read some of my poetry—you could see it within the words" (8). Kelly kept revising the poem "Broken Smile" until he ended up changing its title and publishing it as an opener to Chapter One of *Life's a Joke on Me*. Since Kelly claims that his poems give the best

glimpse of who he really is, I will include his poem in its entirety, center-aligned just as Kelly prefers it to be:

The Real Word Hits Hard

Life always has meaning---somewhere deep in all of us.
 Some people have it good and some have it bad.
 Who's to say that the one with a good life has it easy,
 Or that the one with a poor life has it hard?
 I feel as if the course of my life has not yet been set.
 There are times in my life that are good,
 Then there are real rough times
 That people would never believe.
 Most people think I have a wonderful life.
 Well, at times, I beg to differ.
 I was born with a father, of course!
 Then at an early age, I became a father—
 A father to my younger brother and sister.
 I have felt some joy and some pain.
 But the pain gets worse and turns to strain,
 A strain I wish not to endure.
 People say they know my situation.
 Are they sure?
 I'm hiding this pain behind a fake smile
 Which sometimes looks so real.
 This smile has worked for years.
 So I try to keep myself busy
 Because if I don't do anything,
 I begin to think about everything
 That I've been through.
 Yes, it's made me strong,
 But I still long for someone to love---
 Someone who unconditionally love me.
 I ask myself, "What good is it---being a good person
 When all I get in the long run is hurt and pain?"
 To start to end,
 I don't even know where to begin.

Or maybe Kelly *does* know where to begin since this poem served as a powerful opener to the story he wrote for Comp I.

From Pleasing Parents to Assuming Responsibility

Kelly's book for Comp I featured his struggle through adolescence to be his own person, to find his own place in a culture where many of his peers abused substances or pursued sex as a conquest, activities which held little meaning for Kelly. Even though he appeared to make mostly wise decisions, he still found it difficult to make his own choices without his mother taking over. I asked him about his journey to become an adult and live on his own. His reply reveals the push and pull of becoming independent, that even though we may move out, we often carry our parents' voices within us:

The situation with my mother and my father—I began to realize that I guess I have some issues with myself that I still need to work out. As far as, how I felt. Like, much of my abandonment when my father—he wasn't really around. So as far as me keeping a job, I can't keep it too long cause I feel uncomfortable and it's time for a change. Like I need to, just go on to the next. As I said before, so really with me, I really can't get complacent, with routine. It just—like it just bugs me, it bothers me. (5)

I asked Kelly if he completed any other courses during the semester in which he dropped Comp II, and he spoke of the one class he finished that semester, his music class, reminding me that in his book he had demonstrated how “poetry and music was a major part of [his] life” (5). “With music,” he claimed, “I felt like everything's okay. That was like my alcove, my safe place. So, I continued to go to my music class, at least I finished that” (5).

Dropping Other Courses That Semester

Before Kelly quit coming to Comp II, he had informed his music teacher that he would be taking a semester off. “He [the music teacher] really wanted me to stay,” Kelly said, “I’m not saying that he didn’t need the help [in choir], but he knows what I can do. And what I’m willing to do” (5). Kelly didn’t enroll at CCGC the following semester, but he claimed, “I always wanted to come back up here to visit and say hello. To [the music teacher], and at least come by your class, and to apologize for not finishing. But . . . the strange way things happen, you know?” (5). Kelly felt that the letter he received inviting him to be interviewed for the study was also a call to come back to CCGC and continue his degree.

Financial Aid and Academic Dreams

Despite his struggles to finance his dream of getting a college degree, Kelly had not given up on higher education, perhaps reminding himself as much as informing me, “I haven’t, I haven’t, given up school, it’s just, I’m trying to figure out a way how to get back in. ’Cause I know financially, I don’t have the money to uh, come. And I don’t know along the lines, uh, will financial aid take me, after I just dropped out” (10). When I mentioned that I have relied on student loans to fund both my graduate and undergraduate degrees, Kelly remarked, “That’s another thing. I was [considering that] but every time I get a loan paper, by mother would tear it up [and say] ‘You don’t want that; you don’t want to end up having to take some years trying to pay them back as soon as you graduate’ ” (11).

The catch-22 is that for many students there will not be the possibility of a college degree without the financial obligation of loan repayments. I tried to encourage Kelly to

find a way to finance his degree by telling him of my own pile of student loans, but I'm not sure my story is convincing as I crawl towards paying back \$60,000 as I near the age of fifty. I cling to the belief that education is the one thing that cannot be taken away from you.

Writing the Script of His Own Life

I ended the interview by appealing to the artist within Kelly and asking about his goals and dreams with a hypothetical sentence: "If you could paint your life how you want it to be or write your life how you want it be, what would you create?"

Kelly was clear about what he did and didn't want in his life:

Like I said, music is my life so I either want to be a professor or be within the industry. But, what first comes to my mind is I want to do a better job than my parents. I want to be a better father. I actually want to be there. I always loved kids so, if that time ever comes, I'll be excited, thrilled. Just to know you know, I'll be a father. And just to show that I can do better. Come struggling, I'll just, push through it.

(8)

Kelly recognized the hurdles between him and achieving his dreams, stating, "Music-wise, I try and try and do what I can when I can, but that's when the financial kicks in. It's hard to do things when you don't have the money or the gas to make it where you need to go. And it just bugs me when I have to go ask my grandmother for [money]" (8). Kelly's struggle to see himself as an independent adult makes it difficult for him to receive financial help from his grandmother.

Learning the Bureaucracy of CCGC

Perhaps because Kelly wanted to think of himself as an adult, he was reluctant to ask for administrative help as he was still trying to figure out how exactly to get back into the academy. He shared his frustrations at the trial and error method he used in navigating the bureaucracy of enrolling at CCGC:

Like I said, once you get out it's hard to get back in. I'm trying to figure out a way to go about it. Because, my first semester they didn't tell me anything, [so] I ended up getting on probation because I dropped one class. Because you got to have twelve hours for your scholarship. I had no idea about this, so that's why I messed up. And then I ended up dropping my math class because I felt I wasn't learning anything at all. It was like she was just going through the motions and she wasn't really taking the time to get to know her students and teach. So I just let that go because they messed up my schedule from the get-go, they put me in the wrong class. (5)

Discouraged by the Attendance Policy

By the time Kelly was enrolled in the right math class, he had missed two days and the teacher's policy for this class allowed him only three absences. Even though these first two absences were not Kelly's fault, Kelly remembers that "in her eyes, she [the math teacher] counted it" (6). He then got the flu, causing him to miss two more days. "After that," he said, "I just decided not to go back. I felt like, 'That's too much stress on me,' just having to worry about missing one day" (6). When I asked Kelly what advice he had for teachers regarding their attendance policies, he replied,

Don't be too strict to where [if] you're missing three days, you're dropped. Like I understand if you're missing seven days straight or something; as far as that, I can understand that. Or you could at least be courteous enough to give a call, to see what's going on with the student instead of just, you know, going by procedure. (6)

Discouraged by Test Anxiety

Kelly's testimonial makes it clear that my FYC attendance policy added to his level of stress. Kelly's test anxiety also contributed to the stress he experienced as a student: "Every test my mind goes blank, and the teacher will pick on me because I know the answers to all the stuff. And come the test, all the ones [students] who didn't answer [in class], they score higher than me on the test" (13).

What Can Comp Teachers Do?

My last question for Kelly focused on the difference that Comp teachers can potentially make in a student's decision to drop FYC. "If you could say anything to the college professors of English here at CCGC to guide them in changing something in order to make it less likely for students to drop comp, what would that be?" (12). Kelly spoke of the importance of teachers interacting with students as he reflected on his experiences in Comp I and II:

Really to me, I felt y'all were doing a great job, especially you. That's something I actually think about, you know, the teaching. Not giving us tedious homework every night, you know. Actually giving us assignments to weigh, you know. It's like self-preservation, when we look at ourselves and come up with our own conclusions, you know. That way we get

involved, and that's why I felt I wasn't just going through the motions.

Because you interact with us. Certain teachers, they don't interact with us, especially not on a personal level. If you get with a student on a personal level, they'll feel more at ease and actually do a little better. But if they just see you as a teacher, and not someone really there to help, it's routine.

(12)

Though Kelly was complimentary of my teaching, I couldn't help but wonder if there was something I could have done the semester he dropped to encourage him to continue. Could reaching out to him—maybe even calling him at home—have made a difference in his decision to drop? Perhaps this interview I conducted with him a year after he dropped was my belated attempt to understand him on a personal level; indeed, maybe this entire study is my attempt to finally reach out and listen to these former students, inviting them back to the academy to tell their stories, trying to help them find a way to re-imagine themselves successfully achieving a degree.

As astute and polite as Kelly is, he was able to recognize what I was trying to do by conducting interviews that brought students back to CCGC, and he was one of two subjects I interviewed who ended our conversation by voicing their gratitude. Kelly erupted in appreciation, "This was a great experience 'cause I really didn't express all of this but to maybe two or three people. 'Cause I—I don't express this or let anyone know what's going on. But then, I got to do this. So thank you" (13). I thanked Kelly repeatedly for his generosity in sharing his words—his story, his poetry, his thoughts and his feelings with me. Kelly's story demonstrates Arthur Frank's claim that "stories repair the damage that illness has done" (54). Though Kelly has never been diagnosed with a

physical illness, telling his story may have helped him face his emotional wounds, helping him make sense of where he's been, what he's gone through, and where he wants to go next. My last words to Kelly were heartfelt as I looked straight into his eyes and said, "You deserve to be back in school, working towards a degree" (13). The tear in the corner of his eye told me that he understood my meaning and agreed with me.

Case Study #4: Introducing Jo Ellen and Her Search for Balance

Although Jo Ellen could probably pass for an eighteen-year old, at the time of our interview she was twenty-six and well attuned to the differences in outlook between her and her younger classmates. Nearly four years earlier, Jo Ellen had successfully completed one of my sections of Comp I, having written a book titled *Unfinished* about her struggle to get out of an abusive relationship and get her life back on track. Like Miss D, Jo Ellen had been a leader in the Comp I classroom, asking pertinent questions that benefitted both her and her classmates and offering insightful responses to issues raised in class. She struck me as a renaissance student—curious about many subjects and thirsty for knowledge. She was also a gifted writer and impressed many of her classmates with her ability to frame a scene and then follow it with an insightful reflection.

Jo Ellen waited a year to take Comp II because she wanted to get into one of my sections of the course. She remembers her decision to sign up for my Comp II, and subsequently drop it, stating, "I'd taken [Comp I] and really liked the class, and so I enrolled in [Comp II]. After getting about halfway through the class or so, I'd fallen kind of far behind and just couldn't catch up. I hated to drop it, you know, but I felt like I couldn't—that there wasn't any way to catch up with all the work since I missed tests and

a couple of classes” (1). I asked Jo Ellen how many classes she had missed, and she said, “I don’t know, probably like six. Quite a bit”(1). She was aware that the attendance policy as described in the syllabus stated that more than six absences meant she could fail the course. But I wanted to get beyond the attendance policy as a reason for dropping, and so I asked Jo Ellen what was going on in her life at that time that made it difficult to get to class.

Balancing Work and School

Jo Ellen described the difficulties of balancing work and school as she recollected the semester she dropped Comp II:

I was working a lot. Different jobs. Just trying to balance work and school. I think it’s a constant struggle for a lot of students. Especially maybe students that are a little bit older, not like out of high school. ’Cause 1301 is a freshman course, so a lot of people that were taking it with me, it was, you know probably one of my first semesters in school. And then a lot of people, not all, but a lot of people’s parents are still helping them, and whatnot. (2)

When I asked Jo Ellen if she received any financial support from her parents, she explained her situation:

They started to. My mom, mom’s always helped. Dad, not so much. I mean, he’s there, but after graduation, even through school, child support was enough. He paid that and, no more. So she had to help pay for school and everything. But the way she helps, she pays my car insurance. But everything else is, is on me: car note, rent, all the bills. (2)

Because Jo Ellen waited tables at a restaurant, she was paid in cash. On the days she was scheduled to work, she would get out of class at one and have to be at work at four, so she had “three hours to go home, change, get ready, and eat. And maybe a little bit of studying if you can” (3). On her days off, Jo Ellen would find herself going in to work to see if she could pick up an extra shift. She describes the dilemma she felt between having time to do her homework and making enough money to pay her bills:

I live by myself so it was kind of like a constant struggle: I needed to pay this bill tomorrow. . . and I have the day off. But we can pick up shifts for extra money, and you know, cash that night. So it’s like, well do I pick up a shift, or stay home and study? Or try and do both? But it always ends up I get off work, probably between eleven and one, depending on what shift. And then go home and try and cram it in and study, and either fall asleep reading the material I was supposed to read, or actually finish it and then oversleep in the morning. And then I like, wake up at whatever time and be like, “Ahhh, what do I do now?” (2)

I easily understood Jo Ellen’s predicament as I, too, had been tempted by a paycheck during my undergraduate education, turning a part-time job into a full-time one, causing my class attendance to suffer. As my paycheck increased, my GPA decreased. My job, however, allowed me to be home by ten, whereas Jo Ellen’s ended at midnight or 1 a.m.

Socializing with Co-workers

Since EZ had informed me of the common practice of going out with fellow workers in the restaurant trade, I asked Jo Ellen if she, too, were tempted to go out with

friends and co-workers after her shift was over. She described the difficulty of being on a regular sleep schedule:

Because you get off so late, going in at five and getting off at twelve or one, you're still up, even if I went straight home like I did all the week before Summer 1 started. I went home. I didn't go out with them. They were like, "Come out." I'm like, "No, I'm trying to get my sleeping pattern back to normal." But even then I'd go home, and I'd be like tapping my foot until 3:30 in the morning before I could fall asleep, you know. So it's hard and then, on the same note, after doing a full school semester, just like, just got to get out, I mean, got to just do something else for a minute you know. (4)

"So how do you find that balance?" I asked Jo Ellen, wondering how she navigated the white waters of working so hard that she needed an escape. Her response was a sheepish, "I don't," and then she added the following:

That's why I ended up having to drop. You know, cause, I mean it was about working a lot, but even sometimes when I pick up a shift I'd go out, you know. So it's kind of both—it's a little bit of both, I think, for me. 'Cause I was going out, probably more than I should have—when I could have gone home. But then, it's also true that you spend money when you go out, you know. (5).

The more money Jo Ellen spent going out, the more shifts she had to pick up in order to pay for her expenses. And so the vicious cycle continued.

Dropping Other Courses

Besides dropping Comp II, Jo Ellen also ended up dropping a course in nutrition. Though this course was offered as one of the nursing program requirements, Jo Ellen enrolled in this course as an elective because she was interested in it—a rare occurrence for a nursing course at CCGC. Jo Ellen shared her recollection of dropping this course:

I had a big thing, a dietary analysis was due. And something happened. I was home, my printer, and just something else, and the day it was due I didn't get it there and it's a big chunk of your grade. And I had it like, pretty much completely finished, I had to make like a couple polishing things on it, but you know, it's due by a certain day. So I went and talked to her, and she actually let me drop like a day after the drop date. She's like the head of the department. I missed it, but she was, I tried to go up there and give her my drop slip but she wasn't there, on like the last day. But I ended up re-taking it and making a B. But yeah, I ended up dropping hers, kind of the same thing you know, the balance, working too much, I guess. (6)

Relying on E-mail to Contact Teachers

Remembering that Jo Ellen had not communicated with me regarding her missing assignments and absences in Comp II, I asked her if she usually contacted the professor after her absences in order to try to make up missing work. She responded that it “depends on the professor” (6). In some of her other courses, she relied on e-mail to keep her in communication with a couple of her professors:

With nutrition, you know, with [my nutrition teacher] I did a lot of email. I think in my psychology class the first time, I got behind but I caught up and made a B in the class. You know, there's a couple things I was late on, but I would email her. So she does a lot through email. And so we would take up through email. Pretty much through email and like I'd rush up there and talk to them, saying, "I'm sorry" and work something out. But with [my nutrition teacher] there's only like four tests, so there's no cushion, there's no room. So once I missed one, there's pretty much no return from that—a big part of my grade. (6)

In my course syllabi, I encourage students to e-mail me if they have any questions or concerns, and I try to respond to these e-mails promptly. However, I generally do not initiate e-mail correspondence with individual students. Perhaps sending Jo Ellen an e-mail that semester could have made it easier for her to approach me to find a way for her to succeed in Comp II. She admitted that it was hard to face me in person, stating, "With you, well, because I looked up to you a lot, I felt so bad; I just couldn't face you. I just quit going" (6). In the interview with EZ, she had also commented on the difficulty of coming back to class after extended absences, fearing I "would not understand" (1). I had always prided myself on being approachable to students, but apparently many students still found me intimidating. Because of this risk of intimidation, it takes courage as well as a sense of worthiness for students to approach their teachers after repeated absences.

Avoiding the Teacher

Jo Ellen discussed the courage it took to face a teacher after missing a test or an assignment:

[It] makes my stomach turn. Until I talk to the teacher, I'm like kind of nervous, like sick to my stomach almost. Just like there's something hanging over my head, you know—that weight—until I end up talking to them. And usually, the thing is, you put it off or you don't talk to them 'cause you're scared, but if you just talk to them it's a lot easier. You can make things a lot better if you just go in, and I don't understand why we're just scared of admitting our failures, or what. We just want to like, you know, pretend. I have friends that do that with their rent when it's late. And then it's like, just completely avoiding the landlord, or you know, the apartment person. And really, if you go talk to them, they're people too; they're really understanding. If you avoid them, then you get—it just doesn't work out, right. But I told a friend of mine, I'm like, "Just go talk to [your teacher]." (6)

I wondered if Jo Ellen's advice to her friend also served as a pep talk to herself, trying to rally the courage to face her own mistakes. She struggled to further explain why she had avoided talking to me that semester:

It's like people that you look up to or really respect, you kind of don't want to be like, "Hey, I . . ." you know? "It's my fault that I didn't . . ." you know? Some of it [my reason for dropping] was working and some was going out. A little bit of both. But being like, "Uh, I messed up" is kind of like going to your mom and being like, you know? Instead you just avoid her, until she finds out, you know? (7)

When Jo Ellen periodically came back to class, I tried not to dwell on her absences in order to make myself less intimidating, inviting her to meet with me at the end of class. I wanted to try to find a way for her to succeed in Comp II because she had already drafted many good pieces of writing for her portfolio. Jo Ellen remembers my willingness to work with her that semester, but this still wasn't enough to actually ensure her success, to push her over the tipping point, as she states, "A couple times, when I did go back cause I missed stuff, you'd try to work with me and then I'd miss that [new deadline]" which led her to feel even more unworthy of my help (7). Ironically, my willingness to work with her may have resulted in increasing her sense of shame, making her even less likely to approach me for guidance.

No matter how willing I appeared to be in working with Jo Ellen to help her catch up, the emotional truth was that I was disappointed when she didn't show up for class. I wanted her to choose college success over a paycheck, to choose learning over socializing. However, the choice was *not* up to me—and like a parent frustrated with her teenage son, the situation sometimes made me want to scream, "Don't forget your dreams!"

Why Do Students Drop Comp?

Just as I did with all of my other interviewees, I asked Jo Ellen what she thought was the number one reason that students at CCGC drop Comp I or Comp II. Jo Ellen maturely replied, "Everybody's stories are a little bit different, as far as what's going on actually during that time" (7). And then Jo Ellen said something that still causes me to ponder: "Life's a lot more complicated than art, you know" (7). Even though Jo Ellen

was able to artistically render her life in well-polished pieces of prose and poetry, she still had a hard time achieving balance in the day to day living of her life.

“Life’s a Lot More Complicated than Art”

Admittedly, Jo Ellen was reluctant to generalize an answer to why most students drop FYC, but she willingly described her own personal experience. In the following excerpt from our interview, Ellen delineates the many issues that distracted her from being a full-time student during the semester she dropped Comp II:

The guy I was dating, I was having a lot of problems with him, you know. He wasn’t working, I’d come home, the house was dirty still. He supported [my going to school], but then he would break me down. Like today, he’s like, kind of like a drill sergeant. You know, it’s funny because now I see like, I see where I went wrong, you know. Before whenever I had—and I wrote about it in my book—I had a problem, a drug problem, mainly coke, cocaine. And I moved back from Houston, and certain people put me back into it again. And I didn’t want to be. Like I got tired of, being in . . . and actually I was going to school more. Like my first semester, I kind of didn’t do it [cocaine] a little bit, but not really. But it would be because we were up, “I’m up, I’m gonna do my homework,” and I’d still be up, I’d go to school. You know, but then you have your day where you’re just like, where you stop and you know, you gotta crash. But he helped me get off of it. (8)

Jo Ellen recalls the earnestness of Mike before he became her boyfriend, when he was trying to convince her to get clean:

He said, “I’m gonna get you off of it.” And he told me, you know, it was weird because sometimes like people can talk until they’re blue in the face and it doesn’t matter. But then there’s that one thing that somebody says that kind of does get through. So I mean, their talking isn’t in vain, but he said, you know, “I’ve seen it a million times before, people go, that have, you know, come from a good home, and are beautiful, and then they’re on the street.” You know, and I kind of just sat there and I was like, “You know what?” It just kind of hit me, I’m like, “ugh.” (9)

Jo Ellen’s expressive use of the word *ugh* marks the moment in her narrative where she recognized that she did have a drug problem, and she needed help to kick it. Mike kept his word and supported her throughout her recovery, and this support led to a romantic relationship. However, Mike was a better sponsor than a boyfriend as Jo Ellen summed up the changes in his behavior:

It worked for a little while, and then he went back to, started playing the rounds again, you know. He [previously] had a job as an electrician’s apprentice. He could’ve got a good job, but he wasn’t working; it was just mooching. So there was a lot of shit going on with that at the time, and I ended up telling him to move out. And then, so I was kind of stuck by myself. But I thought he was cheating on me ’cause I found the e-mails. I even wrote one of my papers about cheating because of it. That’s what it was, okay? (9)

Just as EZ and Kelly had mentioned in their interviews, difficulties with romantic relationships could sometimes cause the tipping point between dropping a course and

completing it. After asking Mike to move out, Jo Ellen ended up taking off the next semester, another statistic of student swirl. She remarked, “I’m glad I took the spring semester off because when everything had ended in December, I was trying to get caught up on bills. I went ahead and took the spring semester off because I couldn’t balance everything” (10).

“College Is Just What You Do”

When I asked Jo Ellen if she always knew she wanted a college degree, she answered, “Yes and no” (12). She had gone to a suburban high school where going to college “was kind of just what you do when you graduate” (12). She did well in school, scoring high marks on the state tests required to graduate. When she graduated, Jo Ellen went to cosmetology school, but then she got caught up in working and partying. She describes the temporality of her day-to-day existence in the years immediately after high school:

I was gonna finish [cosmetology school], but didn’t. And then, just, for a while, I just, didn’t really, think any further than like, that week, or that day, you know. I was twenty, twenty-one, and I just really didn’t think about, the future, or you know. For a while. Other than that, no, I just kinda. I don’t know. I just was working and that’s kind of as far as I, you know, looked ahead. (12)

In the book she wrote for Comp I, Jo Ellen summarizes her life between the ages of nineteen and twenty-two when she lived in Houston to escape an abusive relationship, claiming, “No one knew me. No one knew what I had been through. I was starting over with a clean slate” (32). In Chapter 16 of her book, she adds:

I put my past, my abusive relationship in a little box and shoved it to the deepest depths of my mind. I didn't want it to exist. I didn't want to admit that I had been "that girl." My way of dealing with my emotions was to suppress them, to try and act normal after five years of abuse—ignore all of the confusion I was feeling inside and pretend to be normal. Things I couldn't ignore or suppress, I numbed with drugs of any kind, a lot of drugs. I didn't want to think about my past. I didn't want to analyze the things he had done to me. I just wanted them to go away. I wanted to be who I was before I met him. (32)

"I Was Putting off My Future"

In retrospect, Jo Ellen spoke of that time in her life as "stuck in neutral":

I worked, I paid most of my bills, and I partied like a rock star. That was all that I did. I kept putting off school. There always seemed to be some reason I couldn't start. I knew what I needed to do to be where I wanted to be in my life, but it was like I wasn't ready for that step yet. In the back of my head, I knew what I needed to do, I just didn't do it. I never saw my family; I watched too much TV; I slept too much; I went out too much. If it could be done in excess, I did it in excess. I went through the motions, but I stayed standing still. Basically, I was putting off my future. I was scared of more transition. I was stuck in a bad cycle that I didn't understand. I got depressed because I just wouldn't handle up. (Wouldn't, not couldn't). I was just stuck. I knew that I could do more with myself.

Knowing that sent me even deeper into depression. I didn't want to tell anyone, because deep down I knew I could conquer it on my own. (33)

In our interview, Jo Ellen described a moment that reminded her of the importance of going back to school in the journey to re-gain control of her life:

This one guy, who was friends with one of the bartenders, when we were closing after hours he would come and hang out, sometimes. And he was going to school, and he was gonna be an English or philosophy major. Anyway, me and him, we would sit and talk, and debate about things. And everybody's like "shut up." We'd go back and forth, back and forth. And one night in our conversation, I couldn't hold my own. You know, a little bit like, he knew a lot, and I'm like, "I don't like this." In that moment, I was like, "You know what? I need to go back to school, that's what's missing." Because for so long it's kind of like, you work, and you party, and you go out and drink, and you're looking for something, you know what I mean: some kind of fulfillment. You're trying to get it from the alcohol or hanging out late at night. Some kind of fulfillment you don't have, you're out looking for it. And in that moment I realized, that's what it is: I needed to go back to school. As soon as I did, I was like, "yes!" (12)

In her book, Jo Ellen writes about undergoing this transition, as if the fog of depression had suddenly lifted:

I just woke up a different person. I was so much more of my real self. Pieces of the old me that I had missed for so long were finally back, along

with new knowledge I had gained. I got more done in a week that I had in the last four years. The feeling I had in my stomach from knowing what needed to be done—and doing nothing—was gone. It was a feeling I had been weighed down with for a long time. It feels good not to have that weight. For some reason I [had] stayed in neutral for a long time. (34)

After reading Jo Ellen's book, the reason for her "stuck state" would not seem mysterious to any perceptive reader. From the age of fifteen to the age of nineteen, she felt stuck in a relationship with a physically and emotionally abusive boy who threatened to kill her and then himself if she left him. It is understandable that it would take some time to find her strength again.

Understanding the System

At the age of twenty-three, Jo Ellen enrolled at CCGC rather than a four-year university because she liked the small campus. But she still felt a bit intimidated by the prospect of going back to school, as she states,

I guess I felt, I felt kind of, I don't want to say stupid, but going back to [college] a little bit older, being the older one in the classes with all these people who are, you know, right out of high school. And even when I first started going, I thought you went and got a two-year degree, and then went and got your four. I didn't know you just went through. You can stop and get it [a two-year degree], you know, but I mean I didn't know which one was supposed to be a bachelor's. You know, so I didn't know any of the lingo, or anything like that. So I actually felt I think, a little beneath, when I first started, you know. And then, being there I felt like I was the

girl that everybody was like, “Shut up and quit asking questions so we can move on.” I felt like that in all my classes. (14)

In my recollection of Jo Ellen’s participation in class, her questions and comments were well informed and sincere, and I often suspected they benefited her classmates more than herself. Even though Jo Ellen had yet to think of herself as the model student, I found her curiosity and interest in a variety of subject matter to serve as a model for her classmates of how a good student goes about the business of learning.

Difficulty Deciding on a Program of Study

Since Jo Ellen was interested in many subjects, she had a difficult time choosing a field to pursue. She knows she has a talent for writing, but she’s not sure what to do with this interest. Because her father is helping her stepsister go to Texas A&M, he has also offered his financial support to Jo Ellen if she wants to go there, too. But Jo Ellen did not immediately accept his offer:

Whenever my dad offered that, I kinda I didn’t take it. He said, you know, “We want to send you.” And I was just kinda like, you know, and I thought about it, you know, I was like, “Why, why didn’t I jump on it?” Kinda scary. It’s gonna be kinda weird again, moving to a new city, and [I’m] not gonna know anybody. A bunch of eighteen-year-olds. I mean, it’s just gonna be kinda strange. (11)

Jo Ellen talked about researching the journalism program at Texas A & M, but then her self-doubt surfaced again, as she said, “But now I’m like, I’m probably gonna tell everybody I might be going, and then I won’t get accepted or something” (16). She was nervous about taking a spelling and grammar test as a requirement for the program,

though I found her writing to be primarily error free. It was clear to me that Jo Ellen did not see herself as the capable student I perceived her to be.

What Can Teachers Do to Help Comp Students Succeed?

My final question for Jo Ellen was phrased in the following way: “Is there anything you can tell Comp teachers, as a student who had dropped Comp and then came back to pass it, that would help us in learning to support our students to succeed in our courses?” Jo Ellen said, “Let me think about that,” and she proceeded to be silent for ten seconds while she formulated the following answer:

A boy in another class, one of my other classes, came up and we were talking about the book thing, and they were like, “Oh yeah, I dropped.” They were like, “I didn’t want to write a book.” And even that, just like “I can’t do it, it’s too much.” Because as adults they’re not used to that. Like you said, we’re still going, all through high school it’s like, “Thesis statement. Five paragraphs.” It’s drilled in your head, and that’s the only kind of writing you ever learn. And so, getting [home]work outside the box, I think some people are scared kinda, of doing that, ’cause they’ve never had to do that. (14-15)

I asked Jo Ellen if she thought I should introduce the book project differently on the first day of the course, to further guide students in making a decision whether to stay enrolled in my section of Comp I or to transfer to another section. She replied,

Just you know, let them know that, maybe that you use you’re using the word *book*, but it’s not that big. You know, I mean, it’s equal to doing,

like the five papers, but you're gonna have to find the time to do it. It's something 'cause, you know, you're writing about your life. (15)

Jo Ellen also noted that the book project might be more challenging for younger students, particularly eighteen year olds like the ones from her high school who have been “sheltered and catered to” and might think, “Uhh, I don't have anything to write about” (15). She commented that the project might be more inviting to female students than males due to the emotions that sometimes come up when writing about one's life. Of the male students in her courses, she noted the following:

I feel like some of the guys, they just don't care. Some of the people that were in my classes were just like, I don't know. The guys are just like, “I'm here, I'm really getting a degree in something else, but I'm here.” Kind of like what you said, “Jumping through the hoops,” doing just enough to pass, but they don't really care about their course or their coursework maybe. And [writing the book] definitely requires more of you than that. So I think, some students, you know, are looking for a challenge. Whereas some, they're like, “Uh, this takes too much energy and effort. I just want to get a boring topic and write over it like I've always done.” (15)

Jo Ellen's comments bring attention to the resistance that some students may feel towards unfamiliar pedagogical practices in FYC. But she also contends that some students drop for reasons that have nothing to do with the course requirements, stating, “Everybody's situation is a little different; life is just really complicated. When you're going through high school they say high school is supposed to prepare you for college,

but I really don't think it does. Maybe, you know, educationally, but everything else, it doesn't really prepare you" (16).

"I Am Unfinished"

In her book *Unfinished*, Jo Ellen quotes her mother as saying, "Life isn't fair" (32). But she ends her book by assuming responsibility for her reactions to the events in her life, thus claiming the agency to change her life. She tries to empower others to do the same with their lives, coaching her readers with the following words:

When you look around and don't like what you see, you are the only one who can change it. You got yourself there, and you're the only one who can get yourself out. There are outside factors that can interfere. People do have free will. But the decision is up to you on how you deal with it. You can waste time and energy getting mad and bitter. Or, you can accept what has happened, accept that there is no way to change it, and move on, remembering, "This will make me a better, stronger person. I will learn something from this. It will help me grow, because I am unfinished." (34)

I would love to assert that writing the book for Comp I helped Jo Ellen take stock of her life and move on. But it is her father's financial support that is finally allowing her to leave town to pursue her dreams of a four-year degree. For the first time in her career as a student, Jo Ellen will be able to work much fewer than forty hours a week, giving her the opportunity to become the successful student she deserves to be.

Case Study #5: Introducing A.J. : Gifted, Talented, and Struggling Towards Maturity

A.J. was barely eighteen when he signed up for a section of my Comp I course in the fall of 2006. Although young, he was a sophisticated writer, utilizing effective variations in point of view and handling flashbacks with fluency. He admired Hunter Thompson and George Orwell, and often judged his own writing as woefully inadequate. In class, I was immediately struck by A.J.'s articulate intelligence and knew that it would be challenging to stay one step ahead of this student. My first impression of him was that he was an intellectual and seemed smart enough to attend Harvard—yet here he was enrolled at CCGC. I wondered what factors impacted his decision to attend a community college rather than a four-year university. A.J. proceeded to explain this choice to me.

“I Was Just a Little Kid”

After A.J.'s arrest at age sixteen for possession of a controlled substance on a high school campus, his father required him to get his G.E.D. (rather than finishing high school) if he wanted to keep living at home. I asked A.J. if he was upset by his father's ultimatum. He explained his reaction to his father's demand in the following reply:

At the time I was kind of for it [getting his G.E.D.], 'cause it was like I could get out early, get everything done, and be stupid, and college was like this—they made it sound so easy. And, I got there and realized I just wasn't ready for it, I was just, a little kid. I didn't go about, I didn't take it seriously, I just really kind of breezed through it. I paid attention to what I wanted to and did what I wanted to and didn't really, you know, buckle down. (1)

Like many highly intelligent youths who do well on standardized tests, A.J. thought of high school as a “breeze” (1). He initially did well in high school, claiming, “I was number 33 in a 5A school before I dropped out. It was just, [that my father] thought that high school meant drugs. And you know, it kind of does” (1). Because CCGC was less than four miles from their home, A.J.’s father felt comfortable enrolling his son at this local community college. A.J. signed up for a full load that first semester. I asked him if attended an orientation or had any help from an advisor in choosing classes in which to enroll. He responded,

I never attended an orientation. I just showed up. They just asked me what I wanted, and I kind of made sure that I didn’t have anything at 8 a.m. and acted like I was in complete control of it all, and that’s what I mean about being immature. I took easy classes, at awkward times and just kind of made it a big joke—to where I couldn’t work [at a part-time job], and [the schedule] didn’t work out. (2)

I asked A.J. if he thought of CCGC as a “joke school” because it was a local community college rather than a more prestigious four-year university; I wondered if he considered CCGC a place where he could get by with little or no effort, but also not learn much of anything either. I believed that A.J. had the intelligence to thrive in an Ivy League school, so I was surprised by his response: “No, not at all. After being there [at CCGC], I know that there’s really, really good professors. And, I think whenever I say “joke” it’s like I was expecting it to be just this little shanty type of thing, and I got there and was totally overwhelmed” (2). This was understandably disorienting for A.J. as he admitted that in high school he was used to being the smartest kid in the class, and even if he didn’t turn

in daily assignments, he did well enough on the tests to get A's and B's in most of his high school courses (14).

Forced to Succeed: Retaking College Courses to Get A's and B's

Although A.J. turned in a book for Comp I, he was embarrassed by his work, judging it as inferior and incomplete. I remember wrestling with what grade to give his project that semester, as I, too, judged his book *Anomaly* as unfinished. I expected him to do better, but I also realized it was not fair to grade a student's work based on my perception of his or her potential. I tried to compare his work with other work that received a passing grade, and therefore decided to pass A.J. I felt that he would not particularly benefit from taking Comp I again and was intellectually ready for Comp II. I did not realize that he would be forced to re-take Comp I anyway, as is revealed in the following excerpt from pages two and three of the transcript of our interview:

Me: I couldn't give you an incomplete, you know [due to departmental policy]. But it didn't seem to me that you needed to take [Comp I] again.

A.J.: Oh, but I was, I'm being made to. I'll take [Comp I] again. I can't make C's and D's. B is okay, amidst like a bunch of A's, but not C's and D's.

Me: Whenever you say, "Being made to," does that have to do with your father?

A.J.: They only pay for the school that they want me to go to is why I say that.

Me: Who are "they"?

A.J.: "They"—my parents, I'm sorry. Yeah, my parents, my dad pays for my schooling, and he wants me to be a doctor, lawyer, money. So that's the schooling I can go to.

Which, you know, I'm grateful for.

Me: Right. So does he pick every one of your classes? Does he pick any of your classes?

AJ: He tells me what to take, and then I kind of move around the edges. Like I didn't take a chemistry [course] this semester. And that was—I was being a rebel.

Me: Do you like chemistry?

A.J.: No, I don't. I like music.

Me: So, [is this] what we have going on here—that your dad has this vision for you that you don't totally share?

A.J.: Yeah.

If I had known A.J. was going to have to repeat the course anyway, I probably would not have spent as much time contemplating his grade for Comp I. But as much as I wanted this smart and articulate student to succeed in the academy, it can be argued that I was not doing him any favors by passing his less than polished work as this did *not* improve his self-image nor increase his sense of self-worth.

"I've Always Been a Real Bad Procrastinator"

Later in the interview I asked A.J. if he would choose to flunk a course by not turning in a major assignment, rather than submit a project that is not as good as he knows he has the potential to achieve. His reaction is typical of the many young gifted and talent students I have taught over the years, and is also indicative of a perfectionist. A.J. explained how difficult it was to meet his self-imposed standards:

That sounds like, like a cop out, but that's really how I feel: I would be really embarrassed to turn in something that I didn't feel was good. And I know you keep some of that stuff, and like what if you read it one day, and

I'm just, "Oh God." If I want something, if I want to get it done, I want to do it to my standards. (6)

I asked A.J. if there was anything he had created or completed that actually met his own standards. He replied, "I'm really mediocre at everything. And I think it's because I get frustrated. I don't know; I'm not really terrific at anything. I play the drums, and I paint. You know, nothing prodigious or anything like that. It's weird. It's kind of depressing—'cause I'll never be good at anything" (7). I couldn't resist responding with alarm, communicating to A.J. that this was a bold statement for an eighteen-year-old student to make. He then spoke of the shame he carried around with him for getting arrested in high school.

"It Was a Bad Time"

A.J. spoke of wanting to go to London as an exchange student during his senior year of high school, but his plans were derailed when he was arrested for a Class B misdemeanor for possession of a controlled substance in his junior year at his high school campus:

Whenever they arrested me, I could've gone home. Could have, but my dad was like, "No, do with him what you will, make an example out of him." They, you know, took me off campus in handcuffs and the whole spiel. We walked through the whole school, but nobody was out. It was like classes were in, and I felt so saved. And then I was in juvey hall right off the highway for about a week. And then I got out, and they put me in boot camp. And it was just, really crappy. It was a bad time. I'm definitely not as bad into drugs as I was when that was going on. (7)

A.J.'s description of the event reveals his sense of shame at being arrested for drug possession in front of his peers, but his story also hints at the building tension in his relationship with his father, an accomplished surgeon.

Signing up for Comp II

After A.J.'s self-proclaimed sub-par performance in my Comp I course, I was surprised that he enrolled in a section of Comp II taught by me the following semester. I asked him if he chose my section deliberately, or if it was a matter of convenience in scheduling. He replied that he told the registration advisor, "I want Ms. Rudd" (3). I asked him why, and we discussed his reaction to my teaching in the following excerpt:

A.J.: I like the way you teach. And it's, it's more of like, "I'm gonna give you all of this, and kind of, you make sense of it, how you want to, and then, I'm gonna quiz you on, how you feel about it." [laughter] It's the greatest thing ever. You have to have talent to really impress you, but it's, you know, that way of going about it is pretty cool. That [can be] a double-edged sword, but very progressive.

Me: I like the way you condense my pedagogy into, kind of like this lightning bug inside a mason jar. That's pretty good though. I think you did a good job of describing it because I, myself, find it hard to describe. The thing is, that [kind of teaching] was hard on you. Because you didn't finish a book, you didn't get the grade you wanted, you're gonna have to retake [Comp I]. And you probably didn't know how I [would teach Comp II]. But that [Comp II] was a crazy section. It was an interesting class in terms of, I mean, it was fun in a way, but it was a rebel class.

A.J.: Yeah. I still hang out with a bunch of people from that class.

Me: Really? I didn't quite know what to do with that class. But my impression was that you were doing fine in that class at first.

AJ: I don't know. I guess I was doing fine. I just—I don't do well with homework for whatever reason. And when people tell me to do things I just don't do them. And it's, it's just self-destructive. And I don't—I don't know, I'm still trying to figure all that out. That's why, I just stopped going towards the end, and I was just real confused by everything. It was a long semester. (3-4)

For the research project that semester, my Comp II students were required to pick a writer of interest to them, write an I-search paper regarding the writer's style, and then write a piece emulating this writer's style. A.J. chose to read "Politics and the English Language" by George Orwell and *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* by Slavoj Zizek as he tried to decide which of these writers to emulate.

"Engulfed by His Greatness"

Because A.J. had displayed an interest in literary figures such as Alan Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac plus had some of his own literary ambitions, I assumed that the research project I assigned in Comp II would suit him better than most of my other students. However, my assumptions were proven false by A.J.'s description of his attempt to complete this assignment:

Well, I guess it was like, it's hard to critique George Orwell. Like whatever he writes is . . . like things that just kind of make me sit back and, you know, think about it. And then I feel wrong for writing about it, so then I'll write something like stupid and sappy about love and

something you can't contradict. And [that way] I don't feel like totally, you know, engulfed by his greatness. (5)

A.J. ended up writing a short story in the manner of Hunter Thompson. He wrote eight pages about "being terrified in the library and all of that and the trip all around the campus with nobody ever saying anything to [him]" (5). A.J. said he never turned it in because "you know, it was garbage. It wasn't worth anything" (5).

I now see how the nature of this research assignment can lead students—particularly gifted ones—to judge themselves as never being able to measure up to the writer being emulated. Writing in the manner of someone else can make a fledgling writer feel like a mimic at best, and a fraud at worst. What I thought would be an engaging assignment for A.J. perhaps contributed to his decision to stop coming to class. Inadvertently, my assignment may have fed A.J.'s tendency to procrastinate.

A.J.'s procrastinating behavior that semester was not based on an irrational belief, but on the conclusion that doing the assignment would not significantly change the situation: he might pass the class, but he still wouldn't be able to write like Orwell or Zizek. A.J.'s refusal to turn in the pages he wrote could be considered a form of "self-handicapping," defined by psychologist Piers Steel as "placing obstacles that hinder one's own good performance in order to protect one's self-esteem by giving oneself an 'out' if one fails to do well" (69). Steel categorizes this form of procrastination as a facet of neuroticism engaged in when "procrastinators feel that their actions will not change their situation, and thus they concentrate instead on managing their emotional reactions to the situation" (69). A.J. seemed to be more concerned about managing his parents'

emotional reaction to his academic performance that he was about completing the assignment.

“I Thought I Could Talk My Way out of It”

A.J. never officially withdrew that semester, but he missed over a month of classes. I asked him if remembered a point where he decided to give up on the semester. He reminded me that had completed three other courses that semester: psychology, biology, and American history, and that he even had hopes of passing Comp II until the last week of class:

Actually I showed up for the final, on Monday I think. And nobody was in there. And it might have been on a Wednesday or something like that, and then I just didn't go. At that point I gave up. I didn't even consider like, asking anybody. I was kind of relieved that nobody was sitting in that classroom. And then, I just didn't show up anymore. I was just ready, kind of, for it to be over. (8)

I reminded A.J. that, prior to the final, he had not completed nor submitted his portfolio, which accounted for 60% of his grade in Comp II. We discussed his strategy for completing the course and/or pleasing his parents in the following excerpt:

Me: So then you knew you probably weren't going to pass. Even if you did great on the final, you would've made a low enough grade that you'd have to retake it anyway, if the rule in your family is “you have to get an A or a B.”

A.J.: Yeah. And I thought I could just like, kind of talk my way out of it after it was over.

Me: Okay. Has that worked for you in the past?

A.J.: That makes me sound awful [laughter].

Me: So you were gonna talk your way out of it with me?

A.J.: No, with my parents, cause that's my answer to—

Me: Talk them out of your having to retake it?

AJ: No, out of having—like I would talk my way out of getting in trouble for grades.

And I wasn't worried about it, and I knew I would have to retake it anyway, and so I tried to [talk to them] on my own... terms, 'cause I'd be ready for it. (8)

A.J.'s remarks reveal his greater focus on the emotional repercussions of not finishing the course, rather than the academic ones, fitting Steel's description of self-handicapping as mentioned on the previous page (69).

On His Own Terms

Like many students struggling both to please their parents and also to determine their own career paths, A.J.'s words and actions often seem contradictory. He seems to rely on his father's financial support while simultaneously resenting the dependence this fosters. He wants to study music, but his parents want him to find a career where he will make plenty of money which will then support him to pursue his love for music. Taking only courses that his parents approve of may also lead A.J. to believe that it doesn't matter how well he does or does not do in class—"that [his] actions will not change [his] situation" (Steel 69); they will not set him free to choose his own field of interest.

"If you could go to school anywhere," I asked A.J, "where would you go?" Without hesitating, he said, "Berkeley," and added, "I just always, thought of Berkeley as being like this fun little town where everybody's just crazy. Actually, it'd be nice to go to UT Austin. You know, whenever I think about it, I really like Austin. I've only been to Austin once. And it's like, you can be in Austin and be sober, and it's all right " (9).

“I’m Just Too Scared To Tell Everyone I’m Moving”

A.J. has his own dreams, yet he admitted to feeling trapped in a holding pattern (9). For the past two years he has been working for his father, who hired A.J. to take of his bedridden grandmother. When I asked him to describe his typical day, he responded with the following:

Well, I get up at about 8:30, and fall back asleep. And then get here [to the bottom floor of his father’s mansion] about fifteen minutes late and change Grandma, and try to get her to take her medicine and she doesn’t, so I try for the rest of the day, and eventually it gets down. And I’ll say, “Grandma, I’m going to play my drums,” and she just smiles. She’s not really coherent, at this point. She’s eighty-eight and she’s lived with us for the past two years, ever since the hurricane. After I play drums, I’ll have a smoke, and maybe get something to eat. (9)

Since his grandmother doesn’t seem to recognize him and calls him by his cousin’s name, I asked A.J. if his grandmother’s dementia made him feel like he’s alone most of the day. He said, “No. I mean, it’s grandma. And I’ve come to terms with that” (9).

When A.J. gets off at five, he showers and goes to see the guy he’s dating, then tries to find “where the party is” (10). I asked if the partying life costs him very much money, and he replied, “At least a hundred dollars a week. On a good week, forty,” adding, “I always have a good time, but I just wish I didn’t spend so much money on it. I just wish that I could be okay with doing a little bit” (10-11).

Because A.J. had admitted to using drugs as a part of the partying life, I asked him the following question: “So, why do you, A.J., do drugs—not how it’s become a way of life, but what it gives you?” (11). Here is his candid and articulate response:

It kind of just lets me mellow out and handle all this, you know, fucked up shit that’s happening. Like with Grandma, and all the stuff that goes with that, and my mother. Here recently, she’s actually doing better. But she, she had histoplasmosis, and she almost died and yada yada yada, but she doesn’t have any money, is what I’m saying, and so it’s just stressful. And I don’t know how it’s gonna turn out and it’s like, I sleep on the couch over there, you know, to help out or whatever. And I guess I don’t help out that much; I’m probably just the guy on the couch. And I just want to make something happen, but I’m too scared to. I’m too scared to just, tell everybody, “I’m moving,” and you know, go to the city. (11)

When I asked A.J. what city he was referring to, he said, “Well, Austin sounds good. And that’s close. So whenever I fuck up I can always come back home” (11). A.J. laughed after he said this, but I suspected that underneath this laughter lay a legitimate fear of failure, thus fulfilling a role in which his family had him pigeonholed since his arrest at age sixteen.

“The Guy on the Couch”

When I commented to A.J. that he was living a complicated life, he employed his self-deprecating humor by responding, “Who me? The guy on the couch?” I reminded him of the variety of forces impacting him and asked, “What really keeps you here—is it really fear?” He responded, “No, well, for the time being I think it’s Grandma” (12).

Since I had spent a month in hospice with my mother, I felt I could ask him this potentially insensitive question: “So, do you ever feel like you are waiting for her to die?” (12). He gave a powerful description of this place of limbo:

Yes. And that’s everyday, I think about that. And that’s like what it comes down to. And she wasn’t always just, not talking—just since she’s been in bed, since she’s lived here. It’s, you know, she’s slowly dwindling, and I know that. She keeps having these spells, small strokes, and she’ll be in the hospital and they’ll be like, “She has two days.” And then, you know, here we are four months later. And she’s still here, and she’s still kicking, and we’re doing everything we can for her, and she’s just still, slowly, dying. And it’s like—you’re watching her, you know, at your hands. And it, it just doesn’t feel right. It’s awful. But I can’t leave, because . . . then you know, I left. (12)

I asked A.J. if leaving his grandmother’s side would cause him to feel guilty, and he replied, “Yeah. And I get paid to do this, so I already feel guilty and terrible about it. And . . . it’s just . . . gross” (12).

Although I recognized honor in A.J.’s commitment to care for his dying grandmother, I also witnessed how he couldn’t give himself credit for the caretaking, primarily because his father was paying him to do this. I also noticed the disparaging comments he made about himself, implying that, like his schoolwork, he was not giving it his all—that he believed he was not doing a good enough job of taking care of his grandmother. But it is a complicated and difficult endeavor to help someone make the

transition from life to death, and most eighteen-year-old grandsons are not expected to be able to handle this, whether paid or not.

The Hope of Moving Forward

Since A.J. wanted to go to school in another city, I asked if the following was a true statement as applied to his situation: “You really can’t move forward in life until your grandmother dies” (12). He said, “Well, I could keep going to school, and that’s moving forward” (12). His response resonated with me as I have always felt that I am on my way somewhere when working towards a degree. “I really want to go to school,” A.J. stated, “I believe in it” (13).

After a year of college, A.J. was no longer that “little kid” ill-prepared by a high school where “drugs [were] everywhere” and the culture was focused on “having a blast” (15). A.J. described his high school homework as “all fake,” claiming he “won awards his sophomore year for English and history and biology, and that was the most drugs [he’d] ever done in [his] life” (15). But college had changed him, and he registered that change:

I guess I didn’t take [college] seriously, but now I know the nature of it a little better. I just bit off more than I could chew, and I tried to do it my way. But whenever you do that, you have to just go with it, and I didn’t do what I was told, and I didn’t heed people’s advice. I didn’t let people help me the way, you know, they offered to. And I just really screwed myself, ’cause I thought I knew everything, so now I’m more humble. I guess that would be the way I’m more mature: I’m much more humble. (14)

“I’m More Susceptible To Learn”

I asked A.J. if his newfound maturity and humility translated into being more able to ask for help when he needed it. He responded, “Yes, and I’m more, you know, susceptible to learn. I listen to people a lot more because I realize I don’t know everything, and I know reality very little” (14). When asked what advice he had for students on the borderline of dropping, A.J. stated,

The teachers at CCGC, like high school teachers, they’ll really help you, they’ll do anything they can for you. But you have to take, you know, just that little tiny bit of initiative and just put yourself there and they’ll walk you through it completely. So it’s really up to you, because it’s all out there. It’s really hard to fail like I did at CCGC. You have to really try to *not* get a good grade. (13)

Resisting the Assignment

I doubt A.J. purposely tried to get a failing grade in Comp I, but I do believe his actions demonstrated a resistance to the assignment. In my final response to the manuscript he turned in, I attempted to address the ways in which he potentially sabotaged his success as a student as I also faced the possibility that the assignment as I crafted it had set him up to fail:

You could have written a whole book on not wanting to write a book if you would have liked—or on the art and science, the joy and the pain of procrastination. Or on the ridiculousness of institutionalized education as you see it.

So how do I measure what you've given me? In terms of length alone, your manuscript is incomplete. You don't include page numbers nor do you move new chapters to new pages—so perhaps this is your way of declaring that the parameters of the assignment don't apply to you. Even this I could admire—if it were carried out to the end.

Perhaps this assignment was a set-up from the start—and you never really wanted to be here. Which doesn't make you wrong, by the way, as I said on the first day, “There are many ways to teach Comp I, and this is just one of them.”

I'm sorry if I failed you. I just wanted to take the ceiling off of you—to invite you to reach for your potential. I guess I should have known (since I am the mother of a slightly genius eighteen-year-old) that *potential* can be a dirty word to those who are gifted, as it just might pressure [the gifted student] to create a masterpiece before he or she is ready, willing, and/or able. (Rudd 1)

Perhaps transcending the paralyzing fear of never being able to reach one's potential is the dragon that must be slain in order for gifted and talented students to be successful. And maybe treading down the unfamiliar path of failure is one way for gifted and talented students to gain the maturity and humility necessary to get the help needed in order to succeed in the academy.

When asked what advice he would give to incoming students of FYC, A.J. responded in brief, “Listen, people, just show up with a pen, and you'll be all right” (15). Implied, I believe, is a willingness that includes the commitment to come to class, the

courage to take risks, the humility to ask for help, and the tenacity to keep asking until you get the guidance you need—ultimately participating in your own education. These attributes mark the growth of the “young kid” A.J. called himself in his first semester to the “more humble and mature” student he appeared to be in the interview.

Case Study #6: Erin: Putting the Puzzle Together One Piece at a Time

Erin possessed an outgoing personality, and this was apparent from the first day of class when she maneuvered her motorized wheel chair into the front row in Comp I. Although her cerebral palsy affected her speech, this did not appear to make her self-conscious as she often spoke up in class, sharing her journal entries and participating in class discussions. I remember her as having strong opinions about matters, but she also laughed easily and, quite delightedly, was able to laugh at herself. I liked her “no holds barred” approach to life and appreciated her lively presence in the classroom; therefore I was saddened when she withdrew from this section of Comp I. I never knew the whole story behind her decision until she came to my office, three years after dropping, to be interviewed.

“I Just Wasn’t Feeling Good”

Erin graduated from a local high school in 2000, and then enrolled in CCGC the next spring. She signed up for Comp I with another instructor, and though she passed the course, she wanted to re-take it in order to get a better grade. In 2001 she had surgery to spinal fluid in hopes of controlling spasticity. However, this operation resulted in a decrease in her energy, and she remembers “get[ting] tired all the time” (1). She found

out the next year that she shouldn't have had this surgery because it ameliorated "spasticity of the muscles and [she needed] her spasticity in order to stand" (1).

Her health continued to worsen in 2002, and in 2003 she had another surgery, a hysterectomy. The doctors put her on Prolactin which caused her to vomit. She recalls how sick she felt at that time:

I was throwing up constantly, everything I ate would... and so I did that for about a year and half. I started dropping [courses]; when I had you, I started, you know, I would try to go, and I would drop and I would try to go, and I would drop. Well, it just got worse. And come to find out it must have been my pump. Because shortly after I started having problems with this, and then they took it out. And then I had to have four surgeries last summer. Because I almost died: I was leaking cerebral spinal fluid from my back and they didn't know it. Because the infusion kept swelling up and I would leak, and I did that for a period of two weeks. So I had six weeks where I had to be on best rest almost completely. And so this semester is the first semester I've actually felt good. (2)

Erin eased her way back into school by taking three credits—a math class. Her mother accompanied her to all her math classes in order to take notes for her. Although this was very supportive of her mother, it sometimes caused tension between them.

"I'm the One Taking the Tests"

Erin is a serious student, dedicating many hours to studying per week, but, as she claims, "There's times when I want to rest," yet her mother would push her to study more (3). "But I'm the one taking the tests," Erin recited in the interview, "I'm the one, you

know, studying, I'm the one. She doesn't have to take the tests, and she doesn't have panic attacks when she gets selected [to solve a math problem on the board]" (3).

Although Erin appreciates her mother's support, she found it less stressful to live on her own, with the help of an attendant, rather than reside with her mother. This was difficult for her mother to accept, Erin claims, when Erin first moved out at age nineteen:

I was homesick, but then again I was glad to be out from under my mother. When my mother was a child, she was sick a lot. She had a lot of back surgeries when she was in college, so she stayed with her mother until she was twenty-six. I said, "I can't do that." You know, she had just found out that I had a pre-disposition to diabetes, so she was real panicky about it and kind of overboard about it, and I was just like, "Mom, I don't need this right now." And as soon as I moved out my blood sugar started dropping down to where it was supposed to be. (3)

When I asked Erin if she felt that her mother was a strong supporter of her educational goals, Erin responded that getting good grades was more important to her own sense of self-worth rather than something she pursued in order to please her mother. She explained the variation between her and her mother's expectations:

I think [my going to college] is more important to me than it is to [my mother], because I'm more of a person where, I have to make A's and B's. If I'm gonna teach, I can't make a C, you know. And she's more, "It's okay to make a C, you know," and I'm real hard on myself. And because I am so hard on myself, when I say, "Okay, it's time for me to take a

break,” I think I’ll allow myself to do that because I am so hard on myself, you know. A’s and B’s, A’s and B’s. (4)

Erin’s situation seemed to be the opposite of A.J.’s, whose parents were only satisfied by A’s and B’s and made him re-take courses where he earned C’s and D’s. Erin’s mother, on the other hand, was content with her daughter earning C’s. In fact, Erin’s mother had much lower expectations for her daughter than A.J.’s father had for his son. Erin recalls a particularly poignant conversation where her mother admits to these lowered expectations:

Not to make my mother sound bad, but when I first started taking these math classes, and she started taking them with me, she confessed to me a few weeks ago, she said, “Erin, the most I thought you’d ever be able to do is go to college and take, you know, like a little basic computer course, and now you’re taking pre-cal.” And I’m like, “Well, Mom.” And when I was in sixth grade, I had to BEG her, beg her to get out of resource science ’cause I know was good in science. I made straight A’s in science. And even when I got out of my resource classes, you know, I succeeded. I’ve always been . . . I have to be better than, you know, people expect me to be, because if not, then I haven’t proven them wrong. (5)

It struck me that Erin and A.J. had opposite goals when it came to their support systems: Erin wanted to prove the naysayers wrong while A.J.’s self-sabotaging behaviors proved the naysayers in his family right. Both, however, are on a quest for self-determination and independence, making choices on their own rather than under the control of their parents.

“I Want To Have My Own Time, My Own Life”

Erin’s mother chose Erin’s attendants until Erin asserted her own authority to do so. Still, her mother wanted to tag along on Erin’s outings, until Erin had to put a stop to this, too:

Sometimes if I need my space, you know, like if I want to go somewhere with a friend, [my mother] is like, “Well, I want to be included.” You know, that’s just kind of . . . it’s like, “No, I want to be, I want to have my own time, my own life, you know.” A lot of times I don’t get to have my own life so when I do, it’s . . . it’s few and far between, you know. (6)

“It’s All I Can Do Not To Damn Her”

I wondered if Erin had any siblings, as this can sometimes divert a mother’s suffocating attention. Erin mentioned that she was adopted, and therefore she didn’t know if she had any siblings or not. She shared the following story with me:

If I did [have siblings], it would kind of scare me, because of the way I came into this world. My mother was on drugs [LSD], and I was two months premature. And I had breathing problems when I was a baby. I had a heart murmur, and I had three eye surgeries by the time I was two years old. So, I mean, I’ve just had problems. I was in a PCD [Prevention of Chemical Dependency] class [at CCGC], and they were describing the birth defects and what people could have, if they were on this drug and this drug, and it described my mom to a T, and I just, you know, I walked out of the class and I was like . . . So that was kind of a big deal. I knew

what she had taken and what she had done, but just hearing it from another source . . . (6)

I asked Erin if she had ever met her biological mother, and she replied, “No. And God help her if I do. I don’t want to know [who she is]. I just don’t think about her. The only time I think about her is when I start having problems, like all these surgeries I’ve had is because I have cerebral palsy. And every time I get sick, it’s all I can do not to damn her, you know?” (7)

“Don’t Ever Yell at Me Like That Again”

When asked if she ever let herself get angry, Erin noted that anger quickly turned to panic for her:

When I have a panic attack, it’s mostly because somebody’s pissed me off. I just, I start shaking, and I start yelling, and I start not making sense. I mean, it’s, it’s horrible. And then I feel like I’m gonna puke because, you know. But most of the time when that happens it’s because I’m pissed off at somebody. (7)

I asked Erin to give me an example of something that made her angry, and she described a situation with her mom’s roommate:

I don’t like being yelled at too much. When I was [living] with my mom, she had a roommate. And the roommate had bipolar issues, and she would go into these raging screaming fits. I mean, so bad to the point where it would make me shake. And she would, kind of, throw me on the bed or something if she’d get mad. The bed was soft, but the adrenaline just pumped up in me. And so every time somebody yells at me, or I hear a

fight outside, I just go into these shaking panic attacks. I told my mom, I call her, “Mom, I’m having a panic attack,” you know. And it’s horrible. So anytime I hear somebody screaming, or a fight, and we get into it sometimes, and once I was really sick when we got into it. So I tell [my mom’s roommate], “Look, you made me throw up the other day.” And she goes, “Well, I didn’t mean to.” And I said, “You know exactly what you did, you pissed me off and made me puke.” She’s like, “Well, I didn’t mean to.” I said, “Don’t ever yell at me like that again.” (7)

Erin’s use of the historical present (“I tell”) points to the importance of this moment for her, almost as if she is reliving the event as she recounts it to me. I asked her if she felt physically threatened by her mother’s roommate who threw her on the bed and repeatedly pointed a finger in Erin’s face, but Erin described it as verbal abuse. She added, “It’s almost, like, because you’re disabled, you know, you can’t do anything” (7). Erin has also had attendants who have said to her, “Your mom’s my boss, and you’re not my boss, and, you know, I can treat you however” (7).

Slapping Back: “I Just Had Enough”

I asked Erin if she had told her mother about these abusive incidents, and she explained, “My mother’s not the type to take up for herself, you know, rarely ever” (8). Erin recalls one time, however, when she was fourteen and someone told her to drop dead, and she spouted back, “You, too, Bitch!” and her mother backed her up. And though Erin, like her mother, generally prefers to avoid conflict, she described a scene with her mother’s roommate that escalated to violence:

She [the mother's roommate] went to slap me and I slapped her back—I've only done that twice in my life, by the way. But I just, I had enough, you know. It was just one of those moments where, you know, and after I slapped her, I puked on myself [laughter]. It's just one of those things. But my mother doesn't know everything, and I try not to get into that, because she just, she just doesn't want to hear it. But finally my aunt told her [the mother's roommate], "You're leaving this house." I'd had enough with the verbal abuse, and the physical abuse. And my aunt said [to the roommate], "You're going." (8)

Slapping the roommate back—ultimately leading to the roommate's removal—helped Erin develop a sense of agency in her life, making her less likely to tolerate future abuse. She says of her current attendant, "If she has a little attitude and stuff, I'll put her in her place real quick" (8).

Goals and Dreams: Conquering Math Anxiety

Erin had been an English major when she had enrolled in my Comp I course, but now, three years later, she was a math major. When I asked about her goals and dreams, Erin began with her elementary school aspirations:

When I was in third grade, I wanted to teach special ed 'cause I was the smartest kid in my class, and I knew it. And so I said, "Well, I want to teach special ed." And then I got up to seventh grade, and I said, "I'm not doing this" because it just got worse: the kids were violent, and I didn't belong in there, period. And so I just said, "I don't want to do this." And I

said, “Well, I’ll start teaching regular classes,” and I wanted to teach high school English.

And then I decided—I heard this story on the radio one day, and there was a Bible verse, and then she [the host of the radio show] read the Bible verse, and then she said, “If there’s something that just scares the living heck out of you, do it, and see if God does not change your life.” And I said, “That’s it! I’m gonna be a math major. I’m gonna conquer everything that scares me, I’m gonna conquer graphs, I’m gonna conquer this area and this area and this area.” (8)

Hearing those words on the radio would prove to be a pivotal moment not only for Erin’s career path but also for Erin’s life beyond the classroom as she would be introduced to a mentor who would support Erin to receive intellectual and social support in many endeavors.

Meeting Miss Smith: The Difference One Teacher Can Make

Crucial to Erin’s successful mastery of math, particularly graphs, was finding a mentor who could meet her at her current level of understanding. Luckily, she found one at CCGC in Miss Smith, who, coincidentally, had also switched from majoring in English to majoring in math in her second year of college. Erin had much to say about teachers in general:

A lot of teachers, I’m sorry, but they don’t know how to step down a notch to say, “Okay, this person does not understand this.” And it’s not just, you know, college. It’s high school teachers, too. And some of the high school [teachers]—my god, they didn’t want to figure out a situation where [they

can help]; instead, they just say, “Well, I think she can do that, she can do that, why can’t she do that?” You know, it was more like a political issue than “we need to help her.” (9)

“She Stayed with Me until I Got It”

I asked Erin if she felt she got the academic help she needed in high school, and she repeated, “No. No.” She expected to find the same situation at CCGC, but was delighted to discover a different experience:

I swear, when I came here, as far as math went, when I came here, I was scared to death. I thought, “This teacher is not going to understand.” And you know what, she didn’t understand, but that’s the thing, she believed. She said, “Oh, I believe you.” I said, “Thank you, Jesus!” You know?

That’s all I could think. She’s like, “I believe you, I believe you.” (9)

Erin’s repetition of the word *believe* four times emphasized the importance to Erin of receiving affective support from a teacher, of having a teacher invest in her success emotionally as well as intellectually.

In high school, Erin had struggled to explain to her math teachers how she couldn’t see a four by four grid, so they gave up and didn’t teach her graphing. But Miss Smith listened to Erin and encouraged her to communicate what she did see. Erin describes this encounter:

I couldn’t do it [graph] because I couldn’t track it. Well, lo and behold, Miss Smith showed me how I could do it. And I came up with some of the stuff, and she came up with some of the stuff, but she was willing to actually sit down and say, “Okay, show me what can you do.” And she

goes, “Can you see this?” I said, “Well, maybe if you did this.” And she goes, “Can you see this?” And I said, “No, that’s not right . . .” But anyway, she, she helped me come up with a system where I can learn how to graph. (5)

Erin’s repeated use of the present tense verb *goes* in the above dramatization suggests that Erin perceives Miss Smith’s support to be ongoing, making it possible for Erin to succeed where she once failed.

“Then She Got Involved in My Life”

Erin had actively sought out her college math teacher’s help, meeting with Miss Smith outside of class. Even when Miss Smith’s office hours were scheduled to be over, Erin attests that Miss Smith “stayed with me and stayed with me until I got it” (5). Erin greatly admired Miss Smith’s patience and dedication, seeing her not only as a role model for her future profession as a math teacher, but also as a friend and mother figure. Erin puts it this way:

She’s my best friend here [at CCGC]; I admire her so much. She’s like a second mother to me. She wanted me to study and study, you know. And keep up with it and [not] get frustrated. She got involved in my life; she’s like, “Okay, now that you can do this, what can’t you do?” (9)

I recognize Miss Smith as a strong supporter of Erin’s literacy. The phrase *sponsor of literacy* has been popularized by Deborah Brandt’s research “tracing sponsors of literacy across the 20th century as they appear in the accounts of ordinary Americans recalling how they learned to write and read” (334). Brandt defines *sponsors of literacy* as “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as

recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way (334). Brandt describes sponsors of literacy as being “powerful figures who bankroll events or smooth the way for initiates” who nevertheless “enter a reciprocal relationship with those they underwrite” and “stand to gain benefits from their success” (335).

Certainly Miss Smith was a sponsor of Erin’s numerical literacy, but by believing in the importance of Erin’s dream to become a compassionate math teacher sensitive to the struggles of students with math anxiety, Miss Smith also helped Erin navigate the difficulties in her other college courses, encouraging her to communicate with her other teachers and to make detailed and deliberate plans to succeed. Thus she became a “powerful figure” in promoting Erin’s progress towards a degree as a math teacher, and perhaps we can adapt Brandt’s term to more specifically label Miss Jones as one of Erin’s *sponsors of persistence*.

Erin’s Advice to Teachers and Students of FYC

“Is there anything you want to say,” I asked Erin near the end of the interview, “that could help teachers like me in the classroom see what individual students need?” Erin thought for a moment and said, “A lot of time [college teachers] don’t understand, okay, [that] this is a really good student. And I’m a really good English student. I wrote really good papers, and it was just a thing that, you know, if I ask for help with grammar or something, it’s like, “I really need your help here” (10). By extrapolation from Erin’s experience with the math teacher, what she really needs is for a Comp teacher to have the time and good will to listen to her, to meet her where she is, and then lead her to the next level.

I asked Erin what advice she would give to students who are considering dropping Comp I or Comp II. She addressed these potential students directly, “If you have to drop, drop. But I mean, don’t quit. And when you drop, true enough, the letter put on there is Q. But for me, that means don’t quit—don’t prove that letter—just keep going” (10).

After pausing for a moment, Erin articulated a general response regarding why most students drop FYC:

I don’t think it’s just comp. I think either they’re immature or their parents don’t give a crap, or their parents give a crap and they’re just here because their parents [demand], “Go to school, go to school, go to school.” The kid has to want it, and for me, that’s not an issue. I’ve always wanted it. (10)

Erin went even farther in suggesting that Comp teachers deliver the following message to their incoming first-year students:

You gotta tell them, “You shouldn’t be here.” You know, “You gotta find a way to get out of that. If you’re here because your parents want you to be here, you’re not going to be a better person because you don’t want to be here. You’re not gonna want to try harder, you’re not gonna have the initiative to want to do better for yourself. You have to, you know, you have to do it for yourself, you’re an adult now.” (10)

Erin’s advice led me to reflect on my own practice as a teacher of FYC. I frequently begin my courses by asking, “Why are you here?”; however, I can’t imagine being bold enough to take Erin’s advice and tell these first-year students, “If you’re not here for yourself, you shouldn’t be here.” I told Erin that she already sounded like a teacher, and she laughed, although I suspect she was flattered to hear these words (10).

Putting the Pieces Together

In the spirit of generosity with which Erin granted me this interview, she gave me one last candid comment: “I have totally enjoyed this interview. I didn’t think it was gonna be as good for you as it was for me, I was like, ‘What can I do for her?’ But then things just started coming out and it’s like...putting the pieces all together” (11).

This reminded me of Erin’s revelation earlier in the interview regarding her favorite hobby. She begins and ends each day by working on 1000-piece jigsaw puzzles, putting them together in her living room without help from anyone else, beginning a new puzzle every two to four weeks. She claims it relaxes her and provides a needed break from studying, adding, “It just makes you, it still makes you think, but yet, you know, I get frustrated with it. But it gives me a sense of accomplishment. Every time I get a piece, I tell myself, ‘I gotta get one more piece, gotta get one more’” (5). She then laughed in recognition of an insight: “That’s been my whole life!” (5).

I left the interview feeling incredibly blessed to hear Erin’s story—whose twists and turns I never would have guessed by being the teacher of record for the section of Comp I she attended for the first few weeks of the semester when she felt so sick. Just as Erin grew to admire Miss Smith, I have grown to admire Erin as she has inspired me to continue plodding—to keep reaching for one puzzle piece after another even if I am not particularly good at matching size or shape or color, even when I grow weary and frustrated with own academic goals.

Case Study #7: Introducing Mary: From Housewife to Honor Student

I remember Mary as always having a story to tell her classmates in the evening section of my Comp II class she signed up for in 2006. Her life was filled with drama, and we never knew what seemingly fantastical event had happened to her since the last time class met. She was quick to offer her perspective, and also quick to poke fun at herself for this same perspective. I thought maybe Mary was eager to grant me an interview because she likes to talk and has few inhibitions in being candid about sharing her experiences. Because she has three children, she asked me to come to her house to interview her, which I was happy to do.

Before she dropped Comp II, Mary demonstrated talent in being a student, but so many obstacles emerged between her and a successful completion of that semester that simply listing them overwhelmed me. I couldn't imagine what it must have been like to actually live with her particular combination of maladies, but Mary was a survivor—approaching her goals with hope, enthusiasm, and an occasionally absurdist sense of humor.

“I’ve Been Wanting To Go to College for a Long Time”

Mary married young—to a guy she had been with since she was fifteen—and like Miss D, was pregnant by the time she was nineteen. She completed her GED at seventeen, and gave birth to three children by the time she was twenty-three, “So that put kind of a dent in [her college plans] (1). Her husband became abusive, and they divorced in 2004. She admits to “kind of screw[ing] off a bit” after the divorce because she had married so young (1). She adds, “I finally had a chance of blowing off some steam, so to speak” (1). But she soon re-focused on her goals and decided it was time to enroll in

college. “I chose CCGC because I was told that it was easier to do your core curriculum there,” she shared, “and I knew I wanted to go on [to get] my bachelors [degree] and maybe my masters” (1). Before she could do this, however, she had many issues to deal with, including her health.

“They Say I’m Bi-Polar”

As Mary jumped from subject to subject in our interview, she seemed almost apologetic, explaining, “A lot of things interest me. But they say I’m bi-polar. You know, I think everybody’s bi-polar” (1). When I asked Mary whom “they” represents, she shared the following:

I’ve had one doctor say, well, he classified me as bi-polar. And, I mean I’ve had a couple other ones say that I was just depressed. But that was, you know, that was when I was married. When I was married I also had insurance, and I could go to the doctor frequently. And usually when I went to the doctor, it was because I had a very abusive relationship, and I was always depressed or pissed off or having issues with my ex-husband (husband at the time). And I think anybody can be having bi-polar [symptoms] when things like that are going on. (1)

“You’re Not My Real Sister”

I asked Mary if her family had a history of bi-polar disorder. She informed me that she had been adopted, adding, “My brother and sister are my adoptive parents’ natural children.” This made her feel somewhat of an outsider in her family, especially the way she found out she was adopted. She recalls this scene vividly:

They told me I was adopted, I'll never forget, when I was in the car, seven years old, on the way to my grandfather's house in _____. And they gave me this book. It was like, you know, about being a chosen child. And it told about, how they chose me, and it's better to be chosen, cause you don't get stuck with who you're stuck with. And I mean, I don't know if they were just trying to make me feel better or whatever, now that I'm older. But my sister, [who is two years younger]—well actually, they got pregnant with her when I was nine months old. (1)

This younger sister grew up to use Mary's adopted status against her, saying, "You're not my real sister" and "She's not your real mother" whenever she got angry with Mary (2).

Honoring Her Father's Story

In spite of the trouble her adoptive sister caused her, Mary seemed to have a strong bond with her adoptive father. He was a shipbuilder who had been rounded up with his parents in Krakow, Poland, during World War II and put in a prison camp. "He was about ten when he was captured," Mary reported, adding solemnly, "His parents died there." Her father and his brothers, however, were rescued. On his deathbed, her father told her his story and asked her to pass it down to her kids, and then for her kids to pass it down to their kids. "He was a very proud man," Mary remembers fondly, vowing to research and write down his story one day in order to preserve this family legacy of starting over (2).

Starting College after Age Thirty

After her divorce, Mary was finally able to attend college, registering for twelve credit hours in the fall of 2005. I asked her about her first full-time experience of college,

wondering if her first semester at CCGC matched her expectations. She replied enthusiastically,

I loved it. I did great. I made an A, in Comp 1. I mean, I made an A in Public Speaking. I made an A in American History. I made what amounted to be a C in my math class, but it didn't count towards my GPA. Miss Jones [who taught Comp I] and I got along great. She said that she thought I wrote really great papers, that I had a lot to say about the topic I wrote on. But that my grammar, well, my grammar has always sucked. (3)

“Making a D Really Took My World Down”

Mary started the semester of Comp I with Miss Jones enthusiastically but grew stressed as she made her way through finals. She particularly remembers the importance of doing well on the final in-class argumentative essay assigned in that course:

At that point, I was teetering on making a C before the final in Comp 1. And I could have made good on my final which would have made [my course grade] a B, so what I already had would have been great. Or I could have made a boo-boo, and I could have made a D. Well, [the final] was an argumentative essay. And the argument I chose was, “Should kids wear uniforms at school or should they not?” Well, I have three kids, so what do you think I chose? Now, if I'd still been in school, I'd have been like, “Oh no.” But I have three kids, and I'm a single mother now. And I get \$550 a month in child support. And he [my ex-husband] is one of them guys that think, “That's what I pay you, that's what you get.” So I chose to argue “yes,” and I had plenty of reasons why I thought, “yeah.” I thought I did,

except—and I had a lot to say, but, again my grammar. It wasn't—it never—I've been . . . It's been almost twenty years since I graduated [high school]. And I'm basically stuck in the way I write. I have a lot to write about, I've always had a lot to say. And I do write letters to people. I mean, you know, I have relatives that live away. And I like to write. I keep a diary sometimes, not all the time, but I'm stuck in the way I write. Just like, I think we wrote some short stories where people were stuck in the way they write and they just put it down like they put it down that's how it was. And we weren't doing poetry or nothing so there was no give or take, it was just essays. So I ended up making a D, and that really took my world down. (3)

Because of her experience in Comp I, Mary was reluctant to sign up for another Comp course, waiting a whole year to sign up for Comp II.

“You Don't Grade as Hard on Grammar”

Even though Mary received a D from Miss Jones in Comp I, she trusted the advice she received when Miss Jones suggested Mary take me for Comp II. Mary recalls their discussion near the completion of Comp I:

She said that you are a really good teacher, and that she liked you, and ya'll got along. But she that said you don't [grade] as hard on grammar. She said you love to hear what students have to say, that you're big on wanting them to just write and write and write and write. And that you'll help us, like when you have us turn it in and you give us [chances to revise], but whenever we turn it in don't expect for you to give us more

points just because we [corrected the errors] since you edited it for us, you know. Because that's not what it was about. (3)

Miss Jones's depiction of my teaching philosophy does not totally jibe with my own understanding of my teaching practices, but I felt that her instincts were right in steering Mary towards my courses that value creativity and risk-taking, digging deep to find something meaningful to write, and revising repeatedly. But even if a student finds the most suitable teacher for her style of writing, other factors can impinge upon her ability to successfully complete a semester. Mary experienced several of these that were seemingly not under her control.

"I Totaled the Truck"

Mary took twelve credit hours again the next semester, and now had enough credits and a high enough GPA (3.0 and above) to be invited to join Phi Theta Kappa, the two-year college honor society. Her success led her to sign up for both summer sessions, but she ended up flipping her truck on new gravel and therefore couldn't complete Summer Session II. She received a head injury that aggravated the migraine headaches she had experienced since kindergarten (4). Yet she didn't let this stop her from enrolling for Fall Semester. She found support through the Texas Rehabilitation Commission. They helped send her to school and covered the cost of a math tutor. (4)

Still recovering from her injuries from rolling the truck on the gravel, Mary decided to go ahead and enroll for the fall semester of 2006. She signed up for my evening section of Comp II because she preferred the greater numbers of "adults" generally registered in the evening courses (4). Perhaps because she felt so shaken up, she

let her ex-husband move back in with her. This would quickly add to her stress, however, rather than providing her with support.

“I Needed To Get Away from Him”

Soon after he moved back in, Mary and her ex-husband went to a party together. She tells the story of what happened that night:

I left early 'cause they were partying harder than I wanted to party. And um, he comes home at four or five in the morning strolling in drunk. And my daughter was sleeping with me in the bedroom. And, he just went, first he didn't know she was sleeping with me, then he crossed the room, grabbed me, you know. Then she sat up and was like—'cause she was all sleeping—so he tells her to go in her room. Then he just decided that he was gonna wake them all up and say, “See what she made me to do her?” So then after that, he just started stalking me, 'cause I kicked him out. And so that's why, I was having more problems [in college]. And so, I guess it was a little more than halfway through the semester. I decided I had to leave, I needed to get out of here, I needed to get away from him. So I moved to my godmother's. (5)

But her godmother's house did not turn out to be the refuge she hoped it would be. Disliking the behavior of Mary's eleven-year-old son (who, like Mary, had also been diagnosed as bi-polar), Mary's godmother “grabbed him up by his hair and shook him” (5). “I just died,” Mary remembers, “and so I shaved his head off . . . because I didn't want her to do it again” (5). This all happened the first week they were there, causing

their return to the home where the stalking had occurred. Her ex-husband frequently drove by to honk and called her after work to sexually harass her.

Laughing Instead of Screaming

While putting up with her ex-husband, Mary was also trying to get the courts and the doctors to help her secure adequate treatment for her bi-polar son. This, too, proved to be a grueling process as Mary struggled to be heard:

Because of these *great* lawyers we have around here, not lawyers, excuse me, well lawyers included, but judges. There are all these fathers that have nothing to do with their kids while they're married, but everything's equal you know. Fathers are supposed to have as much say in the parental rights. Doctor, medical-wise, and all that crap. So I tell the doctor to put [my son] on the medicine that's supposed to help control his anger—'cause he gets *angry*. You know, see he's eleven, he just turned eleven in May. So [the doctor] says, "He's not angry. He doesn't get angry." I'm like, "NO?!", " [The doctor says], "Where does he get that from, an anger issue?" I'm like, "I get moody sometimes, but I don't have some kind of anger problem." [laughter]

And I'm laughing you know, 'cause I gotta laugh. I'm like, "You don't think he needs something?" It cracks me up. And I mean, [my son] needs—and they just decided, cause I've been telling them and telling them. (6)

After much frustration, Mary finally got the doctor to listen to her and help with her bi-polar son.

I wondered if Mary had lived much of her life feeling as if people in authority don't listen to her words. If so, then it would make sense that the laughter she often resorted to was a coping mechanism in dealing with the absurdity of not being treated seriously. Whether she was describing her children or herself, Mary preferred to laugh rather than scream in her struggle to be respected and taken seriously.

Reflecting on Her Stressors

Mary believed she would have successfully completed the semester she dropped if she wouldn't have had to leave town to flee the harassment of her ex-husband. "The teachers I had—including you—were all gonna work with me to help me get through." Even though Mary had missed the official drop date, Special Populations arranged for her to have a medical drop. Surprisingly, her relationship with her ex-husband was not her biggest stressor at the time of the interview: rather, it was living with her oldest child, her fourteen-year-old son.

"He Treats Me Disrespectfully"

Mary shared that she felt her ex-husband had turned their fourteen-year-old son against her by encouraging him to give his mother grief. She describes her frustration with her son's behavior, claiming, "He doesn't mind me, he doesn't clean his room, he refuses to wash the dishes" (8). She quit paying for the son's cell phone when he ran up a bill over \$400 one month. When she calls the boy's father for help in disciplining the son, he says, "Well, I am trying," to which she responds, "No, you never try." Mary lowers her voice as she admits to feeling disrespected by both the father and the son.

“She’s Not Going to Finish”

Money remains a stress “that trickles down,” according to Mary (9), but a bigger stressor in her life involves not feeling supported by her extended family. “My mom, my aunts and uncles, brother and sister—everybody since I started school, they’re like ‘She’s not gonna finish’” (9). This actually serves to motivate Mary as she wants to prove them wrong, asserting, “I know I’m smart enough to finish” (9). I agreed with her heartily, stating, “You absolutely have what it takes to make it” (9). She reflected on her strengths as a student:

I know I have problems in grammar, I always have. I’m good in math. I’m good in other stuff, but I think I just want to be a professional student for a while because I’ve got my government [programs], which sounds bad but, you know, I’m like, if they want to call me “crazy” and give me government money to help me finish school, I know that sounds selfish, but let them pay. Let them pay for five degrees if they want. [laughter] (9)

Everybody Has Problems

Somewhat alarmed by Mary’s use of the label *crazy*, I asked her to qualify her use of this term. She explained,

They say I’m bi-polar. But I mean I know I have my moments where like right now, I talk about stuff and I get, you know, excited. But everything that I’ve seen me go through, I’ve seen fifty more [people] have the same. When I get to talking about, “ Boo-hoo, my kids, boo- hoo, my ex,” you know. I see everybody have—I mean, it’s not nothing that’s unusual to anybody. (10)

I admired Mary's refusal to be singled out for pity or to claim her life as any more difficult than anyone else's, but I also wondered if she gave herself credit for all she has overcome, for all the times she hasn't given up.

The Road to Self-Respect

With forty credits on her transcript, Mary was two-thirds of the way to her goal of completing the core curriculum at CCGC. I asked her if this made her feel worthy of her own respect, whether she was proud of herself. She replied, "Not yet." She proceeded to share with me her goals and dreams:

I want to get that associates degree first, that diploma. And I mean. At the induction [to the honor society], I felt proud of myself. 'Cause you know, to be allowed to walk up there and hold the candle I'm like... But I want to graduate first, with something. 'Cause then I can say, "Yeah, I did it." But then I want to go on, and see if I can make it. And even, I mean, just to know I can get a job, a decent job, cause I've had decent jobs before.

(10)

I asked Mary if she had a goal not to go back to work until her kids were a specific age, and she set me straight about working while parenting:

My kids are fourteen, ten, and eleven. And, shit, *I* was babysitting when I was eleven. I want *them* to go to work, and learn responsibility. I mean, my daughter's old enough, she could be babysitting, making money. And my oldest—I was working by the time I was his age; I was working in a snow cone stand. And then by the time I was fifteen I was working at [a restaurant] making money. (10)

Mary was clearly proud of her work ethic, which she probably also relied on to become a hard-working student.

Why Do Students Drop Comp?

When I asked Mary about her conjecture of the number one reason students drop Comp at CCGC, she paused and said, “I’m not exactly sure,” but then offered the following observation: “I don’t think they think they can do it. But I know that they know they can’t graduate until they at least do [Comp I and II]. Maybe they’re gonna wait for other friends to finish it, and then get their help” (10). Mary’s answer emphasizes the crucial role of self-confidence and self-efficacy in a student’s successful navigation of FYC, as not “thinking” or believing you can do something makes it much harder to succeed in this endeavor.

“Don’t Enroll If You’re Not Ready To Go”

When asked if she had a message to give to fellow students who have dropped or are considering dropping FYC, Mary reflected on her priorities as an eighteen-year-old:

I wasn’t ready to go [to college] ’cause I was loving life and partying. And I mean, I like to have the occasional margarita or whatever, can’t drink that much, but you know, I like to have fun. But if I was wanting to go out and stay out ’til three or four o’clock every morning, and you knew you had signed up for classes at eight. I mean. I don’t know if that’s why most people drop, or if they just drop cause they—I’m just saying, “If you know you’re not ready to go because you’re partying and you’re not gonna be able to get up or make it, or you take one semester and you realize you

can't do it, for some reason, don't do it. Especially if you're on your parents' money." (11)

"Don't Just Drop: Go to Your Teachers"

Mary's advice to older students was a bit different, as she includes her own college experience:

But if you're older [and considering dropping], I mean, life throws you a curve. Then I'd say, "Don't just drop out; go to your teachers. Do what it takes." I mean, I went to a library, then, 'cause like your [Comp II] class was at night, and I could go to the library after my day classes. And I could do some of my work. And like, [my P.E. teacher], with that being a physical class, I could go at other times, and he was allowing it. And there are certain teachers even though you're signed up at a certain time, if they've got a class running, even though it's not your set time, as long as they're doing the same materials your class is doing, then they'll let you [attend], you know. Or you could also go to certain of your advisors, or they'll send you to Special Populations if you've had a—if you're having medical problems—and they can get you a note-taker; they can get you somebody in there [the classroom] to help you. (11)

"I Asked for Help"

Though Mary did not receive significant family support to finish her degree, she created her own support system by researching and relying on government programs and by reaching out to people at CCGC, including her teachers. She readily admits to asking

for help, and she took one last opportunity via the interview to give advice to students on the edges of campus:

I asked [for help]. But I'm saying if you can't ask, if you're young and in a partying mood or even older and in a partying mood 'cause you end up being married and then you get a divorce and you're like, "Hey!" But if you're younger—or older—in that situation, just take a couple semesters off. Don't just quit and give up. (11)

"I Can't Wait To Go Back!"

As for her own plans, Mary exclaimed, "I can't wait to go back!" She plans to sign up for classes in the fall—that is, if she doesn't have to have brain surgery for complications from the head injury she incurred from the car accident (12). Once she finishes her associate's degree at CCGC, she wants to go on to a four-year university. A recruitment letter she received from Texas Tech after her induction into the local chapter of Phi Theta Kappa has woven itself into her psyche, representing the hope of achieving higher degrees, of going places beyond her childhood dreams—beyond what her family believes she can do.

And maybe this is the purpose of all the striving we do, particularly in the arena of education. Earning degrees changes our perception of ourselves—forcing us to erase old limitations as we surpass them again and again. Maybe a fundamental purpose of education is to change our ideas about what we are and are not capable of, to change the way we frame our life story to others, but, perhaps more importantly, to change the story we tell ourselves. Ben Okri's claim that "if we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives" (qtd. in King 153) could prove true for Mary's situation:

after she accomplishes her educational degrees, she is more likely to believe she has earned the respect she seeks—if not from her family, then at least from herself. Let us now return to Miss D's interview as she, like Mary, is changed by her success in school.

Returning to Case Study #1: Miss D's Semester of Completion

"If Anybody in that Class Has a Story To Tell, I Do"

Miss D was true to her word and signed up for another section of Comp I with me the next semester. "I wanted to finish that book because I had a story to tell . . . so I stuck with it. And I have yet to pay my installments but I will. I didn't drop it [Comp I]; I owe 'em, but I did not drop it" (4). In direct opposition to her mental state the first time she enrolled in one of my sections of Comp I, Miss D now believed her story would be interesting:

I felt like if anybody in that class has a story to tell, I do, you know, and I think it would capture the reader, and I wanted to finish it, you know. And I worked on it diligently. And I, I wanted to do it. I mean, I don't know why anybody would want to drop, you know. Drop this class. Even if you don't have, uh, you know, like things happening in your life, like I feel just to write about something, you know. And twenty-two pages didn't seem like a lot. I felt like I could keep going on. (5)

Rather than believing she couldn't write a book (as she had emphatically declared regarding her first time taking Comp I), Miss D now believes everyone has a story to tell.

What happened to Miss D to cause such a transformation? Was it simply a matter of time as she accumulated more experiences each semester that helped her become a

more confident student, one who was willing to take on greater challenges? Did her increased status in the cohort of students taking upper levels courses in the nursing program add to her sense of confidence and increase her sources of support? I looked back at the transcription of her interview for clues to factors that potentially influenced Miss D's changing perception of her abilities as writer, and I found several references to herself as a writer that are worth re-visiting.

Learning from Her Own Children: "My Kids Are Good Writers"

When I mentioned to Miss D that the Comp I class she dropped for the third time just wasn't the same without her active presence and contribution, she seemed flattered as she interjected, "Awwwww" (5). Yet she wasn't totally comfortable with this compliment and quickly shifted the attention to her own children:

You know, I wanted to tell you, all my kids got commended [regarding scores on the writing section of the state mandated tests]. They're writers; my kids are good writers. And I'm like, "Maybe they passed that on—to me." You know, all the teachers tell me. My little girl's ten, and she got commended in writing. She writes like she's in middle school. I told her teacher, "You know, I took a writing class and an English class, and I had to do a book." (5)

Earlier in the interview, Miss D had shared her initial resistance to the book project I assign in Comp I. She had considered a book to be something from "the shelves of Books-A-Million or Barnes and Noble" (2), feeling overwhelmed by the assignment as she exclaimed in disbelief, "She wanted me to write one of those!" (2) Later in the interview she added, "I can't do that" (8). But upon completing this project in her fourth attempt at finishing Comp I, Miss D proudly told her daughter's teacher that she had

written a *book*—not a story, nor an extended narrative, nor even a manuscript, but a published and permanently bound book. Although the term *book* initially triggered Miss D's sense of inadequacy, her eventual completion of this project—her successful authorship of a *book*—served to change her mind about what she could or could not achieve. Even though referring to the Comp I project as a *book* might frighten a student into dropping the course before she or he has even begun, I believe I will continue to call this project a *book* because of the testimonials I have received from students who stuck with it and completed the assignment. When reflecting on the process, these students frequently mention the pride and satisfaction they feel for having written a *book*, rather than a portfolio of essays, and changed their ideas of themselves as writers. Just as a person who completes a marathon can no longer consider themselves a non-runner, a student who writes a book in FYC has a difficult time thinking of him or herself as a non-writer.

The Power of Narrative: Miss D Begins To Shape Her Story

Miss D's initial reaction to the book assignment might speak for many returning students who are single mothers working full-time jobs while trying to squeeze in a couple of evening classes per week:

I was so exhausted I just didn't think I had anything to write about, you know. I'd get up, go to work, take care [of the] kids, and do the laundry, the dishes, and things. It just . . . really wasn't anything exciting for a reader . . . I didn't—I thought. That's why I thought that I didn't . . . didn't have anything exciting. (8)

Miss D's repetition of the word *didn't* four times in this brief explanation might point to her feelings of inadequacy as a writer and/or a student, but this focus on lack might also hint at some of the other deficits she dealt with in her life as she experienced a lack of many things: time, money, computer access, and support in raising her children.

Although I, as her teacher, believed Miss D had a story to tell even that first semester she enrolled in Comp I, she was too busy performing the often competing roles of mother, student, and bread-winner to be able to acknowledge her own story and find the time to write it down. However, this changed with a pivotal assignment given to her in one of her nursing courses.

Miss D Discovers the Deeper Story

In Miss D's fourth attempt at Comp I, she wrote a book about the role of racial identity in her life. As the lightest-skinned member of her African-American family, she felt singled-out by her siblings, her classmates, and even her teachers who often labeled her "Mexican" even though she told them from third grade on, "I'm Black." The book she wrote for Comp I begins by introducing the college nursing assignment as well as the central question of her childhood:

I have put the finishing touches on my nursing project for the summer semester—creating a genogram. The purpose of this assignment is to become aware of how genetics play a role on what diseases and disorders are passed on to offspring. It has turned out nicely, however, I don't think I'll get an "A." I selected red heart shapes to represent each family member, and listed the disease or disorder they have or had. I stare at my creation, focusing on the last name,

_____, my father's name.

That old lingering question resurfaces. *Was he your father?* Deep down in the depths of my soul I didn't feel it. There was no resemblance. He had a light complexion, but so did my mother, whom I had no doubt about being my real mother. The older I get, I look like a replica of her. Her nose was long, although not as long as mine. We had the same eye color and contour. Her lips were thin and her hair was long and black before cutting it. (*Hearts Don't Lie* 1)

Miss D's book then flashes back to scenes that depict her struggle to find her place in a racist and unofficially segregated society. The first of these occurs when the narrator is nine years old:

It is September, 1966, I'm a third grade student at _____ Elementary School. I remember the teacher, a tall white lady standing in front of the class. She asked all of the white children to raise their hands. She counted the hands that were up and wrote something down on a piece of paper that was in her hand. She then asked for all of the Mexican children to raise their hands. Once again, she counted the hands as she quickly glanced in my direction and walked to my desk. "Raise your hand," she said. I knew I wasn't Mexican, but I did not argue with the teacher because I was taught to do what I was told. She counts all of the hands that went up, including mine. Her final call was for all of the colored children—in the sixties we were called *colored*—to raise their hand. My hand went up again. The Teacher walked

over to my desk. “Put your hand down, I’ve already counted you,” she said. She counted me as being Mexican. I can remember feeling confused that day. I talked to my mother about the incident, but I didn’t get a response. She just had a blank stare on her face. (2-3)

The narrator goes on to recount episodes of 8th grade boys teasing her about “being white and acting Black” (4) plus an incident involving a teacher from Puerto Rico who insisted that the narrator should “be proud of her [assumed Hispanic] heritage” (6).

The first day of high school was especially stressful in the days of court-ordered desegregation. Miss D effectively recreates this scene, set in September of 1972, which opens Chapter Two of her book *Hearts Don’t Lie*:

I attended my freshman year at _____ High School because it was my zoned school according to my address. Back then, kids were assigned to schools based on address, not whether or not the school was three or four blocks from their house. The school was three stories high, extremely large in comparison to my junior high school. The high school was dilapidated and desegregated. One thing which made me uncomfortable about attending this school was how we as students sat in class. All of the Black kids sat on one side of the class while all of the white kids sat on the opposite side. One day while sitting in class, I glanced over at the all-white section. Lo and behold, a girl whom I’d never recognized before beckoned me to sit on their side of the class. I shook my head to say “no” and thought, “Oh my God, here we go again. She thinks I’m white.” I also noticed in History

class that the teacher, who was a white male, only looked at the white kids when he talked. I wondered if he ever noticed the seating arrangement because the students in the class certainly did. I came to the conclusion I was not going to get a good education at this school because the teachers contributed to the division in the classroom.

I was not going to get the attention I needed from the teachers. (5)

Even without the added mystery of her biological father's identity, Miss D's story is compelling as it chronicles the sharp divisions made between races by family members, classmates, teachers, fellow workers, potential partners, and future employers. Though her story is unique, it also reveals the cultural and social norms of the time. As such, it is one story of fighting racism amidst a larger cultural problem of racial injustice.

After a month of dreading to go to school each day, Miss D convinced her mother to try to get her into another high school, which her mother was able to achieve by providing a relative's address. Miss D found this school to be much less biased towards whites, but she was still frequently approached about her racial identity. In Chapter Two of her book she writes:

By now I am accustomed to the question. They usually start off like this: "I want to ask you a question, but please don't get mad." I already knew what the question was pertaining to, therefore I quickly responded by saying, "I'm Black." I can remember buying a dark shade of foundation, to appear darker, but I looked horrible. I continued to wear my classic tan by Covergirl. (6)

I recount much of Miss D's story here because I believe it exemplifies her awakening sense of agency as she shifts from allowing herself to be defined by others to claiming her own identity—a tricky maneuver because of the racist society she grew up in and because she was unsure of her father's ethnicity. At one point she even made up a lie: "I began to tell everyone that questioned me about my race that my dad was French from Louisiana. I said it so many times, at least a million. Convincing my mind was easy; it was my heart I couldn't convince throughout the years. My mother remained silent" (8).

As Miss D gains independence during her junior year by working part of every day and on the weekends, she is able to buy her own clothes and eat two meals a day at the restaurant where she is employed. Her job expanded her geographic world beyond church and school, but she still encounters the same questioning of her ethnicity, perhaps even more severely. In her book she recounts a confrontation she has with a fellow employee regarding Miss D's ethnicity:

Mrs. _____, the cashier, was a white middle-aged lady, about five feet with red hair, freckles, and an extremely annoying high pitched voice. [She] sat down with me for lunch one day. I took a deep breath as she eased into a chair beside me. I braced myself for a chalk and chalkboard experience. We talked about school, boys, the job and her children. She focused on her son who was about to enter college and how handsome he was. She blurted out between bites of her sandwich, "What's your nationality, hun?" "I'm black," I replied. Her immediate response was, "No, mam, you ain't black." She laughed in my face. She went so far as to suggest I could pass for being white, move to Vidor and date her son.

Vidor, Texas, in those days was known as K.K.K. country. No blacks lived in that town. Rumor had it that a black person could not drive through Vidor at night without being harassed by the citizens. I laughed in her face. “No thank you, mam, I love being black,” I replied with a smirky grin on my face. Mrs. _____ and I did not eat together after that. I never told my mother about the conversation, although I thought about it for a long time. The mere thought of someone asking someone to abandon their race would mean to abandon their family, a family that I valued. We were not the perfect family, we didn’t own a lot of material things, but in my eyes we were complete, whole, and that was all that mattered to me. (7)

Miss D’s increasing financial independence from her mother led her to enroll in college for the first time immediately after graduating from high school. She filled out the paperwork by herself and was interviewed by the nursing department heads at a nearby university. Although Miss D was not financially supported by her mother, her mother was invested in her success and emotionally supported her to succeed in school. In Chapter Three, Miss D writes: “My mother greeted me on the front porch every evening after school. [Our closest neighbor] stood on her front porch waving at us and saying, ‘There goes that college girl’ ” (11).

However, like many first-year students, Miss D overestimated her ability to work and attend school, both full time. In Chapter Three of her book, she recounts the difficulty of her daily schedule:

It was really tough for me to attend school due to the fact that I

worked the night shift at a nursing home as a nurse assistant. Upon leaving work, I went immediately to class, where I remained until four o'clock each day, except weekends. I became mentally exhausted by the end of the first semester. I could no longer concentrate on studying. My body became sleep deprived. By the end of the first semester, two weeks before my final exam, I dropped all of my classes. The instructors warned us early in the semester that working full time will conflict with being successful in the program. I suppose having an income was more important. If my mother was disappointed, she did not show it. She became worried about me two months into school. She suggested I stop working, but I was accustomed to having my own income and I did not want to rely on my mother to buy things for me. I bought clothes, perfume, and makeup every payday. She could not afford to do that.

It took about two months for me to recuperate from the exhaustion. I continued to work at the nursing home at night. Many years passed before I attempted going to college again. I regretted it.

(11)

Variations of the exhaustion that Miss D speaks of resurface in the interviews of several other former students who dropped FYC. They might not be exhausted for the same reasons, but usually their workload outside of school contributed to their experience of burn out.

Deferment of the Dream of a College Degree

In her book written for Comp I, Miss D describes the events in her life that kept delaying her dream of achieving a college degree. Out of nowhere, her mother died from a stroke and massive heart attack when Miss D was just nineteen. Being the oldest daughter, Miss D became the matriarch of the house, caring for her younger sisters, ages thirteen and seventeen. She then got married and quickly became pregnant with the first of her five children. The last one was born when she was thirty-nine. She recalls being distraught at the time, thinking “I’ll never get back to school, I’m too old to be having a baby, what will my co-workers say?” (*Hearts* 16). Her health also suffered as she developed asthma and high blood pressure and went through a difficult divorce—all while she was pregnant with her fifth child. But she was determined to get a house for her and her children to live in, and after a year, she was able to keep this important promise to herself and her kids (18).

Miss D Earns Her First Nursing Degree

It took more than twenty years from her initial enrollment in a nursing program upon graduation from high school, but Miss D was finally able to earn her L.V.N. (licensed vocational nursing) associate’s degree in 2004. In Chapter Four of her book she writes of this accomplishment:

I was finally going to become a nurse and nothing was going to stand in my way this time. I had to prove to myself that I could accomplish that. I got assistance from the government that every poor single parent was entitled to—Section 8, Food Stamps, Pell Grant, I got it all. My kids were not happy about me returning to school because I didn’t have much time

or money to spend any more. My teenage daughter complained, “You’re wrecking my life. I’m not having children until I finish college.” I was pleased to hear her say that. (21)

I could relate to the smirk I imagined on Miss D’s face as her daughter informed her of this as my own daughter had said something similar to me when she was ten, watching me do homework once again. Upset that she could not have my full attention, she huffed, “I am going to finish ALL of my degrees BEFORE I have a family.” Like Miss D, I was pleased and replied, “Yes, you do that!”

Back to School for Another Degree

Miss D got a job immediately after receiving her degree, and discovered that she wanted to specialize in wound care. She could not do this without achieving the next degree—becoming a registered nurse, so in January of 2005 she enrolled in the R.N. program at CCGC. She made it through that first semester, even though she suffered the loss of her younger sister in early May from a prescription drug overdose.

The fall immediately following her sister’s death marks the semester when Miss D signed up for my Comp I course once again, determined to tackle the book project, believing now that she had a story to tell. She had survived the losses of both her mother and her sister, and she wanted to write about this to appease the “need or desire to share something with those that we’ve lost” (*Hearts* 23). But her desire to complete the book project for Comp I competed with her commitment to provide for her children. In our interview she mentioned financial struggles as the reason for dropping the third time, but in the book she finally finished when she took Comp I a fourth time, she describes her

predicament in greater detail, relying on present tense verbs to recreate the immediacy of the historical present:

It is November, 2006, and I'm still struggling with school, tuition, and my personal finances. Unable to make the next installment to go to the third level in nursing, pay the next car payment, *and* buy my kids gifts for Christmas, I did what I thought was the right thing to do: quit school and get a part-time job along with the full-time job that I already had. I worked extra at the nursing home and at another nursing home one day per week. I saved money for Christmas. (23)

When Miss D withdrew that semester, she did not realize that this decision would change her life story dramatically. With a twist stranger than fiction, Miss D ended up meeting and caring for her biological father when he became a temporary resident of the second nursing home she worked at on the weekends. When she signed up for Comp I for the fourth time, she had a slightly different story to write with a completely different ending.

Sharing Her Story with the Rest of the Class

Rather than giving a final exam at the end of each of my comp courses, I reserve a special room or auditorium with a stage to host a literary reading of the students' texts. Students are invited—but not coerced by grades or extra credit—to read from their books, reminding the rest of the class of the pages they shared in workshop and filling their classmates in on the rest of their texts. Students often chose to read a part of their work that they are proudest of having written, believing these passages will be of interest to the audience of their classmates. I vividly remember Miss D's reading as she shared the passage about meeting her biological father for the first time. That semester we had our

literary reading in the chapel, and the light from the stained glass windows reflected on the picture of the rose petals on the cover of her book as she sat on a stool in the sanctuary, facing the pews while fifteen of her classmates sat in the first three rows, staring straight at her.

She was one of only two students in her class to read from their work that day. When I asked her about this in the interview, she said that getting an ‘A’ in speech made getting up in front of everyone a lot easier, recalling that her speech teacher had told her that the initial fear that a speaker feels is also “where you get your energy from” (6). During the interview, Miss D thanked me for giving her and her classmates an opportunity to share from their stories (6).

The Power of Breaking Silence

I recognized the importance of Miss D’s literary reading in the chapel that day—how telling her story out loud to witnesses changed the way she saw herself. I, too, knew the power of silence-breaking—of sharing that which has never been shared before—freeing a secret that causes us to live a lie or prevents us from achieving our full potentials, as our energy is wrapped up in the hiding or suppression of the truths of our experiences.

As a newly transferred college student at the University of Minnesota in 1983, I stumbled upon a Women’s Studies course on silence breaking featuring Tillie Olsen’s classic text *Silences* as well as *On Lies Secrets and Silences* by Adrienne Rich. These texts encouraged me to break some of the silences in my own life, and I continue to try to practice silence-breaking in the readings I give both in the classroom as a teacher with my students and at conferences with my colleagues because I believe it leads to agency.

Rich describes this mechanism in a lecture given at a coalition on women's education in 1978:

In breaking those silences, naming our selves, uncovering the hidden, making ourselves present, we begin to define a reality which resonates to *us*, which affirms *our* being, which allows the woman teacher and the woman student alike to take ourselves, and each other seriously; meaning, to begin taking charge of our lives. (*On Lies* 245)

By reading her story to the class that day, I believe Miss D took another step in taking charge of her life, asserting her legitimacy both as a student and as a daughter.

The Importance of Teacher Talk

Near the end of our interview, I asked Miss D what advice she would give to other students who, like herself, felt ambushed on the first day of class by the prospect of writing a book for the course. She reminded me that she had come in late that first day of class in the first semester she enrolled in FYC, and so she had to sit in the back of class and couldn't hear everything I said. "I could barely hear you, but I tell you I heard when you said 'book, write a book!'" (2). Later in the interview she added,

I guess I didn't hear the part where you said, "It doesn't matter what you write about." And you know what else? You gave us [an assignment to come up with] this list of ten significant things, and you went over it [the list] with each of us, but I never allowed you to get to that point. Maybe you said [you were going to do this], but I didn't get it; I didn't hear that part. I don't know if you said it or, like I said, I came in late and you had

already mentioned it. But students might not realize that you give someone a start, instead of leaving it all up to us to come up with something. (7)

Miss D's comments remind me of the importance of what teachers say in class, particularly on the first day. We sometime skip the crucial steps of scaffolding information, resulting in dumping too much on students on the first day without hearing any of their responses. Perhaps it would be more effective to interrupt the dissemination of course information with activities that call for deeper engagement of students, such as question and answer sessions, group discussions, or even free-writing in response to "Why I can't write a book," and thus facing resistance to the project on day one.

The Importance of Time

When I asked Miss D to speculate about the most common reason students drop first year comp at CCGC, she was hesitant at first to speak for anyone outside of herself. However, she tried to put herself in the shoes of a younger student as she answered:

I guess it's pretty different from high school. You know, for the ones, you know, the traditional students. It's different, because I'm sure they don't have to do all that writing [in high school]. And you know, they read a book, and, uh, discuss it. So it's just probably, I guess, a shock for them to have to come in and start doing writing. And focus on their writing, and read their own writing. And when you're younger and have time on your side, you might think you can always retake it next semester. (10)

In our interview, Miss D reminded me that on the first night of attending my evening section of Comp I, she had mentioned that she "hadn't taken an English class in thirty years" and I had told her, "Good, you won't have to unlearn anything!" (10). Miss D

claimed that this quip of mine served to reassure her she had the ability to succeed as a non-traditional student. Her other teachers also offered reassurance:

Most of my instructors would tell me that the older students do better than the younger ones, straight out of high school, you know. I'm at the nursing school. They [the younger students] aren't serious, you know, and I was serious. Because, uh, I don't have time on my side anymore, you know.

(10)

After Miss D's comment about time, neither of us said anything for a few seconds. We were both in our forties, working on our respective degrees, trying to raise our children and pay our bills and complete the programs in which we had invested so much time and money and energy. Her words resonated with me as I tried to earn my Ph.D. before turning fifty. Like Miss D, I felt that I didn't have time to start over again, that I had chosen my final profession.

The Importance of Support

In her book *Hearts Don't Lie*, Miss D credits the patience and sensitivity of her nursing instructors for helping her make it through the LVN program. Regarding her favorite instructor, she remarks, "She seemed to know just what to say to take the edge off when I became nervous while performing a certain skill. I am forever grateful to her" (21). Besides the instructors, the fellow students in the program also supported each other. Miss D describes the closeness of her cohort: "I learned a lot and made new friends whom I shared and overcame personal hurdles with. Our class was like a family. When one of our classmates failed a test, we encouraged them to hang in there" (21). Miss D's

desire to set a good example for her children also motivated her to “get up every morning” and ultimately achieve her degree (22).

During my interviews with administrators at CCGC, several of them had mentioned the importance of family support in a student’s success, the Vice-President of Student Services going so far as to say, “No one is looking for them to succeed.” Miss D’s story shows that teachers and classmates can step up to provide this support, and, at least in her case, there are those who are definitely watching her success with vested interest: her children.

Success Begets Success: The Culture of Accomplishment

Miss D’s success in her nursing courses and her career may have also contributed to her *perceived self-efficacy*, defined by social cognitive theorist Albert Bandura as “people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives” (1). “People who doubt their capabilities” and thus lack a strong sense of self-efficacy, according to Bandura, “shy away from difficult tasks which they view as personal threats” (1). In Miss D’s first two attempts at completing Comp I, she fits Bandura’s description of those with low levels of self-efficacy who “dwell on their personal deficiencies, on the obstacles they will encounter” . . . “rather than concentrate on how to perform successfully” (1). In her first two stories of withdrawing from FYC, Miss D fixated on how she could *not* write a book and how she could *not* write the way the Oxford teacher wanted her to, without using the word *the*. However, her sense of self-efficacy seemed much stronger when she enrolled in Comp I for the fourth time. When I asked her what she took away from that course, her final attempt to finish Comp I, she responded immediately:

A sense of accomplishment, a sense of accomplishment. I think I wrote that in my little note [final reflection]. I actually completed something I was afraid, ah, to do, that I didn't think I could handle. To take it that far [writing a thirty page book], that just gave me a sense of accomplishment. It's freakin' intimidating, you know, it's pretty intimidating. But you were very encouraging. When students give you a reason why they can't write the book, you can give them a reason why they can. (12)

Miss D's comment about encouragement reminds me of a colleague at CCGC who describes her role as that of the great encourager. This colleague claims that she is required not only to focus on teaching her students how to complete an assignment, but also to bolster their self-confidence so they believe they can succeed.

The Assumptions We Make about Our Students

Before I interviewed Miss D and read her life story during the fourth time she signed up for Comp I, I did not know the extent of her struggles and accomplishments, the range of her losses and dreams. What could I have done differently as a teacher of Composition to enable her to succeed during one of her earlier attempts? Perhaps nothing, or perhaps everything: the way I set up the work of the course, the way I introduce the project, the way I look at and listen to (or ignore and talk over) each student. Miss D's testimony points to the importance of seeing each student as a magnificent unfolding human being—no matter whether that student completes the course or not. Her story serves as a warning of how much I don't know about each student sitting in my class—that I make assumptions about the tip of the iceberg I see rather than the massive forms hidden beneath the surface.

Preview of Case Study Summaries

In the next chapter, I review the overlapping and distinguishing characteristics of the seven case studies while also considering the results of the nearly six hundred surveys from Chapter Three as I explore the lessons learned by listening to students' experiences of withdrawing from FYC at CCGC. My aim is to propose possible answers to the original research question: **what can be learned from students' stories of withdrawing from FYC that can inform composition pedagogy?**

CHAPTER FIVE

IMPROVING THE CLASSROOM PRACTICES OF COMPOSITIONISTS:

CONCLUSIONS, CONNECTIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction to the Conclusion

This chapter reviews the factors that influenced each case study participant's withdrawal from FYC, making connections among the seven case studies and then also connecting these case studies to the survey results reported in Chapter Three. Advice from the case study subjects to future students of FYC as well as teachers of FYC is also revisited in this chapter where I propose recommendations for the teaching practices of FYC teachers as I respond to the original research question: **"In what ways can students' stories of withdrawing from FYC inform composition pedagogy?"**

Reviewing the Case Studies

By interviewing seven former students and listening to their struggles of completing FYC, I have come to a greater understanding of the physical, economic, social, and emotional difficulties many of these students encountered while attending FYC at CCGC. To make connections among the reasons given by each case study subject for withdrawing from FYC at CCGC, I will revisit the seven case studies and summarize the contexts of their decisions to withdraw. To connect these reasons to those given by the questionnaire respondents who previously withdrew from FYC at CCGC, I apply the same coding I used for the questionnaires, sorting reasons into the three divisions I used in Chapter Three: 1. Student Circumstances, 2. Teacher Practices, and 3. Overlapping Teacher & Student Responsibilities.

Revisiting Case Study #1: Miss D

Because Miss D had withdrawn from FYC three times at CCGC, the factors influencing her decisions to drop varied. However, the first two reasons can both be tied to the division Teacher Practices. In her first attempt to complete Comp I, she dropped my section of FYC because she didn't believe the assignment fit her: she didn't want to do the work required to write a *book* which she imagined to be like the books she had seen on the shelves at Books-A-Million and Barnes and Noble (2), nor did she believe she had a story to tell that anyone would want to hear. As she put it, "To be honest, I didn't have anything to talk about in a book. I was just leading a social life; nothing exciting to a reader, I didn't think, so I dropped it" (1). She was also busy working part-time as a nursing assistant and full time as a single mother of four school age children, so deciding to withdraw from FYC due to the amount of work required to complete the book project may have been a sensible decision for her at this time.

The second time Miss D enrolled in Comp I, she ended up with a teacher who had gone to Oxford, a school so distant and prestigious that it caused Miss D to feel intimidated. Miss D described the constraints on student writing that semester when "the Oxford teacher" presented the class with a list of words *not* to use. After three weeks in the course, Miss D already suspected she would drop the course, but the hurricane evacuation delayed the semester by six weeks. When class resumed, the teacher wanted students to attend on a Saturday which was impossible with Miss D's work schedule. Although this new requirement may have been the final straw in causing Miss D to take the action of withdrawing, she had already been thinking about this decision. "I had already planned [before the hurricane evacuation] to drop her," Miss D recalled, "because

I just couldn't write like she wanted me to write" (3). Miss D used the phrase "drop *her*" rather than "drop the *course*," perhaps emphasizing the importance of a particular teacher's course design in influencing a student's decision to withdraw. Because Miss D didn't like the constraints this teacher put on her writing, I would categorize Miss D's reason for withdrawing the second time under the division Teacher Practices.

The third time Miss D withdrew from FYC had little to do with teacher practices. She had deliberately signed up for my evening section of FYC because she wanted to write a book about losing her sister. She jumped at the opportunity to workshop her pages with the rest of the class, believing this time that she *did* have a story worth writing down and sharing. However, she no longer got the help she needed from financial aid, and so she was forced to decide between completing the semester or working overtime to be able to buy Christmas presents for her four children. She told me that she "hated to drop [all her courses] that semester" (4), but was comforted by the words of one of her nursing program instructors who said, "Do what you have to do. This [course] will be here next year, you know, so do what you have to do" (4). Although Miss D's third decision to drop FYC could be considered an honorable sacrifice for her family, it also marks an economic struggle that could be seen as an indictment against society: if a single mother of four wants to go back to school to get her R.N. degree, shouldn't a community working to eradicate poverty support this decision? Shouldn't financial aid be more readily available? Despite my claims that Miss D's experience could be tied to community responsibility, I categorized Miss D's third reason for withdrawing from FYC as financial difficulty, a category included in the division Student Circumstances.

Revisiting Case Study #2: EZ

Unlike Miss D, EZ was not discouraged by the course assignment, nor intimidated by the academic pedigree of the teacher, nor in the position of having to sacrifice progress towards her degree to support her family. But EZ was also less than half of Miss D's age, and at twenty, she frequently straddled the fence between adolescence and maturity, dependence and autonomy. EZ was distracted by social ties that shifted her focus from achieving her dream (of being the first one in her family to earn a college degree) to living in the moment. In the interview, she mentioned the temptation to socialize with friends after her shift at the restaurant was over, admitting, "it's really hard to get up in the morning whenever" . . . "you smoke the night before" (2). Along with her recreational drug use, EZ's relationship with a boyfriend who frequently slept in rather than going to class also influenced her to skip my 9 a.m. section of FYC (1). However, my attendance policy, along with my authority as a teacher, may have prevented EZ from contacting me about her absences as she explained in the interview why she hadn't communicated with me that semester: "I was afraid you wouldn't understand" (2).

Perhaps EZ feared I had made assumptions about her commitment to being a student, and to spare herself the risk of receiving an authoritarian lecture from her professor, she preferred silence instead. I wonder what would have happened if I had made it clear to EZ that semester that I related to her struggles since I, too, had missed many classes as a college student and found it difficult to go back to class after consecutive absences. Even though EZ's decision to withdraw from FYC was based on the number of absences she had accrued (which in turn were affected by social distractions), she also felt that she could not approach me to discuss the matter. This

makes her decision connected to the division Overlapping Teacher & Student Responsibilities, particularly the category of “absences/ attendance policy” within this division.

Revisiting Case Study #3: Kelly

Like Miss D, Kelly struggled with financial issues. Although he was the same age as EZ, he did not have a father like EZ’s who was both willing and able to pay for his education. Unlike EZ, he was not tempted to alter his state with substances, having no interest in the party life. At the age of twenty, he was struggling for emotional independence from his overbearing mother as well as financial independence from his well-meaning grandmother, all the while aware that he must come to terms with abandonment issues caused by having an absent father. Kelly was determined to make it on his own, but he was still learning to navigate the system of higher education, particularly the connection between financial aid and the number of credits a student must take to avoid being put on probation. Several times during our interview, Kelly spoke of the stresses he was under: financial, emotional, academic, and even racial. Being the oldest son raised by a single mother, Kelly felt forced into the role of surrogate father for his younger siblings, noting that the sacrifices he made to help raise his siblings largely went unrecognized by his mother. Kelly felt that he was not appreciated for who he was—that, in many ways, he felt invisible, and that he was “going along the road by [himself],” unnoticed (7). Kelly recalled feeling “burnt out” the semester that he dropped Comp II.

Along with pressures from his family, his job, and his college courses, Kelly also experienced romantic discouragement that semester which probably served as the final

straw in his decision to withdraw. Kelly remembered the feelings around his decision, adding almost as an afterthought: “And the girl I was getting to know, she ended up leaving town on me; she wasn’t gonna tell me and . . . I hate when that happens ’cause” . . . “I try to deal with [my] abandonment issues” (7). Being ignored like this only contributed to Kelly’s sense of invisibility, perpetuating a belief that his thoughts, desires, and feelings didn’t matter—not to his father, nor his mother, nor his girlfriend, nor *most* of his professors.

Kelly dropped all of his courses that semester except for one: his music class which he called “my alcove, my safe place” (5). Although there seems to be little that I, as his teacher, could have done to eliminate the stressors impinging on Kelly’s life that semester, Kelly reminded me that my attendance policy added to his stress. He understood the need for a policy, but he encouraged teachers to “be courteous enough to give [the student] a call, to see what’s going on with the student instead of just going by procedure” (6). If I had called Kelly during that semester, I wonder if this would have made him feel less invisible. I do know, however, that receiving the letter inviting him to participate in my study made Kelly feel special, and he took it as an invitation to come back and re-enroll in CCGC. Kelly’s heartfelt thanks for listening to him describe his thoughts and feelings made me think I should have done this much earlier—ideally in the semester in which he was enrolled, rather than several semesters after the fact. I was reminded of the power of a teacher’s words as I looked at him in my office at the end of our interview and said, “You deserve to be back in school, working towards a degree,” and he nodded in agreement with me (13). Although the factors influencing Kelly’s decision to withdraw from FYC were largely emotional as he reeled from a romantic

break up and missed several classes in a row, his decision to withdraw from FYC was impacted by my attendance policy and our lack of communication about his circumstances. Therefore I consider his action to be classified under the division Overlapping Teacher & Student Responsibilities.

Revisiting Case Study #4: Jo Ellen

Along with Kelly and EZ, Jo Ellen also withdrew from Comp II due to her excessive absences. These, in turn, were caused by her tendency to pick up extra evening shifts at the restaurant when her bills were due, often resulting in her sleeping through her alarm the next day. She admitted that the quick cash made when waitressing enabled the party lifestyle, and then the money spent on going out after work required working extra shifts. Thus she felt caught in a vicious cycle. Although her father was willing to help her financially by supporting her to study journalism at Texas A&M, Jo Ellen wasn't sure she would accept his offer; she was proud of being independent and hated asking for help from her parents. But she also felt unsure that she could do well at a four-year university and doubted whether she, at twenty-six, could fit in with "a bunch of eighteen year-olds" (11). I considered Jo Ellen to be a gifted writer who rarely made a grammatical error; she, on the other hand, worried that she wouldn't pass the spelling and grammar test required for entrance into the journalism program at Texas A&M (16). Her image of herself seemed to me a limited version of her actual talents and capabilities, and I wondered if the abusive relationship she experienced from the age of fifteen to nineteen had lingering effects, amplifying her feelings of inadequacy.

Due to her abusive past, Jo Ellen needed more encouragement than an "A" student normally required. Perhaps she could have benefitted from a "sponsor of

persistence,” a concept I introduced in Chapter Four when I recognized the role Miss Smith served for Erin. Although I saw Jo Ellen as a competent student, she did not always perceive her own competence. Tinto and Engstrom remind us that it is not enough for students “to be competent in class; they also have to *believe* in their competence” [emphasis added] (3). Jo Ellen needed someone who believed in her ability to achieve a college degree even when old doubts surfaced and clouded her vision. Jo Ellen’s psychology professor sponsored her persistence in that course because she kept in contact with Jo Ellen via e-mail. Because the professor initiated contact, Jo Ellen felt invited back to class, and she worked out a plan with the teacher to complete the course, ultimately earning a “B” (6). Since I, too, could have initiated contact with Jo Ellen and worked out a plan for her to come back to class, I consider Jo Ellen’s case to fit under the division Overlapping Teacher & Student Responsibilities.

Though the specific struggle to balance work and school and romantic relationships might seem unique to each case study, EZ, Kelly, and Jo Ellen all mentioned the frustrations of managing their personal circumstances, battling their inner demons of depression and loneliness, resisting the temptation to numb out with substances or, as Jo Ellen put it, “get[ting] stuck in neutral” (*Unfinished* 33).

Revisiting Case Study #5: A.J.

Just as Jo Ellen was reluctant to ask for help from teachers, so too was A.J. Like many students labeled “gifted and talented,” he breezed through high school academically but had a difficult time with authority. Arrested for possession of a controlled substance on his high school campus at the age of sixteen, A.J. ended up getting his G.E.D. He enrolled in CCGC at seventeen, but admitted in the interview that

he was still not ready to be a serious student when he took FYC. “I thought I knew everything,” he reflected during our interview, “I tried to do it my way” which included strategies that worked for him in high school: not doing homework but acing the tests (14). He regretted not following course requirements, not listening to people’s advice, and not letting people help him “the way they offered to” at CCGC (14).

A.J.’s unwillingness to adapt to the demands of college plus his inability to appease his own demands for perfectionism when it came to writing caused him to procrastinate to the point of self-sabotage, making it impossible for him to complete a portfolio in time to pass Comp II. Because he didn’t do his homework, he didn’t come to class; but somehow he thought he could still pass, that he could “talk [his] way out of it” (8). Perhaps because he was so young, or perhaps because he was accustomed to being the smartest kid in the class in high school, A.J. lacked the maturity and humility to succeed in Comp II. He completed his other courses that semester—psychology, biology, and history—because they demanded only that he show up for the tests and pass them. If he had enrolled in a section of Comp II taught by any of the other four teachers at CCGC, he probably could have passed that semester because they taught Comp II as an introduction to Literature, with unit, midterm, and final tests counting for most of the course grade. I advocate teaching Comp II in a more progressive way, but the traditional introduction to Literature approach would probably have better suited A.J.’s learning style.

Even though A.J.’s immaturity and resistance to following in the footsteps of his successful surgeon father may have been a factor in A.J.’s refusal to complete the requirements for my section of Comp II, ultimately it was my assignment “to write in the

manner of a writer you admire” that made it difficult for A.J. to succeed. Therefore I categorize his reason for withdrawing under the division Overlapping Teacher & Student Responsibilities.

Revisiting Case Study #6: Erin

Erin was a devoted student, taking Comp I a second time (even though she passed the first time) because she wanted to get a better grade. She planned on being a teacher and therefore wanted to excel at being a student, unhappy with any grade on her transcript lower than a B (4). Erin’s mother never really expected her to go to college, perhaps because Erin was confined to a wheel chair and had frequent health issues mostly related to her diagnosis of cerebral palsy. Erin was bright and determined, possessing the tenacity of a bulldog as she declared, “I have to be better than people expect me to be, because if not, then I haven’t proven them wrong” (5).

Erin ended up withdrawing from Comp I because of health problems. She experienced complications from a surgery that was intended to help her control spasticity, but ultimately made it harder for her to stand. She had four more surgeries and almost died because she “was leaking cerebral spinal fluid from [her] back and they didn’t know it” (2).

As soon as she felt well enough, Erin signed up for a single course: a three-credit math class. Because her mother accompanied her to this class and took notes for her, Erin felt it necessary to assert her independence, declaring, “I’m the one taking the tests!” (3). Erin also had to learn to set boundaries with roommates and attendants who abused or disrespected her. Perhaps learning to be her own advocate at home prepared Erin to be an advocate for her education at CCGC—in particular, facing her fear of majoring in math

and mastering graphs. Erin was delighted to find a math teacher such as Miss Smith who “stayed with [her] until [she] got it” (5). Erin’s high school teachers had given up on teaching her to graph, so Erin did not expect Miss Smith to be able to do what the high school teachers couldn’t. In the interview, Erin recalled her first impression of Miss Smith: “This teacher is not going to understand” (9). “And you know what?” Erin quipped, “She didn’t understand, but that’s the thing: *she believed*. She said, ‘Oh, I believe you’ and I said, ‘Thank you, Jesus!’ ” (9). Miss Smith’s patience, persistence, and investment in Erin’s success led to a friendship beyond the classroom. Erin said with admiration, “She [Miss Smith] is my best friend here at CCGC” . . . “She got involved in my life” and tells me, “Okay, now that you can do this, what *can’t* you do?” (9). I see Miss Smith as a crucial sponsor of persistence for Erin, not only for Erin’s math classes but for all her coursework at CCGC. Because Erin was not well enough to complete Comp I the semester after her baclofen pump surgery, I consider her primary reason for withdrawing to fit under the division Student Circumstances.

Revisiting Case Study #7: Mary

Both Mary and Erin suffered health issues while they were enrolled at CCGC that sometimes made attending class a physical impossibility. Erin fought to recoup her energy after complications from her many surgeries, and Mary dealt with bi-polar disorder while also recovering from a car accident. As if this wasn’t enough to overcome, Mary also felt her life was threatened by her ex-husband who continued to physically and verbally harass her, and this ultimately led her to leave the area to protect herself and her three children. She worked with the director of Special Populations at CCGC to secure a medical withdrawal from all of her classes, including my evening section of Comp II.

Like Erin, Mary displayed a resilient spirit while experiencing adversity after adversity. In listening to each of their stories, I found myself wondering the following: *Should one person have to go through this much in order to earn a college degree?*

Both Mary and Erin were motivated by the desire to prove the naysayers wrong—to show their families that they could achieve their educational dreams, even though some members of their families doubted their abilities. Both Mary and Erin were adopted, and each spoke of the difficulty of feeling accepted by all members of their adoptive families. Though Mary and Erin had withdrawn from FYC, both re-enrolled as soon as they were mentally and physically able. They both went on to pass Comp 1 and Comp 2, and at the time of the interviews, both were working towards transferring to four-year institutions to finish their degrees.

Perhaps because of Mary and Erin's respective diagnoses of bi-polar disorder and cerebral palsy, both of these students knew how to garner support by registering through the Special Populations office on campus. When they needed help—whether with transportation or tutoring or book fees, they weren't afraid to ask. In fact, both of these diligent students offered explicit advice for future students straddling the decision to stay enrolled in FYC or to withdraw. Later in this chapter I will include their specific advice when I summarize the recommendations that the case study subjects offered to future students contemplating withdrawing from FYC at CCGC. But first I will summarize the reasons all seven of the case study subjects gave for withdrawing from FYC.

Connecting the Case Studies to Divisions of Survey Results

Because Miss D enrolled and withdrew from Comp I three separate semesters at CCGC, the seven case studies I conducted resulted in nine stories of withdrawing from

FYC. Of these nine stories, three include primary reasons for dropping FYC that can be categorized as “personal problems/ family issues” under the division Student Circumstances as labeled on Figures 3 and 4 in Chapter Three (98). These stories include Erin’s physical state after a complicated surgery, Mary’s mental state when she fled to escape her ex-husband’s abuse, and Miss D’s financial need to get a tuition refund in order to buy Christmas presents for her children. Even if I, as their teacher, had known at the time what each student was going through, there is little, if anything, I could have done to alter their situations in order for them to complete the requirements of FYC.

Of the nine reasons given by case study subjects for withdrawing from FYC, three other testimonials can be directly linked to the division I have labeled Teacher Practices (see Figure 3). Twice Miss D dropped because of the teacher’s requirements: the first time because she did not like my assignment of writing a book for Comp I, and the second time because her teacher wanted her to come to school on a Saturday, plus she felt her teacher didn’t value the way she wrote, leading her to believe she wouldn’t get the grades she deserved on her papers. As for the third instance of a case study subject withdrawing connected to Teacher Practices, I include A.J. because he passed all his other courses that semester and most likely would have passed Comp II, too, if the course had been designed as test-based.

The remaining three of the nine case study stories are more complex, each subject mentioning a variety of reasons for withdrawing from FYC. Certainly EZ, Kelly, and Jo Ellen all struggled with balancing work schedules, class schedules, homework, and romantic relationships, but all three also mentioned the attendance policy and how hard it was to come back after missing a few classes. Because attendance policy is typically

worded by the teacher on her syllabus, and because communicating with students who are absent is a pro-active measure that teachers can do to reach out to those who are struggling with the requirements of being a student, I include the reasons that EZ, Kelly, and Jo Ellen gave for withdrawing from FYC to fit under the division I originally called Both Student and Teacher Responsibilities in Chapter Three. Because these responsibilities are not necessarily equally shared, I have replaced the modifier *both* with the more accurate term *overlapping*, resulting in the division now labeled Overlapping Teacher & Student Responsibilities. Certainly nine stories of withdrawing from FYC do not provide enough data for a graph with statistical significance; however, I offer one in the form of a pie chart (see Figure 5 on the following page) to compare with Figure 6 (also on the following page) which represents the reasons given by the 67 survey respondents who had previously withdrawn from FYC.

While the division labeled Overlapping Teacher & Student Responsibilities hints at the complex cause and effect relationship between course policies and student withdrawal from FYC, I will focus on this issue in the implications and recommendations section of the conclusion. A more conclusive fact gained by comparing Figure 5 and Figure 6 on the next page is this: the reasons for withdrawing from FYC that can be attributed to Student Circumstances remains roughly consistent for both case study subjects and questionnaire respondents: one in three. This is significant because it implies the following: **two out of every three withdrawals from FYC at CCGC might have been impacted by the teacher!** As FYC teachers dedicated to the success of our students, we can no longer afford to ignore either this data nor our students' stories!

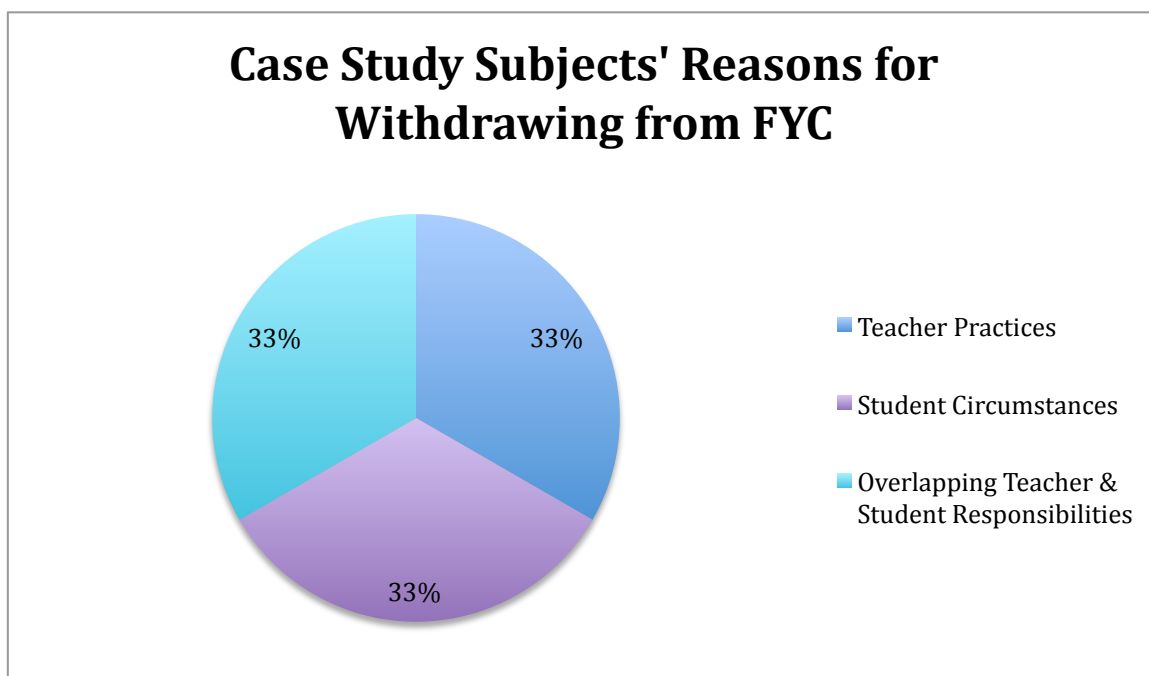


Fig. 5: Reasons Given by Seven Case Study Subjects To Explain Nine Experiences of Withdrawing from FYC at CCGC

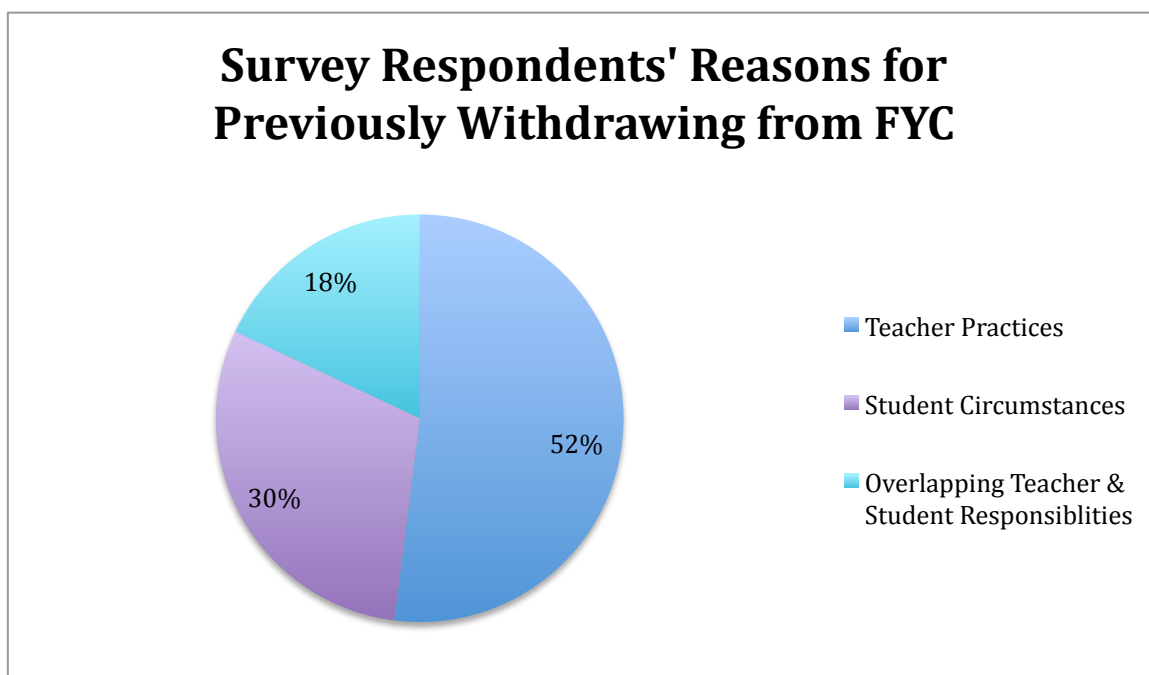


Fig. 6: Responses Regarding Reasons for Withdrawing Given by 67 Questionnaire Respondents Who Had Previously Withdrawn from FYC at CCGC

If we combine the percentages in the divisions of “Teacher Practices” and “Overlapping Teacher & Student Responsibilities” for each of the pie charts in Figures 5 and 6, then 66% of the reasons for case study subjects withdrawing from FYC (see Figure 5) might have been impacted by a teacher, while 70% of the decisions of the 67 questionnaire respondents who withdrew from FYC might have been impacted by the FYC teacher (see Figure 6).

If two out of three FYC students who withdraw could potentially benefit from a “sponsor of persistence,” how can FYC teachers fulfill this role and meet these students’ needs? And shouldn’t we as Composition teachers be familiar with most of these “best practices” by now since our profession has been studying the teaching and learning of writing since Composition became a discipline? Gathering and listening to students’ stories is a powerful way to find out about the “less than best” practices going on in many FYC classrooms, and these same voices make poignant suggestions for promoting a pedagogy of persistence in future FYC classrooms. Before I, myself, recommend ways in which FYC teachers can teach for persistence, I will turn to the advice shared with me by the case study participants during their interviews. I will begin with their counsel for future students, and then turn to their wisdom for FYC teachers.

Advice from the Case Study Subjects to Future Students of FYC

Near the end of each interview, I asked each case study participant whether he or she had any advice for future students of FYC who might be on the brink of considering withdrawing. Even though some of the interviewees gave general advice to incoming students, their wisdom is worth collecting and passing on to future students of FYC.

According to the seven case study participants who had previously withdrawn from FYC at least once, incoming FYC students should

- make friends in class, encouraging each other to “hang in there” (Miss D 21).
- embrace assignments that ask them to “think outside the box,” to do things they’ve never had to do before (Jo Ellen 15).
- be prepared for the reality that high school doesn’t necessarily prepare them for the privileges and responsibilities of college (Jo Ellen 16).
- be humble; don’t act like they know everything (A.J. 14).
- take college seriously: go to orientation, put some thought into organizing their schedules, and avoid taking “easy” classes (A.J. 2).
- take initiative in approaching their teachers (A.J. 13).
- realize they are adults, enrolling in college for themselves rather than for their parents (Erin 10).
- consult their teachers before dropping out (Mary 11).
- take a semester off if they’re not ready to settle down and study, especially if they’re relying on their parents’ money (Mary 11).
- become aware of campus resources; visit advisors and school counselors to see if they qualify for special accommodations (Mary 11).
- “If [they] have to drop, drop, but . . . [they] shouldn’t quit” (Erin 10).
- believe in themselves and their abilities to succeed (Mary 10).

It is difficult to argue with any of these suggestions for future students of FYC as they seem to rely on common sense. However, this wisdom was hard-earned for most of these

advice givers since they could have prevented their own withdrawal from FYC if they had understood these important guidelines *before* they enrolled. Many of the case study subjects spoke passionately in regards to their advice to incoming students, almost as if they were advising their former selves, the ones who ended up withdrawing from FYC. Indeed, in their advice to inexperienced students, the case study participants fulfilled the purpose of retelling the narratives of our lives according to Clandinin and Connelly and quoted in the first chapter of this dissertation, which is “to offer possibilities for reliving, for new directions and new ways of doing things” (189). In sharing their own stories of withdrawing, the case study participants demonstrated that they had begun to perceive new ways of succeeding in FYC.

Advice for Teachers of FYC Interested in Promoting Persistence

Revisiting the Advice of Case Study Subjects

The case study subjects who offered advice to incoming students also made powerful suggestions for teachers of FYC who want to retain as many of their students as possible. The final question I asked each of my interviewees was a version of the following: **“If you could say anything to the college professors of English here at CCGC to guide them in changing something in order to make it less likely for students to drop Comp, what would that be?”** What follows is a representation of the case study participants’ responses as paraphrased by me and then sorted into two groups that attempt to separate classroom practices from teacher attitudes. The first six suggestions advise FYC teachers *what* to do in the classroom, and the next six recommend *how* teachers should approach their students.

Advice from leave-takers for teachers regarding assignments and classroom practices in FYC:

1. On the first day, let students know how willing you are to help them, that you wouldn't give them a task or assignment without showing them how to get through it (Miss D 7).
2. Create assignments that build community in the classroom, asking students to share their writing with each other, making the classroom feel like a family (Miss D 21).
3. Coach your students to assume responsibility for making the choice to be in college and remind them that they won't excel in higher education if they believe someone else (such as their parents) has made the choice for them (Erin 10).
4. Consider the demographics of your class when giving assignments, and ask yourself if the requirements of a particular assignment privilege a race, a gender, an age, a sexual orientation, or a socio-economic class above others (Jo Ellen 15).
5. Craft assignments that invite students to write in ways they haven't done before, utilizing their creativity and building on life experiences (Jo Ellen 14).
6. Build flexibility into your course policies; inquire about a student's circumstances rather than making assumptions about his or her life (Kelly 6)

Advice from leave-takers for teachers regarding attitudes and approaches towards students of FYC:

7. Don't approach your job as routine or your students' learning as perfunctory; don't treat your students as "objects" to be educated (Kelly 12).
8. If your students ask for help, listen to them; take their concerns seriously. Take the time to sit down with an individual until the student understands how to work on his or her own (Erin 10).
9. Pay attention to the anxiety of your students and don't underestimate the power of saying "the right words at the right time" to encourage your students (Miss D 21).
10. Help your students feel at ease; help them believe they can succeed (Kelly 12).
11. Don't be afraid to interact with your students, to get to know them personally (Kelly 12).
12. Care about your students enough to call or e-mail them if they've accumulated a few absences; this will help you understand your students' circumstances, plus it might create an opportunity for you to help them find support in solving their problems. If nothing else, it will make them feel less alone (Kelly 6).

Listening to these recommendations for teachers cited during the interviews showed me that the case study subjects wanted their former teachers—including me—to take the time

to get to know them individually. If we don't understand our students' struggles, then how can we support them to achieve the dream of attaining a college degree?

In the next section I will connect this advice to teachers given by the leave-takers with the suggestions made by many of the retention experts and composition scholars referenced in the literature review in Chapter One. Together they can form a foundation for a "pedagogy for persistence" that deserves not only consideration but immediate implementation in our FYC classrooms.

Revisiting the Advice of Retention Experts

The twelve directives to FYC teachers gleaned from the transcripts of the seven case studies of students who withdrew from FYC echo many of the concerns and findings of retention scholars and compositionists committed to access whose work was reviewed in Chapter One.

When Miss D calls upon teachers of FYC to create assignments that build community in the classroom, making it "feel like a family" (21), she echoes Tinto and Engstrom's call for the "sense of belonging" in the classroom created by the learning communities they studied (3). I am not recommending that every section of FYC be officially registered as a "learning community," but I do advocate the workshopping of student writing because I have witnessed the intimacy created in FYC when students share their stories and experiences with one another, deciding to be worthy of each other's trust. When students form a bond with one another, they are more likely to coach each other through the difficult moments of the course, serving as sponsors of persistence for each other as needed. As a member of a tightly knit community, students of FYC are less likely to withdraw because they see themselves as part of a larger whole and believe

they are “on the right track” (Tinto and Engstrom 3). Retention researcher John Bean recognizes that strong social bonds in the classroom “help a student fit in with others at the school [while] weak social attachments” . . . “can hurt retention” (227).

Creating a close-knit community in and of itself is not enough to keep the “family” of the classroom together, for, as Tinto points out the obvious, the purpose of a learning community is “to foster learning” which results in persistence because “students who learn are students who stay” (“Enhancing Student Persistence” 5). Therefore we as FYC teachers should heed the advice of the case study subjects who coached us to carefully craft our assignments, weighing students’ interests, histories, and cultural anxieties with their need to be challenged intellectually. This is no simple task as many compositionists struggle to determine the content of their FYC courses and to scaffold assignments that are meaningful to their students while also meeting the requirements of the academy. I will posit my own suggestions for FYC course content in the recommendations section of this chapter.

Besides crafting thoughtful assignments, Kelly recommended that FYC teachers word their course policies carefully, building in enough flexibility to be approachable to students who are new to the academy and unfamiliar with the ways institutions of higher education enforce these policies. In *Lives on the Boundary* Mike Rose documents the difficulty many students have of “crossing the boundaries of that powerful room” (238), of collapsing the distance between the experienced teacher (backed by the powerful institution) and the novice student. Kelly was unable to make this step (to approach me about his absences) the semester that he withdrew, but his testimony also reminded me that I did not take a step towards him either. Upon review of my attendance policy that

semester, the terms read rather sternly: “Accumulating more than six absences results in failing the course.” No wonder Kelly had decided I was unapproachable in terms of discussing his absences.

Although none of the case study respondents mentioned the term *intervention*, several suggested actions that FYC teachers could take *before* their students had made the decision to leave. Their suggestions include contacting the student via phone call or e-mail, listening to the student during conferencing rather than doing most of the talking, approaching students before or after class, paying attention to individual student’s levels of anxiety, and putting students at ease by getting to know them personally. Aquiline and Powell also encourage FYC teachers to “intervene, when it’s both possible and right to do so, to help students address problems that might otherwise lead to decisions to leave”(Aquiline and Powell 4).

Aquiline and Powell’s advice may be sound, but how do we, as FYC teachers, know when it is “right” and “possible” to intervene? Are we tempted to hang back due to the workload of trying to prevent dozens of students a semester from withdrawing? Do we have the energy to tune in to the problems of each and every one of our fifty to a hundred students per semester? Or perhaps we get discouraged because so many of our students’ problems lie outside of our areas of expertise and to hear their stories contributes to our feelings of helplessness or inefficacy. When I served as a teaching assistant for Claude Mark Hurlbert, I witnessed him model a compassionate and sensible approach as he said to a struggling student, “How can I support you?,” thus beginning an earnest dialogue with the student experiencing difficulty. I have borrowed his question, sometimes rewording it to be, “What do you need to succeed, and how can I best serve

you to meet this goal?” In the future I can imagine wording it like this: “How can I be a sponsor of your persistence?” Being a sponsor of a student’s persistence means aligning myself with his or her goal of achieving a college degree. It means paying attention to the hopes and dreams of my students in FYC.

Revisiting the Role of Resilience in FYC Persistence

Why do some students who withdraw from FYC discuss their departures with their teachers at the time of withdrawal while others simply disappear from the FYC classroom and sometimes the entire campus? Why do some students re-enroll the very next semester while others wait years and some even give up on college completely? Many students share the common stressors that Powell’s subject Jenelle succumbed to: money, time, and family drama (Aquiline and Powell 13), yet not all of these students ended up withdrawing. Powell poses an important question to FYC teachers interested in persistence: “Why does this stress prevent some people from succeeding, while others are able to manage? And to what extent can retention efforts deal with these factors?” (Aquiline and Powell 13).

In Chapter One I defined *resiliency* as “the ability to recover quickly from illness, change, or misfortune” (“resilience”), making the case that students with greater resilience were more likely to re-enroll in FYC the next semester. But after listening to the testimonies of Erin and Mary, I’m not sure that resilience is as important to a student’s success as the concept of *tenacity*, defined as “the state or quality of holding or tending to hold persistently to something” (“tenacity”). After all, neither Erin nor Mary *quickly* recovered from their physical, mental, and emotional setbacks, yet each never doubted she would come back and finish her respective degree, and they both had

something to prove to members of their families and even those in the CCGC community who didn't believe that someone with cerebral palsy or bi-polar disorder could earn a college degree.

Connecting Resilience to Self-Efficacy

Both Erin and Mary fit social cognitive theorist Frank Pajares's description of people with a strong sense of self-efficacy, demonstrated by those who "approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided" (9). The testimonials of Mary and Erin include more lists of things they *can* do than things they *can't* do. They are proud of their accomplishments and plan to build on their successes. Self-efficacy beliefs motivate behavior, determining "how much effort people will expend on an activity, how long they will persevere when confronting obstacles [what I have referred to as *tenacity*], and how resilient they will be in the face of adverse situations" (Pajares 9). With high levels of self-efficacy, both Mary and Erin demonstrate impressive perseverance and, in particular, *academic resilience*, defined as "the attitude of not giving up in challenging situations because of the belief that effort and challenge lead to success more than ability" (McTigue, Washburn, and Liew 424). Reflecting on Erin's refusal to accept her supposed inability to graph in her math class demonstrates high academic resilience. In a way, both Erin and Mary turned the naysayers of their abilities into "sponsors of persistence" since proving them wrong became powerful motivation for their persistence toward their degrees.

Though many family members believed Erin and Mary would not succeed, Erin and Mary did find support from teachers and advisors who recognized their intelligence and drive, thus advocating for their opportunities to succeed in specific courses at CCGC.

In speaking with Erin, it becomes apparent that her self-concept was altered by her interactions with Miss Smith. But self-concept (or self-esteem) and self-efficacy are not the same constructs as educational psychologist Frank Pajares distinguishes the two: “self-efficacy is concerned with beliefs of personal capability” and “self-concept includes the evaluation of such competence and the *feelings of self-worth* associated with the behaviors in question” (13-14). While the attention that Miss Smith gave to Erin probably contributed to her sense of self-worth, it was her ability to master graphing that increased her level of self-efficacy.

Like Erin, Mary also found a supporter at CCGC, but her mentor was not a teacher. Instead, she was the Special Populations Director and guided Mary toward the resources she needed to succeed. Maybe it’s true what Olympian wrestler Brandon Slay once claimed in a motivational speech at an alternative middle school in his home town of Amarillo: “You don’t need everyone to believe in you; just one person will do.” If so, this leads me to question how many times I have been that person—the one who believed—for a student of FYC, and how many times I have missed the opportunity to do so.

Supporting Students to Find Reasons to Believe:

Recommendations for a Pedagogy for Persistence

Powell posed a question that I mentioned in Chapter One, but it hovers over me in a thought bubble above my desk every time I sit down to design a semester’s worth of assignments for FYC: **“What should our course goals be when we consider that many [of our FYC students] may never take another college class?”** Aquiline and Powell find guidance in the following answer provided by Tom Fox: “Design courses that invite

students to participate right now, in our classrooms, in consequential, engaging work that involves substantial writing and reading” (qtd. in Aquiline and Powell 16). But Fox’s answer begs another question: what, precisely, would a pedagogy for persistence centered around “consequential, engaging work” look like? What should our students read? And what should they write? And how should class time be spent? I will offer answers to these questions by considering the following sources of knowledge: retention researchers, social cognitive theorists, compositionists committed to creating opportunities for their students to succeed, and, of course, the students of past, present, and future sections of FYC.

Paying Attention to Major Findings of This Study

The data gathered from both my survey and the seven case studies shows that **teacher practices can have a significant impact on 2 out of 3 students’ decisions to withdraw or persist**. Therefore teachers who are dedicated to following this **pedagogy of persistence** that I recommend must do the following:

1. keep abreast of the scholarship on teaching and learning (SoTL) and the research on retention;
2. become actively involved in the retention programs and institutional policies on your home campus;
3. carefully consider, craft, and communicate your policies regarding absences and develop your approachability so students aren’t afraid to communicate with you;
4. share “best practices” regarding persistence across departments and disciplines and even with other institutions through presentations and publishing;
5. and, most important of all, pay attention to your students’ lived experiences.

In the following sections I will offer more specific advice and ideas for following each of these five recommendations.

Paying Attention to the Research on Retention

In the preface to his newest book *Completing College: Rethinking Institutional Action* published in April of 2012, retention expert Vincent Tinto reflects on the shifting focus of retention research as he states, “I have come to appreciate the centrality of the classroom to student success and the critical role the faculty play in retaining students. But I also learned that the classroom was the domain of institutional action that was given the *least* attention [emphasis added]” (viii). Instead of promoting more “add-on” programs that enhance student engagement, Tinto advocates making the work we do in the classroom more engaging. Four years earlier (in 2008), retention scholar John Braxton was already prescribing the best pedagogical practices to promote persistence, including the following listed in his article “Toward a Scholarship of Practice Centered on College Student Retention”:

- Employ “active learning” in class (defined as “any class activity that involves students doing things and thinking about the things they are doing”) (104).
- Develop the teaching skills of organization, preparation, and instructional clarity (104).
- Emphasize higher-order thinking skills in course assessment practices (105).
- Interact frequently with students both inside and outside of the classroom (105).
- Communicate high expectations to students and expect them to be met (105).

- Demonstrate respect for diverse talents and ways of knowing by validating student work through frequent feedback (105).

In his article “Instructional Issues and Retention of First-Year Students” published in the *Journal of College Student Retention* in 2009, Richard Giaquinto points out that many first-year students might be uncomfortable with active learning because they “expect a teacher dominated classroom” . . . “where they passively sit and listen and take notes” (269). Giaquinto counsels teachers to consider the expectations of the students and to build on these progressively, such as taking class time to review course plans (272). He implores teachers to “try to get to know our students so that we can plan instruction accordingly” (272). Giaquinto also provides a list of best practices in teaching for persistence of first-year students based on education research conducted by Carol Tomlinson of the University of Virginia:

- Connect instruction to the lives of students—make it relevant.
- Identify goals for instruction in your syllabi and what outcomes can be expected if the goals are met.
- Match classroom activities to the goals of your instructions.
- Go for powerful learning in class where students are explicitly aware of key principles [and] concepts that facilitate learning and understanding.
- Teach up, where you organize learning that is a little more difficult than the class might successfully ordinarily navigate. Then provide the necessary support with appropriate instruction and celebrate real success.
- The first-year students come to us with more problems ranging from being unprepared to complete college work to interpersonal issues of feelings of

isolation and depression. Recognize and accept it and meet these students where they are in their cognitive development and support their efforts with understanding and support. (qtd. in Giaquinto 273)

This list may seem like second nature to progressive teachers of FYC, but it is grounded in Tomlinson's notion of "differentiated instruction" which provides a way for teachers "to accommodate the different ways that students learn, involv[ing] a hefty dose of common sense, as well as sturdy support from the theory and research of education" culminating in "an approach to teaching that advocates active planning for student differences in the classroom" (Tomlinson). When we give students choices in assignments, or help them customize a project, whether we realize it or not, we are participating in differentiated instruction.

Giaquinto offers several other specific tips for teaching for persistence that can be adapted to the FYC classroom:

- "Have students complete a quick write—a timed writing of no more than five minutes—to identify more examples of a concept or to redefine a concept" (281).
- "Have the courage to ask students to complete a mid-semester evaluation of the course—to evaluate what you need to change" (281).
- "Build on the need for students to interact socially by using group work that is carefully monitored and incorporates activities that require students to elaborate, synthesize, and apply knowledge to situations relevant to the class" (282).

- “Carefully use role-playing in class to help students understand different viewpoints of people under discussion” (282).
- “Make yourself available after an interesting class went really well: have lunch or coffee with these students. With more personal content, you will begin to see more engagement in class because students not only are beginning to trust you, but better understand and appreciate what you have to offer them during one short 15-week course” (282).

Although Giaquinto cautions teachers to be careful when crafting class projects (282), Vincent Tinto promotes project-based education as a practice for increasing student engagement and thus increasing student persistence. In *project-based education* (a term Tinto often interchanged with *problem-posing education* in his keynote address “Promoting Student Success” at the 18th Annual New Mexico Higher Education and Retention Conference held in Albuquerque in February of 2012), teachers work with students in designing assignments based on real-world problems that students then address in individual or collaborative projects. An example Tinto gave for project-based education included having his education majors work in groups to address the problem of retention of first-year students at their home institution in Syracuse. The groups of five then designed proposals to address the problem, presenting these proposals to the entire class with Tinto deciding which group would be “awarded” the consulting contract. Tinto acknowledged that there really was “no one right answer” to the problem, but this assignment revealed to the students the many ways of looking at a problem (“Promoting”). I believe Tinto would consider the book project I assign in FYC to meet

the conditions of problem-posing education since students write about issues they have faced or are facing while being students at CCGC.

Paying Attention to Your Campus:

Considering the Influences of Institutional and Departmental Policies on Persistence

In Chapter One I outlined the reasons given by Pegeen Reichert Powell for composition and rhetoric teachers to get involved in research and programs regarding retention on our own campuses. The case was made that composition teachers who care about access should also care about supporting students to succeed once they are inside the academy. But in these times of competition both for funding and for enrollment, institutions of higher education are often invested in retention programs because of the dollars lost from the tuitions and fees of students who drop out or transfer to other schools. In his keynote address at the conference on retention in Albuquerque, Tinto, too, declared that “performance based funding is not going to go away any time soon; the question is whether you are going to have a say in it or whether you are going to leave it up to the state” (“Promoting”). Like Powell, I propose that instead of resisting being drafted into retention programs on our campuses, composition and rhetoric teachers should volunteer to join—or even form—interdisciplinary and cross-campus committees, coalitions, and study groups. Giaquinto promotes one such study group composed of “faculty who teach first-year students” . . . “who plan and structure courses together” . . . thus creating an interdisciplinary instructional model not dissimilar to learning communities (273-74). Because first-year courses are so crucial to student persistence, retention expert John Braxton recommends that “colleges and universities should avoid staffing gatekeeper courses with part-time faculty members such as part-time adjuncts,

part-time lecturers, and post-doctoral researchers” (“Toward” 102). At the conference in Albuquerque, Tinto also recognized the importance of staffing first-year courses with tenured faculty.

Tinto recommends a restructuring of campus services so that “student affairs is partnered with faculty,” and he also suggests that students would utilize more campus services if teachers consistently brought college advisors and counselors into their first-year classrooms (“Promoting”). Although Tinto sees some summer bridge programs as “add on” approaches to preventing student attrition because they are not necessarily tied to the centrality of the classroom, these programs can be integrated into the first-year experience if they are followed up with mentoring—either by a second year student or a faculty member—or both. Powell was part of a program like this where faculty were paired with summer bridge graduates in order to mentor them through their first year experience, and that is how she came to interview Jenelle. Tinto also emphasized the importance of “getting students more quickly through developmental courses” because retention research shows that the longer they are stuck in “the developmental pipeline,” the more likely they are to leave the academy (“Promoting”).

To be an FYC teacher dedicated to promoting student persistence on your campus might mean pushing yourself to address departmental or institutional policies aimed at holding students back, such as the junior writing test that Tom Fox fought to eliminate at his home institution because it served to keep students from advancing in their majors. At the community college where I presently teach, students who do not pass the writing placement test are required to take *nine* credits of developmental writing courses before they are allowed to enroll in Comp I. This policy is not intended to racialize the student

body, but it nevertheless results in an overrepresentation of minority students enrolled in the developmental writing courses on our campus. To be dedicated to a pedagogy for persistence requires me to address the gatekeeping aspects of policies in both basic writing and FYC, particularly practices I suspect of making it less likely for students to succeed. Tinto reminds us that the longer we keep students in the “pipeline” of developmental courses, the more likely they are to get discouraged and disappear from our roles (“Promoting”).

Compositionists dedicated to student-centered teaching may also find themselves in battles against one or more of the following: 1. adopting required textbooks for their courses, 2. raising the caps in writing classes, and 3. being excused from a week of whole class teaching to participate in effective one-on-one conferencing. Institutions interested in student persistence should encourage *more* student-faculty contact, not *less*, claims Braxton, and this may require teachers to fight for changes in departmental policies such as lowering class caps and supporting one-on-one conferencing by allowing class release (“Toward” 105).

Paying Attention to Attendance Policies

Because attendance policies can be difficult to compose and even more difficult to enforce, and because they so greatly figure into student attrition rates, these policies should be thoughtfully crafted and situated in the culture of a campus. Perhaps each department would benefit from assigning this work to a committee; at least that would make the wording of the policy consistent, although its enforcement might still vary depending upon negotiations between the teacher and the student. In order for these negotiations to occur at all, the teacher must be approachable—both in person, and on

paper, meaning the wording of the attendance policy on the course syllabus must leave room for interpretation. There are many, many reasons that cause students to miss class, and as teachers of FYC, we should not assume we know these reasons without talking with students individually.

Giaquinto cites stress as a possible cause for poor attendance exhibited by first-year students, describing a typical scenario:

When students experience problems with their school work—failing exams, not keeping up with the readings, poor grades on papers—stress is usually the resulting effect. This in turn might lead some students to seek relief [through] inappropriate and harmful experiences—binge drinking, sexual experimentation, and isolation.

As a result, they might stop attending class. The problem becomes worse as their decisions are made based on destructive behaviors and perhaps on a distortion of what they are really experiencing. As their emotions continue to worsen, their feelings of inadequacy might cause them to stop attending other classes as well; and without any meaningful intervention from others, the semester is one of failure and discontent.

This failure might cause some of them to quit or attend another institution.

(270)

Giaquinto's description at least partially fits the stories shared by many of my case study subjects—particularly A.J., Kelly, EZ, and Jo Ellen. Tinto implores teachers of students with successive absences: “Don’t wait for the student to contact you, contact them! No person is better than the teacher of the course to reach out to the student!” (“Promoting”).

What if our attendance policies actually emphasized the compassion we feel for our students and how dedicated we are to their college persistence, rather than how many points we will subtract for each absence? What if our students knew that being absent two classes in a row means scheduling a conference to plan for their course success rather than being punished for their absences? The correlation between communication of attendance policies and student attrition in FYC is an area that could benefit from further research.

Paying Attention to Our Students' Experiences

The best way I have come to learn about the lived experiences of my FYC students is by inviting them to write—and then share—their interests, their ideas, their struggles, their family stories, and then adopting this writing as the central texts of my Comp I courses. We begin with low stakes writing such as responses to journal prompts that they are then invited, but not required, to share with the rest of the class. I write in class when my students do, and sometimes I force myself to share an entry or two. I notice that when I take a risk in sharing my writing, sometimes this causes the students to do so too. By the third week of class we have filled twenty to thirty pages in our composition notebooks, and then I collect these to read and respond to in the margins minimally, with a longer endnote addressed to the student as if it were a personal letter, beginning with “Dear _____,” and ending with “Sincerely, Mysti” and filled in between with my responses to their most powerful writing.

The students then work in a computer lab for a week or two while I conference with each of them in the back of this lab. At first, the students are assigned to compile a list of the most significant events in their lives and then type a paragraph or more about

each event on the list. When students finish this assignment, they schedule a conference with me to discuss what they want to write their book about. I ask them what they are struggling to make sense of in their lives—or what they are working on or trying to figure out, and then I look at each student’s list with the writer, as together we try to make connections between where they are going and where they have been. By reading their journals and their lists, along with conferencing with them, I receive an introduction to my students’ lives. But this is only the beginning. It is not until each student has workshopped four single-spaced pages of his or her draft with the whole class that we begin to understand what really matters to this writer. And as we discuss each piece—analyzing its purpose, its message, its rhetorical effectiveness, then offering serious and thoughtful suggestions for revision—a discourse community is formed.

I am not advocating that everyone teach Comp I this way, and, in fact, I am more likely now to use this curriculum as an introduction to composition because of the emphasis on research for Comp I at my current institution. However, I still have my Comp I students write books, but instead of being extended narratives, these books are formed around original research questions connected to students’ urgent concerns, such as “What should I major in?” or “How can I afford to go to law school?” or “How do I know if I have inherited my family’s tendency toward alcoholism?” or “How do I juggle being a new teacher with being a new mother?” We begin the semester by discussing the concept of *work* as we share responses to excerpts we have read from Studs Terkel’s *Working* and Mike Rose’s *The Mind at Work*. Then we write about our earliest memories of work, connecting the work we come from to the work we are headed towards. Each student then chooses to write about a topic that fills in the following sentence: “I want to

write my book about the work of _____.” We freewrite and conference in order to discover a topic of meaning and relevance for each student. The book each student then writes is a multi-genre project that includes original poetry, primary research based on interviews and questionnaires, and secondary research incorporated into essays and I-search papers.

I am not totally satisfied with the parameters of this assignment, but if, like Powell suggests, many of these students will never take another writing course and will not persist to a degree, can I live with this curriculum I have designed for FYC? Will I be satisfied with what I have taught them—or, more importantly, what they have learned—from enrolling in one of my sections of FYC? I can more easily respond with a “yes” to this question if the student actually completes either the extended narrative or the multi-genre book in FYC. For if a student completes this project, he or she is often thought of as “the writer in the family,” and therefore asked or expected by the family to write occasional poems or eulogies or poignant family stories. This is an important position in both the family and the community, and I am proud to have been a part of empowering these students to become writers who share their work with others.

If, however, a student does not complete the book project and withdraws or stops attending FYC, as a compositionist dedicated to persistence, can I live with this outcome? As my case study subjects and the questionnaire respondents mentioned, the book project can be very daunting—particularly to a first-year student. There are measures, however, that I could take to increase FYC students’ chances of succeeding by strengthening their self-efficacy, enhancing their beliefs in their capabilities to complete FYC.

Paying Attention to Students' Self-Efficacy Beliefs

Education specialist Karen Kirk, who runs workshops for the Science Education Resource Center at Carleton College when she is not teaching skiing lessons in Montana, has long studied the influence of the affective domain on the cognitive domain in educational settings. Both as a science teacher and as a ski instructor, she recognizes how our “values, motivations, attitudes, stereotypes, and feelings” influence our ability to “synthesize, recollect, comprehend, evaluate, and analyze” material (“The Affective Domain”). In her article “Self-Efficacy: Do You Believe You Can Be Successful?” published in the Winter 2012 issue of *32 Degrees: The Journal of Professional Snowsports Instruction*, Kirk overviews the four ways that social cognitive theorist Albert Bandura claims can positively influence the self-efficacy of students. Although Kirk applies these methods to teaching ski students to navigate the literal “demanding terrain” of a ski run, I have customized her advice to include the metaphorical “demanding terrain” of the book project in the FYC classroom. Here are the four ways recommended by Kirk to positively impact self-efficacy in students followed by my application to FYC:

1. “Mastery Experiences: Students’ successful experiences boost self-efficacy, while failures erode it” (73). Applying this to the book project, I could employ more assignment scaffolding, building in smaller successes on the way to completing the bigger project.
2. “Vicarious Experience: Observing a peer succeed at a task can strengthen beliefs in one’s own abilities” (74). Having successful students from previous semesters visit the current class and give testimonials about the project could help students

see the book project as achievable. Forming writing or research groups in FYC could also supply the “vicarious experience of observing a peer succeed.”

3. “Verbal Persuasion: Teachers can boost self-efficacy with credible communication and feedback to guide the student through the task or motivate them to make their best effort” (74). Applying this to the book project, I could check in with students weekly, scheduling conferences or giving feedback via e-mail when they are stuck or have questions about their drafts.
4. “Emotional State: A positive mood can boost one’s belief in self-efficacy, while anxiety can undermine it. A certain level of emotional stimulation can create an energizing feeling that can contribute to strong performances. Teachers can help by reducing stressful situations and lowering anxiety surrounding events like exams or presentations” (74). I could “take the emotional temperature” of the class, inquiring about their stress levels on a scale of 1-10. I could also diffuse the anxiety in the classroom by letting students blow off steam via freewriting and breaking into small groups, with each group framing a problem and brainstorming a possible solution. I could also pair students with writing partners who could serve as a “sponsor of persistence” when their partner felt like giving up. A week before a big assignment is due, I could pose to the entire class, “What are you worried about in terms of the upcoming project?” Students could then confer in groups to spearhead concerns which we could then address in whole group and brainstorm possible solutions together.

Even though the book project can potentially exacerbate the levels of self-efficacy of FYC students, it does readily fulfill two tips for improving self-efficacy among

students: 1. It allows students to “make their own choices,” and 2. It “capitalizes on students’ interests” (Kirk “Self-Efficacy: Helping”). Many other FYC teachers’ projects also fulfill these two tips for designing a course to enhance student persistence, and I will explore some of these options in the next section. First, however, I call for further research to examine the impact that practices in the FYC classroom have on student self-efficacy and student persistence.

Sara Jimenez Soffa has researched the ways that “the classroom experience contributes to the academic self-efficacy of undergraduate women enrolled in gateway courses to academic majors in the sciences and business management at a small Midwestern single-sex college” (1). In her study published in 2007, Soffa found that teachers who “created learning experiences relevant to students” and “invited real-life experiences in the learning environment had a direct and positive effect on students self-reported levels of academic self-efficacy at the end of their gateway courses” (1). Soffa calls for further research exploring the connection between “innovative ways of teaching” and “students’ levels of academic self-efficacy toward specific courses” (131). Since FYC is also a gateway course, studying the impact that innovative ways of teaching have on student self-efficacy and ultimately persistence could promote more effective ways of teaching in the field of Composition.

Designing Relevancy into FYC

There are many, many ways of making assignments in FYC relevant to students’ lives, a great example chronicled in *Letters for the Living* when Claude Mark Hurlbert and Michael Blitz had their FYC students write to each other across boundaries of gender, class, race, and place. In Chapter One of this dissertation, I mentioned Ellen

Cushman's focus on the culture shock of the first-year experience which she addresses by inviting her students to write about their adjustments to college. I also alluded to Bruce McComiskey's assignment to have his students first analyze the cultural values made evident by the college's promotional literature, and then to contrast that with their own values, culminating in the creation of each student's own version of a "College Look Book" (93-98). As I stated in Chapter One, the purpose of McComiskey's FYC course design is "to help students both critique and identify a place for themselves inside the academy" (41).

In an attempt to furnish herself with an answer to her own question as to how FYC should be designed to consider the needs of the students who will persist as well as those who will drop out without receiving a degree (676), Powell entertains Downs and Wardle's proposal to make FYC about the study of writing. "A course like the one that Downs and Wardle describe," surmises Powell, "may be one possibility for reaching all students, those who will go on to become 'successful insiders' and those who will be 'more articulate critical outsiders'" (678).

As for my own courses, I will keep tinkering with the design and content of FYC, hoping this risk-taking qualifies me as a teacher with "high self-efficacy" who is "able to rebound from setbacks" and is therefore "more willing to experiment with new ideas or techniques" (Kirk "Self-Efficacy: Helping"). Although I am willing to explore new ways of designing FYC, I continue to see a good fit between problem-posing education and the real-world problems our students encounter as they head to college. Since problem-posing education leads to greater student engagement which then leads to higher rates of persistence, and since many of our students are already mired in problems that are social,

emotional, cultural, and economic, why can't they study their own situations and research the cultural and historical contexts of their circumstances? It might be a perfect marriage to earn college credit for exploring that which they need to figure out in order to take their next steps in achieving their goals and dreams.

While my book project caused some students to drop FYC, it also contributed to the self-efficacy of those who participated in this “mastery experience” of completing a book for FYC (Kirk “Self-Efficacy: Do” 73). In Miss D’s interview, she discussed her feelings of accomplishment, clearly proud of having published a thirty-paged book as she shared this accomplishment with her daughter’s teacher (12). But I have also learned from Miss D as well as other case study subjects that the way I framed the book project—including the way I introduced it on the first day of class, the way I did *not* mention how much I would help them with this project, and the way I did *not* emphasize my dedication to one-on-one conferencing—made the project seem daunting and my role as teacher intimidating. And I did not, from day one, reinforce my investment in their success, my sponsorship of their persistence—all ways in which I could have impacted their levels of self-efficacy. Course design is crucial to making college relevant to students’ lives, but paying attention to students’ beliefs in their ability to succeed is also crucial—and in the next section I will explore the impact teachers can make by establishing approachability and addressing issues affecting self-efficacy.

Improving Teacher Approachability

I began this project of researching the reasons so many of my students at CCGC ended up dropping FYC because I was worried that I was contributing to the 20% attrition rate. And now I know that I was! According to both my case studies and my

questionnaires, two out of three withdrawals might have been impacted by the teacher of record (see Figures 5 and 6); for all my case study subjects and many of the questionnaire respondents, that teacher was me. And for the more than one hundred students represented by the yellow drop-slips piling up in the drawer of my desk on campus, that teacher was also me.

But I no longer believe it was the challenge of the book project alone that caused students to drop; rather, it was the accumulation of my missed opportunities to positively effect students' self-efficacy. It didn't matter if the project was "doable" if the student didn't *believe* that she or he could do it.

Self-efficacy can be measured and considered a student attribute tied to background characteristics (such as race, gender, standardized test scores, and parents' educational levels) and therefore used to predict success or failure before the matriculating student has even attended his or her first college course (Murray, M.). But this is a very static view of the concept of self-efficacy, disregarding the ways proven by Bandura that self-efficacy can be impacted. While Kirk applies Bandura's methods to the ski slope, I believe the FYC college classroom—a place many students fear more than taking a chairlift up a mountain and maneuvering their way down—is a powerful place to address student fears of failure or inadequacy. Although it might seem that students' emotional health is outside a writing teacher's area of expertise, students bring their fears of failure into the FYC classroom with or without our permission. Refusing to acknowledge student fears forces students to find their own ways to manage them.

Understanding Students' Fears of FYC

In her 2009 book *The Fear Factor: How Students and Professors Misunderstand One Another*, Rebecca Cox describes the tenuous emotional state of first-year community college students. Many are first generation students and thus have little “college knowledge” compared to middle-class students (24). Many of them have not experienced academic success in high school, but now they are “step[ping] into the role of college student” . . . “anxiously waiting for their shortcomings to be exposed, at which point they will be stopped from pursuing their goals” (25). Cox describes these students as “fearful and fragile” (25) and in her interviews with them, they “admitted to feeling intimidated by professors’ academic knowledge and by teachers’ power to assess students and assign grades” (26). Although Cox interviewed first-year students about all their courses, she noted that math and composition “evoked the greatest anxiety for the vast majority” of her interview subjects and that “students’ fears of the composition course was particularly intense” (27-28). In fact, the title for Cox’s book came from a student named Kyra “who put off taking [Composition] until her very last semester” because she “just had a fear of English, like this total fear factor” (28). Carlos, another student Cox interviewed, put off submitting his first essay to his FYC teacher because he “didn’t know exactly what the teacher wanted” (29). These types of student responses are familiar to those of us who teach FYC at community colleges. Because students like Kyra and Carlos bring a lot of fear about meeting the demands of a college composition course into FYC, they also depend on strategies for managing this fear—one such strategy being to leave.

Identifying Student Strategies for Managing Fear

Although Cox admits that “quitting is the ultimate fear management strategy because it offers a means of eliminating the source of anxiety” (32), she recognizes other strategies that students rely on, such as “not participating in classroom discussions” and “avoiding conversations with the professor—whether inside or outside the classroom” (36), “avoiding being evaluated” (39), e.g. not turning in a paper or not showing up on test or presentation day, “scaling back,” (33) and “redefining failure” (34). “Choosing not to attend class,” continues Cox, gives “fear-driven students another reprieve from exposure” (36). Cox’s depiction of class absences as a strategy to avoid anxiety causes me to take even more seriously the words of my case study subjects, especially EZ and Jo Ellen, who spoke of how stressful it was to come back to class after several absences. Cox noted that interview subjects were more likely to speak of fear in the past tense (39), and I found this to have a corollary in the questionnaires I coded: students were more likely to speak of their classmates’ fear than their own. Questionnaire respondents were also more likely to speak of their classmates’ lack of motivation or low self-esteem, but rarely claimed these attributes as their own.

All of the strategies mentioned in this section temporarily manage the fear students are trying to avoid feeling, but in the long term, these strategies cause students to spiral towards failure rather than lead them to academic success. If FYC teachers notice these behaviors in their students, how can they intervene before the student has withdrawn from FYC or completely left the academy?

“Coming Down to a Student’s Level”

What can we as FYC teachers do about the fears our students bring into the classroom? Since “professors who underestimate the level of students’ anxiety tended unintentionally to exacerbate those fears” (Cox 124), we could begin by acknowledging the fear in the FYC classroom. Few people, however, especially insecure students, are likely to admit their fears in public. But if we replace the word *fear* with the word *stress*, this might make it safer for students to share their academic concerns—either in whole class or small groups. Some of Cox’s subjects credited “their persistence or success to professors” who were able “to relate or come down to students’ levels” (120). Can you imagine a FYC classroom where the professor shared his or her fears, too?

“Coming down to a student’s level” refers to a professor’s “friendliness, accessibility, and approachability” claims Cox (121). Many professors invite students to drop by during office hours, but when the students do, they often get the message by either verbal or non-verbal cues that they are bothering the professor, interrupting his or her more important work. Teaching for persistence means doing just the opposite of this: “validat[ing] students’ sense of belonging” and “engaging in a more caring and personal relationship with students” (Cox 134). Cox also emphasizes the importance of perception, as you could be the most encouraging teacher on campus, but if your students don’t perceive you as encouraging, they cannot receive the form of encouragement you believe you are offering (134).

Changing Our Students’ Assumptions

To become more effective teachers of persistence in FYC, we need to become aware of the assumptions of our students regarding the subject of writing, the culture of

college, and their own levels of self-efficacy. Again I quote Mike Rose's call for "a pedagogy that encourages us to step back and consider the threat of the standard classroom and that shows us, having stepped back, how to step forward to invite a student across the boundaries of that powerful room" (*Lives* 238). Like Rose, Cox encourages teachers to pay attention to who our students are and what they need to succeed in the academy. "In an effective learning environment," claims Cox, "part of the instructor's responsibility involves understanding how students perceive the curriculum and the learning objectives and, when necessary, helping students revise their perceptions" for "only then can a teacher close the enormous gap between her expectations and the students' approach to coursework" (87).

If we want to influence our students' academic self-efficacy, more specifically their beliefs about their ability to produce successful writing in FYC, we need to understand the assumptions they have made about notions such as "good" writing or "academic writing" and the labels they have given themselves, including "bad" or "horrible" writer. In short, we must come to know our students' fears and dreams in order to help them cross the seemingly vast chasm of the college classroom.

Teaching the Art of Asking for Help

Several of my case study subjects and questionnaire respondents suspected that their classmates withdrew from FYC because they were afraid of approaching the teacher to explain the situation, afraid to show the teacher they hadn't started the paper yet, afraid to admit they needed help, and unsure how to ask for the help they needed. Although A.J., Erin, Jo Ellen, and Mary all implored students to approach the teacher for help, in

my experience in the FYC classroom, students are not well versed in the art of asking for help.

When I teach developmental writing, I accompany my students on quick field trips to the resources available to them on campus, including my office. When we reconvene in the classroom, I say, “But if you’ve been taught to avoid asking for help, then all the resources in the world can’t help you through this course.” I share with them my Norwegian Lutheran heritage whose code of silence around asking for help often leads to resentment because, according to this tradition, your friends and family should be able to read your mind and foist help upon you without your asking. I also share with them that this is not an effective strategy in the academy, giving them examples from my academic life when I did not ask for help until it was too late. Then we freewrite beginning with the following line: “The last time I asked for help . . .” and write for five to ten minutes. Inviting students to share about their experiences of asking for help leads them to reflect on their own traditions of asking and receiving help. This might also be an effective exercise in FYC, adding the more specific questions, “How do you know when you need help on a paper?” and “How do you go about asking for help?” Role-playing might be a lively way to model various approaches for asking for help.

Vincent Tinto has found success in allowing his students to ask for help anonymously in the form of “the one-minute paper” which he described during his presentation at the 2012 conference on retention in Albuquerque. At the end of every class period, Tinto asks his students to write for one minute answering one or both of these questions: 1. “What is the one thing you’d like to learn more about?” and 2. “Is there a particular point you are not clear about?” (“Promoting”). Tinto then responds to

these questions in a single page that he posts on the class list-serve, plus he prints and hands this page out at the beginning of the next class period. Tinto recognizes the power of this exercise to promote the following: reinforcement of learning, metacognition by students, honest student engagement because it is anonymous, and increased social connection when students discuss the one-minute paper and realize they are not the only ones with these questions. But most importantly, the one-minute paper shifts the focus of the course from being teacher-centered to student-centered because, as Tinto has come to realize, “It’s not my teaching that matters but the learning that matters” (“Promoting”). If you consistently use the one-minute paper in a course, Tinto is convinced that this practice will not only change your teaching, but will “teach you how to teach” (“Promoting”).

Like it or not, teachers of FYC who are dedicated to persistence may also have to teach their students the art of asking for help. “By virtue of their professional authority,” Cox recognizes, “instructors have a tremendous influence on students’ sense of competence and willingness to seek help. An instructor’s ability to assuage students’ fears can be the first and most important step toward actively inviting students into the classroom to accomplish what they perceived as challenging but ‘doable’ work” (114). Following a pedagogy for persistence in the FYC classroom includes looking for creative, effective, and contextualized ways to help our students detect the moment they need help, whom to ask for help, how to ask, and then, most importantly, how to receive the help they need.

Teaching about Learning

First-year students in the composition classroom are often asked to participate in activities they have never done in high school, such as freewriting, or sharing their work in whole class workshops, or rhetorically analyzing their classmates' writing, or composing an essay in the manner of Montaigne rather than the five-paragraph theme. These new ways of approaching writing can be disorienting for students, especially those students who prefer to imitate specific models provided by a textbook. I have stated previously that FYC teachers need to help students revise some of their notions about writing, but FYC teachers may also find it necessary to introduce students to concepts covered in educational psychology, such as Piaget's term *disequilibrium*. When I sense that students are uncomfortable with an assignment, I share with them Piaget's notion of *disequilibrium* as "an unpleasant state that happens when new information cannot be fitted into existing schemas" (McLeod) and ask them to reflect on how this might explain their discomfort. I then remind students that this state of discomfort is often a necessary step in the process of learning, motivating us because "we do not like to be frustrated and will seek to restore balance [equilibrium] by mastering the new challenge" (McLeod).

When I have already handed out assignment descriptions and answered students' questions and there remain students who want me to tell them exactly what to do and what to write, I often use Google Image to display an array of Bloom's Taxonomy charts, encouraging students to investigate revised digital versions on their own computer screens. I ask them to locate the higher order thinking skills on the chart they like best and then inquire where the verb *to create* is located. "On the top of the chart," a student invariably shouts. I comment that I think this is a good position for *creating* and that

creating includes composing which requires our higher order thinking skills as we make a thousand decisions in a paragraph regarding what to write about, what words to use and what words to leave out, what tone to adopt, what audience to address, and what we hope to be the significance of our message. I tell them that I believe composing is the hardest thing we do as humans, and that I believe it can also be the most powerful—and that what we are working on in this course is climbing the ladder from the lower order thinking skills to the higher order thinking skills, to which some jokester often remarks, “But I’m afraid of heights!” “This is no easy task,” I remind my students. “But if you are willing,” I reassure them, “it is doable.”

There are many hands on activities to engage students in reflecting on their own learning, such as having them take the Birmingham Grid for Learning’s multiple intelligence quiz on line—and then deciphering plus reflecting on their pie chart results. I encourage teachers of persistence in FYC to help demythologize the static nature of intelligence as promoted by standardized tests, and to empower their students to understand the specific ways each of them learns.

Learning about Teaching

While students in the FYC classroom could benefit from understanding principles borrowed from educational psychology, teachers of FYC also need to study effective strategies for teaching and learning in the academy. Although the field of Composition Studies has paid more attention to pedagogical content than most academic disciplines, Cox reminds us that “creating a learning environment for professors as *learners* calls for a different conception of faculty work” (170). “Rather than working as individual, isolated faculty members,” Cox continues, “teachers should be given structured

opportunities on an ongoing basis to learn through reading, writing, discussion, observation, and reflection with peers” (170). Teachers who study the scholarship of teaching and learning (referred to as the SoTL movement) need “time and space to reflect, access to literature, and departmental dialogue” (Cox 171). This dialogue is very important for teachers of persistence, for if they do not share their effective strategies for keeping students engaged in the FYC classroom, then they are in danger of promoting the “boutique style of education” Tinto spoke of in Albuquerque: although a particular boutique (read: FYC classroom) might be successful, it exists as an isolated entity; when the owner—or professor—retires, so goes the pedagogical knowledge with him or her. Therefore teachers of persistence have a responsibility to contribute to pedagogical knowledge in the field of composition and to participate in departmental dialogue regarding pedagogy.

Becoming a Sponsor of Persistence

In my write-up of Erin’s case study, I adapted Deborah Brandt’s famous phrase “sponsors of literacy” to describe Erin’s math teacher, Miss Smith, as a “sponsor of persistence.” In reviewing Laura Rendon’s research on the persistence of Latino students at four-year colleges, Rebecca Cox noted the importance of students “being actively invited (even pulled in) to college by key adults—counselors, instructors, or other adults in the academic sphere” (127). Rendon’s description of the actions taken by these supportive adults she calls “validating agents” matches my notion of “sponsors of persistence” in the academy:

What had transformed nontraditional students into powerful learners and persisters were incidents in which some individual, either inside or

outside class, had validated them . . . Validating agents took an active interest in students. They provided encouragement for students and affirmed them as capable of doing academic work and supported them in their academic endeavors and social adjustment. (qtd. in Cox 127)

To serve as sponsors of persistence for our students of FYC means to look for ways to validate them, both inside and outside the classroom. It means being willing to move beyond the concrete boundaries we place between ourselves and our students because of our fears of social awkwardness or exposure to claims of sexual harassment. It means getting to know our students in other arenas, such as participating in campus clubs or service learning activities or travel abroad opportunities.

A sponsor of persistence pays attention to how her students are doing in their other courses, for if they fail in their other courses, they probably won't end up persisting in FYC. A sponsor of persistence invites students into the academy, validates their abilities, and offers support to students all the way to graduation. In some cases, this sponsorship can even turn into friendship, and the relationship doesn't have to end at graduation. A sponsor of persistence embodies this belief: "If I can believe in the system, then you, too, can believe in the system" (Tinto "Promoting"). A sponsor of persistence pays attention to the reasons students give for wanting to leave the classroom or the college, listening carefully and then offering comfort and counsel. A sponsor of persistence looks her student directly in the eyes and says from her heart as well as her mind: "You have everything it takes to make it in the academy," providing the student with the best reason to believe she can succeed.

Epilogue

“How did it go?” my dear friend Jennifer asked from three time zones away. I had just finished my *first* three-chapter meeting with my dissertation committee and didn’t want to answer the phone, but I knew that I should resist the urge to sulk alone.

“Do you want the good news or the bad news first?” I responded. Being the perennial optimist, Jennifer chose the good over the bad. “Well, the good news is that I failed,” I told her in an expressionless tone. “And the bad news is that they are giving me a second chance.”

“Don’t you think you’ve got it backwards?” she asked in that way she has of framing a statement as a question so as to avoid offending.

“No,” I told her. “If they wouldn’t have given me another chance, then I wouldn’t have to keep living under this stress. In the new time table they have set for me, I have two more years of living under this sword of Damocles.”

“Write about it,” Jennifer said. “Write about what you are feeling right now.”

But I couldn’t. I couldn’t pick up a pen and face my shame on the page; I couldn’t pretend that everything was going to be okay. So I called my greatest sponsor of persistence, Kathleen, and she cried with me, helping me feel understood and no longer alone in that motel room in Pennsylvania. After my mom had died, Kathleen had become my family—someone who would love me whether I finished the dissertation or not, someone I could show my inner doubts and insecurities without worrying that she would think less of me. “Have you called Amy?” Kathleen asked, knowing that Amy, another member of our cohort and writing group, was closest to me geographically. As good as Kathleen is at crying, Amy is at cheerleading.

“What do you mean you want to quit?” Amy practically screamed at me. “Listen, you’ve been through much worse than this: your divorce, your son’s overdose, your father’s death. Starting your dissertation all over again is a piece of cake compared to all that!” As I sat on the bed wiping my tears on a pillow, Amy’s strange claim began to make sense to me. She was right: I *had* been through much worse than this. And here I was, still plodding away, still trying to move forward in my education, my career, and my parenting. But it wasn’t as simple as she made it out to be either. Neither of us could have known that in those next two years two of my children would sink into depression and I, myself, would nearly die from some strange form of meningitis.

Along with Jennifer, Kathleen, and Amy, my dissertation committee also became sponsors of my persistence. When I was sick, they worked to get me extra time to finish, and when my recovery was slow, they were flexible about the time between drafts. Without them, I don’t believe I could have earned this degree.

Like many returning students who are parents, I was also motivated by the desire to be a good role model for my three children. I didn’t want them to see me quitting; I didn’t want them to conclude that all those summers I spent away from them amounted to nothing. Plus I could never justify the material cost to our family of paying back student loans for me that didn’t increase my earning capacity.

After I successfully defended this dissertation on October 18, 2012, the first call I made was to my twenty-year-old son who now lives thousands of miles away from me. “I’m so glad you passed,” he said, “It’s been such a stress on the family.” Here I thought I protected them all these years, sparing them from my doubts and fears. Turns out,

however, that our fears as well as our successes connect us to each other. Maybe Miss D is right—and success begets success. We'll see.

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APPENDIX A

May 25, 2007

Dear Former Student,

I am inviting you to participate in a research study that I am conducting for my dissertation in Composition, tentatively titled: **“Leavings, Returnings, and the Explanations In Between: Students’ Stories of Withdrawing from First Year Composition.”** The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision about whether or not you’d like to participate. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

The purpose of this study is to research the reasons students have dropped freshman composition at [REDACTED], within the past four years. Because these students are not in class toward the end of the semester when teacher evaluations are completed, their voices remain silenced, and the teacher seldom fully understands why this particular student dropped the course at this particular time in his or her life. I am interested in these stories because I think they can help me become a better teacher. I am also interested in how professors’ perceptions of why students drop might differ from the real reasons students do. I think faculty could learn a lot from these students, so I want to gather these stories in order to better inform the teaching of Composition on our campus.

You have been selected as a potential participant because you enrolled in a section of English 1301 or 1302 taught by me, then decided to drop this course. I have kept the yellow copy of your signed drop-slip in my desk drawer, hoping that one day you would be willing to share with me the story of how you came to sign up for English 1301, and how you came to drop it. I am also interested in this topic for personal reasons, as I, too, dropped courses as an undergraduate, and three times I left an institution of higher education without earning a certificate or degree.

Your story has the power to impact the way English Composition is taught not only on our campus but in institutions of higher education across our nation. Your identity will be protected at all times, as pseudonyms will be used in the manuscript. In order to be as faithful to your story as possible, I would like to use a tape-recorder during our interview. If you decide to participate, you will be allowed to review what I write about you. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with me.

If you are willing to allow me to interview you, please provide me with your contact information (your phone number and/or e-mail address) by calling me at [REDACTED] or e-mailing me [REDACTED]. I regret that I cannot pay you for your time, but I will give out modest gift certificates to Barnes & Noble to all students who grant me interviews by June 10th. If you decide to participate, please call me or e-mail me soon as I will be leaving for the summer around June 12th. Thank you for considering this invitation to tell your story and have your voice heard.

Sincerely,

Mysti Rudd
Assistant Professor of English

APPENDIX B

Potential Interview Questions for Former Students

My interview questions for these students may include the following:

- May I record this interview?
- What is your name? age? ethnic identification?
- When were you enrolled in first-year composition?
- Why did you choose to enroll as a student at CCGC?
- How has dropping first-year composition affected your academic and/or career plans?
- If you were to tell “the story of” your experience of dropping Composition I, how would that story begin? . . . What would be in the middle? . . . How would your story end?
- Reflecting back upon the story you just told, to what extent did the following factors affect your decision to drop Composition?

	<u>Definitely</u>	<u>Some- what</u>	<u>Not at all</u>
a. educational background/college preparedness	_____	_____	_____
b. substance abuse	_____	_____	_____
c. other health issues	_____	_____	_____
d. learning disabilities	_____	_____	_____
e. family demands/relationship issues	_____	_____	_____
f. legal matters	_____	_____	_____
g. military service	_____	_____	_____
h. work demands/economic issues	_____	_____	_____
i. English-as-a-second-language issues	_____	_____	_____
j. Caught cheating/plagiarizing	_____	_____	_____
k. Institutional/course requirements	_____	_____	_____
l. Teacher/student dynamics	_____	_____	_____
m. Apathy/lack of motivation/procrastination	_____	_____	_____
n. “biting off more than you can chew”	_____	_____	_____
o. Other: _____	_____	_____	_____

- How has dropping FYC affected your academic and/or career plans?
- If you could give an anonymous message to composition teachers or college administrators from the perspective of a student who has dropped first-year composition (FYC), what would that message be?
- Is there anything else you’d like to add about your personal experience of enrolling and then dropping FYC?

APPENDIX C

For her dissertation research, Mysti Rudd, Assistant Professor of English at [REDACTED], invites you to complete this brief questionnaire regarding composition students' perceptions of why their classmates withdrew or stopped attending Composition I or Composition II. If you would like to contribute to her study, please fill out the following form. Your participation is completely voluntary and your anonymity is assured. Completed questionnaires can be placed in the drop-box marked "FYC STUDY" on the table next to the mail room in the [REDACTED] building. Your responses will be collected by the department secretary and will not be read by Mysti until the semester has ended and grades have been turned in. If you have any questions, call [REDACTED] or e-mail Mysti at [REDACTED]. Mysti thanks you in advance for taking the time to share your words and insight which have the potential to impact the way she teaches her composition courses on this campus.

1. Have you ever dropped and/or stopped attending a college composition course? If so, what course(s) and when?

2. If you have dropped a course in first-year composition, briefly describe how you came to sign up for that section, and then tell the story of how and why you decided to withdraw from that course.

3. Did you consider dropping your English composition course this semester? If so, please write from this place of doubt or discouragement. What were the factors or circumstances that impinged upon your decision? What made you ultimately decide to "stick it out" and finish the course?

4. Consider the empty desks previously filled with fellow students in your composition classroom. Why do you think your classmates dropped this course or stopped coming to class? Generalizing from this, what do you think is the most common reason that students withdraw from first year composition courses?