

# Academic Language Acquisition in First-Generation College Students

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Running Head: ACADEMIC LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Boston College  
Lynch School of Education  
Department of  
Educational Leadership and Higher Education

ACADEMIC LANGUAGE ACQUISITION  
IN FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

Dissertation  
by  
TRESEANNE KUJAWSKI AINSWORTH

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

May, 2015

# ACADEMIC LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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# ACADEMIC LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

## Academic Language Acquisition In First-Generation College Students

by

Treseanne K. Ainsworth

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### ABSTRACT

The past thirty years have seen an unprecedented expansion of access to higher education among traditionally disadvantaged groups. Along with increased opportunity, this access brings new challenges, including student preparation and social and academic integration of college campuses (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). One area of academic integration that requires further examination is how first-generation students acquire the written academic language they will need to succeed in college courses. Because language is closely tied to identity, acquiring academic language can have personal and social effects (White & Lowenthal, 2011). In addition to the struggles that these students have in acquiring academic language, they also bring alternate forms of cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) that are not captured in traditional assessment.

This qualitative study considered the academic language acquisition of ten first-generation college students who completed a transitional bridge program. Writing samples from four different time points were assessed with an operationalized definition of academic language to capture how these skills were acquired during the first year. The

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samples were then analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis to identify alternate forms of cultural capital. Finally, the same ten students were interviewed about their experiences of academic language during their first year of college.

The results of this study show that students benefitted from direct instruction of academic conventions and other assumed expectations of academic discourse, and they were most successful with assignments that drew on lived experience. The writing samples also revealed critical forms of alternate cultural capital that must be recognized and leveraged in academic settings. Finally, students saw the process of academic language acquisition as voluntary, conscious, and ultimately worthwhile. Understanding the challenges these students face, as well as their unique strengths, is vital to their full inclusion within the university and for meaningful diversity in higher education.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Statement of the Problem**

Students who are the first generation in their families to attend college face a number of challenges in their transition to higher education. These students often have less “pre-college” knowledge about the institution itself, including the application process, cost and financial aid, and have less family and peer support than students with highly educated parents (Conley, 2010). First generation college students (FGCS) also often have educational backgrounds that do not provide an adequate foundation of course work and academic skills to prepare them for the expectations of college classes (Bedsworth, Colby & Doctor, 2006). Students of color and low-income students make up a significant proportion of first-generation college students (Choy, 2001; Walpole, 2007), and research has demonstrated that these students face additional challenges, including financial insecurity and institutionalized racism. Recent decades have provided increased access to higher education for these students, but in order for that access to be meaningful, researchers need to look more closely at the experiences of these students once they reach college.

Research shows that these students have lower retention rates than their peers. Students who suffer the “double whammy” of low-income and first-generation status drop out at a rate of 26% after the first year of college, compared to 7% of their more advantaged peers (Lederman, 2008). This difference is particularly apparent at selective institutions, where students from higher socioeconomic classes outweigh their peers from lower socioeconomic classes by a four to one ratio (Terenzini, Cabrera & Bernal, 2001). Even as selective institutions attempt to expand access to low income and first-generation

students, admission decisions that are based on “merit” factors such as standardized test scores and AP course completion, reflect larger societal inequalities (Karabel, 2005). Academic readiness is a major cause of the struggle to persist and succeed in higher education (Walpole, 2007). Though these realities of pre-college disadvantage have been well documented, researchers are still exploring how they impact the experiences of the remarkable students who manage to enroll at selective colleges in spite of formidable obstacles. However, more work needs to be done on the experiences of these students once they arrive on campus in order to better understand the challenges they face, and how institutions can serve them better.

There is a sizeable body of research on the transition of FGCS from their home communities to college, including the cultural, social and academic adjustments required. This research suggests that student engagement with both academic and social aspects of college life is necessary for their retention and success (Tinto, 2000). Although important work within this body of research focuses on how students struggle to persist in college in spite of a significant disconnect from their home communities, and difficulty integrating socially with their college peers, more work needs to be done on specific areas of academic integration.

FGCS often perceive their lack of adequate academic preparation early on, and respond with self-doubt that further marginalizes them from the college community (Johnson, Rochkind, Ott & Dupont, 2013). Although institutions, particularly those that are selective, attempt to provide remediation services for these students, including summer transitional bridge programs (STBP), it is not clear that such interventions provide adequate support. One quarter of FGCS students do not return to campus the

second year (Horn, 1998), and they continue to leave college at higher rates than their peers, including those who persist to the third year but are still less likely to earn degrees (Schmidt, 2003). Even FGCS who complete their degree requirements report feeling marginalized on campus, both socially and academically (Walpole, 2007). If colleges are to retain FGCS, and allow their experiences of social and academic integration to be meaningful, more research needs to be done on these experiences so that effective interventions can be designed and implemented. It is only with such measures that the promise of increased access will be realized.

One area of academic integration that would benefit from further study is how this group of students acquires academic language during the critical first year. In this study, academic language will be defined as written language in academic contexts (coursework) in English. Development of academic language may pose a challenge for first-generation college students, because it is often not emphasized in the K12 schools where many of these students receive their educational foundation (White & Lowenthal, 2011). Research suggests that familiarity with the language and its underlying values within a community, also known as discourse, is vital to full participation within it (Lave & Wenger, 1991), so knowledge of the discourse of the university is central to full academic integration. It is important to consider what curricular and pedagogical experiences support this development. Universities can promote critical awareness of the norms of academic language by defining and modeling them for students, while recognizing that this form of discourse is valued in this particular context, but is not inherently superior to other forms of discourse, including that of students' home communities. FGCS may not have the same exposure to academic language as their peers

with highly educated parents, or with stronger educational backgrounds. Language is also tied to cultural identity, and devaluing the discourse of family and home in order to succeed academically has been called a form of “cultural suicide” (Tierney, 1999).

Students who are forced to shift from the language of their home discourse communities to that of academia may experience challenges to their cultural identity as well as academic difficulty.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions will guide my inquiry:

RQ1: How do first-generation college students acquire academic language during their first year of college?

RQ2: How do these students perceive their academic language acquisition?

### **Significance of the Study**

Research in this area is important because it will provide a better understanding of the role that academic language plays in the retention and success of first-generation college students, and will help to make the university a more inclusive community.

Although most of the literature on academic discourse has been conceptual, more empirical research needs to be done on the initial experience of the students who are most likely to face the reality of this adjustment. The goals of this research would be gain a better understanding of how academic language develops during the first year of college for this subset of students, as well as student perceptions of the challenges and successes of this development. This understanding can lead to better programmatic supports for these students, in order to promote their overall integration with the university community.

### **Definition of Terms**

#### **First-generation college students.**

Research on this group of students has been conducted under many names. In fact, the division of research on low-income students, students of color, and first-generation college students has fragmented the field, and limited important insights that could have broader implications. This is not to suggest that particular sub-groups of students, such as African American or Latino students, do not face unique challenges and experiences within higher education, and that research in these specific areas is not inherently valuable in understanding them. However, these students share many challenges in common, and research that is more broadly applicable may be beneficial to institutions attempting to serve a variety of sub-groups. Although some recent research has introduced the term “economically and educationally challenged” to describe these students in a more inclusive way, it does emphasize their deficits. The term “first-generation college students” (FGCS) that reflects the parental education level of these students is well established in the literature, and recognizes the remarkable accomplishments of these students in spite of the very real challenges they face.

Because of the role that higher education plays in social mobility, students whose parents did not attend college often come from low-income households. In fact, studies consistently show that nonwhite and low-income students are disproportionately represented among first-generation college students (Choy, 2001; Walpole, 2007). As a group, these students are less likely to enroll in college, to attend four-year institutions, and to remain there than higher-income peers whose parents did attend college (Bedsworth, Colby, & Doctor, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2007; Walpole,

2007). For the purposes of this study, students whose parents may have attended some college, but face similar obstacles will be included, though some researchers are more restrictive in their definition. It is well documented that this population enters college with weaker academic skills, lower degree aspirations, and less family and peer support than other college students (Lombardi, Conley, Seburn & Downs, 2012; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996). Although understandable, it is troubling that much of this research approaches these students from a deficit model that focuses on what they lack, rather than the potential strengths they inevitably bring, given the perseverance and skills that are required to reach higher education at all. Though some admissions offices use “non-cognitive variables” as a way to quantify these strengths (Cortes, 2013), such alternate measures do not follow students into the college classroom, and their strengths often go unrecognized in academic settings. The Funds of Knowledge theory, utilized in the K12 context, suggests that student families and home communities should be considered in terms of the strengths and resources they offer, rather than merely deficits (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005). Though this theory has made some impact in K12 settings, it is not clear that it is recognized at the college level.

FGCS are an important group to consider in terms of academic language development, since these students are at a disadvantage in terms of their access to dominant forms of cultural capital (Pascarella et al., 2004). Particularly in the area of language, students with highly educated parents are more likely to have absorbed the unwritten norms of more formalized language just by observing their family and adults in their home communities. Research has also shown that academic language is not taught or modeled in many of the K12 schools that this group of students has attended (White &

Lowenthal, 2011). Because the term does not reinforce a deficit model, and because of the particular relationship between parental education level and academic language, first-generation college students will be the term used to describe the students considered in this study.

**Academic language.** Academic language is defined here as the type of written language in English that is valued in college level academic settings. At selective universities, students are expected to use formal conventions of academic writing, as well as norms that are understood by speakers and writers, but may not be explicitly taught. In order to operationalize the definition of academic language, the following guidelines from the Council of Writing Program Administrators are helpful:

1. Objectivity and awareness of appropriate response to a formal academic rhetorical situation.
2. Demonstration of knowledge of conventions such as structure, paragraphing, tone and mechanics.
3. Claims supported by evidence from the text or other primary sources.
4. Critical engagement with sources, integrating their own ideas with those of others.

These criteria are based on those adopted by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (2001) as part of their “Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition.” Directors and faculty of university writing programs use these criteria to assess pedagogical practices in their courses. The writing program at the site university of this study used these criteria to pilot an assessment of the first-year writing program during the summer of 2013. Though the focus there was on particular outcomes in the first-year



writing seminar courses, they also provide a useful measure by which to evaluate the academic writing of first-year students because they indicate features that are valued by the university in assessing student writing.

It is important to recognize that these criteria have been developed and implemented out of a particular history, and reflect the values of a particular audience. Though it is essential that students learn and practice these norms in order to achieve academic success, it is also essential that students are aware that such norms are not inherently superior to any other form of language, including that of their home community, but reflect the values and norms of a particular context of the university. The values of oral language are also significant in this context, as demonstrated in one study in which a group of FGCS suffered academically because they did not participate in class discussion due to their own discomfort with the spoken language in the classroom, what they called “high language” or “college-like talk” (White, 2005, p. 384-385). Although that study did not consider written language, it is likely that it would pose similar challenges. Most universities, including the one in this case, require academic writing in several required core courses, including History, Philosophy, Theology, Literature and the required Social Sciences, where it is unlikely that writing will be taught at all. Therefore, students may find academic writing a significant obstacle in many of their required courses and their academic integration overall.

### **Theoretical Grounding**

This study attempts to construct a critical analysis of academic language acquisition, and draws on critical theory’s concern with how existing realities are constructed through language, and how the meaning conveyed through language is

constructed historically and culturally (Foucault, 1972; Habermas, 1987; Saussure, 1974). Because academic language represents a form of power and exclusion in a hierarchal society, this research relies on two related theoretical frameworks—Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of cultural capital and Critical Race Theory. Bourdieu’s (1977) notion that certain forms of cultural knowledge are used as a form of currency or capital has particular implications for educational contexts. Because FGCS lack particular types of knowledge about higher education access and conventions, they are more likely to be excluded from it. Alternately, students with highly educated parents have an advantage because they gain an understanding of college culture through their parents and communities (Pascarella et al., 2004). In this way, the theory of cultural capital accounts for social reproduction—students who have obtained cultural capital through their families, social origins and early education are more likely to reap its benefits in college, while FG, low-income students continue to be marginalized because of their initial lack of cultural capital. Language, and academic language specifically, serves as a form of cultural capital because its norms are transmitted uncritically and its use is necessary for success. It is a “code of power” (Delpit, 2006) that often serves to exclude FGCS from the university community.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is necessary for theoretical grounding because the socioeconomic hierarchy at work in theories of cultural capital has become racialized in this country (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). CRT holds that racism is endemic in the U.S., and is an integral part of how our society is structured and functions (Russell, 1992). CRT challenges notions of merit and objectivity within educational institutions, asserting that they are often based on historical and racialized norms. This seems particularly relevant

to the value of academic language, and is worthy of consideration among FGCS, who are disproportionately students of color (Choy, 2001). CRT also suggests that students of color bring alternate forms of cultural capital to the university context (Yosso, 2005), but these contributions have not historically been valued. Further research including alternate forms of assessment can help to better define and locate these alternate forms of cultural capital, and perhaps begin to recognize their value. Theories of cultural capital and Critical Race Theory both inform my conceptualization of the problem and the analysis I plan to use. Critical Discourse Analysis, as a method, draws on the foundation of critical theory, with its concern for language and power. In the specific context of this study, higher education represents an exclusionary space of cultural capital, which CRT notes has particularly racialized aspects. Such an understanding will serve as the foundation for my use of Critical Discourse Analysis when interpreting the writing samples and interviews as data.

### **Experience With the Topic**

I have taught the First Year Writing Seminar (freshman composition) and the required literature core course at a selective university for seventeen years. For twelve of those years, I have also taught the English component of the summer transitional bridge program serving FGCS at the same university. Though I have found the students in this program to be remarkably bright, hard working and motivated, I have also watched them struggle to succeed in their college courses. Even those students who have remained and graduated often feel marginalized within the academic community, and choose majors and courses according to their own sense of difficulty and self-doubt. Although lack of adequate academic preparation is clearly a factor, the more formal language norms that

are valued at the college level also appear to play a role. Even students who feel they are strong writers, and participate in creative writing outlets such as poetry slams, or write movingly of their personal experiences, struggle to decipher the unwritten rules of academic language.

These norms of academic language include conventions of structure (appropriate paragraphing) and mechanics (correct grammar), and also reflect White, western values such as objectivity and formality that many FGCS may not be socialized into. For example, many students will use the “I” pronoun in an analytical paper, because they realize they are offering their own assertion, but fail to realize that though their professor may expect them to offer it, they do not want them to *write* it that way. In addition to the very concrete aspects of writing, including research and technological knowledge that is increasingly a part of that process (Relles & Tierney, 2013), students find these unspoken norms, which appear to be understood by their peers and professors, a mystifying and obstructive part of their educational experience. I have observed students doubt their own ability, and the value of their home community’s knowledge, as a result of academic language acquisition. In my role as a long time teacher of academic writing, and an advisor to these students, I hope to use my positionality to better understand the role that academic language may play in students’ overall integration into the college community.

### **Overview of the Study**

This study follows the academic writing development of FGCS at a selective university from a summer transitional bridge program through their first year. Four writing samples from ten students were collected and analyzed from four time points in the first year, and these students were then interviewed about their academic writing

development. Studies suggest that first-generation college students may make greater gains in cognitive development than their peers during the first year (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and comparisons of their writing development across this time period may help to isolate one facet of this development. The interviews will provide a critical, and often overlooked perspective on how the students themselves perceive that acquisition process, including pedagogical approaches and the cultural adjustments that may be required. The two sets of data will be analyzed using qualitative methods to gain a better understanding of how their academic writing develops during the critical first year.

## **Chapter Two: Review of the Literature**

### **Overview**

Development of academic language poses a challenge for first-generation college students (FGCS). Research suggests that familiarity with the language and its underlying values within a community, also known as discourse, is vital to full participation within it, so knowledge of the discourse of the university is central to full academic integration (White & Lowenthal, 2011). In addition, language plays a significant role in cultural identity, so shifts from home discourse communities to that of academia may pose a significant conflict for first-generation students who may not be socialized in its norms. Research in this area is important because it will provide a better understanding of the role that academic language plays in the retention and success of first-generation college students, and will help to make the university a more inclusive community.

### **Foundational Research on First-Generation College Students**

Research on the persistence and success of first-generation college students (FGCS) is central to the future of higher education overall. The term reflects the parental education level of this group of college students, who typically also come from low-income households. Research has made clear that these students are less likely to enroll in college, to attend four-year institutions, and to remain there than longer higher-income peers whose parents did attend college (Bedsworth, Colby, & Doctor, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2007; Walpole, 2007). The term FGCS allows for the disconnect that many students of lower socioeconomic status experience upon entering academia that transcends and compounds racial, gendered or ethnic differences (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Studies consistently show that nonwhite and low-income students are

disproportionately represented among first generation students (Choy, 2001; Walpole, 2007), and this population enters college with weaker academic skills, lower degree aspirations, and less family and peer support than other college students (Lombardi, Conley, Seburn & Downs, 2012; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996). Although recently researchers have introduced the alternate term of “economically and educationally challenged” (Walpole, 2007) in a commendable effort to combine research under various subheadings, the term FGCS recognizes the remarkable accomplishments of these students in spite of formidable challenges, rather than their deficits.

Bowen and Bok (1998) conclude in their longitudinal study of African-American students that race almost always affects an individual’s life experience and perspectives, given our national history and the continuing affects of discrimination and racism, but parental education level is also a key predictor of wealth, social class and the value placed on educational aspiration (Bowen & Bok, 1998). Parental education level is highly correlated to college success, even when other factors, such as race and economic class are considered. More recent research reinforces the impact of parental education on their children. Four years after high school, students whose parents had some college experience were twice as likely to earn a college degree as first-generation college students (21 vs. 11%), regardless of other factors; and students whose parents completed a bachelor’s degree or higher were five times more likely to earn one than first-generation college students (50% vs. 11%) (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Because there is a significant overlap between FGCS and students of color and students from low-income families, much of this research can be applied to our understanding of the challenges they

face. Only one in seven low-income students<sup>1</sup> will earn a bachelor's degree (Bedsworth, Colby & Doctor, 2006), and recent troubling research suggests that the gap in college education attainment between low-income and high-income students has been growing (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). Understanding the challenges that these students face is essential for developing effective interventions to support their academic success.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) provide an effective summary of the three types of research that has been done on this group. The first type of research considers the basic pre-college knowledge that such students have about the institution itself. This can include awareness of cost, financial aid options, family income and support, degree expectations and academic preparation. The second type of research on first-generation students focuses on their transition from high school, and the cultural, social and academic adjustments required. The final type of research on these students focuses on persistence in higher education, degree attainment and early career outcomes. Although all of this work provides an essential foundation of understanding first-generation students, more research is needed on the experience of college itself, including both cognitive and social development during that period. In order to determine the interventions and supports that will best serve these students, further research must be done in this area, particularly with regard to academic experiences.

**FGCS experiences in higher education.** The likelihood of completing college is highly correlated with parent's education level, even when other factors are considered. Once enrolled in post-secondary education, 43% of FGCS left without completing a

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<sup>1</sup> Defined in this study as those eligible for free and reduced meal programs, usually with family incomes between 130 and 185 percent of the federal poverty line.



degree, and only 24% completed a Bachelor's degree, compared to peers with college educated parents, who had the reverse pattern-- degree completion rates of 68%, and only 20% left without a degree (Chen & Carroll, 2005). Even when controlling for factors such as socioeconomic status, institution type and enrollment, status as a first-generation college student has a negative effect on persistence and degree attainment.

Research shows that first-generation students who attend selective institutions have higher rates of degree completion, greater income potential, greater likelihood of attending graduate programs, and obtaining leadership positions (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009). Because of the clear benefits of completion of a four-year degree, all institutions must be hospitable to first-generation students. In spite of the current discrepancies, it is important to recognize that first-generation students are present across all institution types, and their numbers are likely to increase (Bedsworth et al, 2006; Choy, 2001; Lombardi et al, 2012; Walpole, 2007).

Compared to students whose parents had some college or a college degree, first-generation students are typically older and lower-income. Forty-two percent were dependent on families in the lowest income quarter, so research on low-income students can be significantly extended to first-generation students (Choy, 2001; Bui, 2002). These students are likely to face the same challenges as low-income students such as living off-campus, delay in entering college, and significant family and/or work responsibilities (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). They are more likely to be ethnic minority students, to speak a language other than English at home, and to score lower on the SAT, even at selective four year universities (Bui, 2002). Such factors have been demonstrated to inhibit engagement with both social and academic aspects of higher education, and these

challenges can be expected among many first-generation students. These data help to establish correlation between first generation students and low-income and minority students. In fact, studies often group low-income, minority and first generation students together because of the connections among their experiences. These related groups of students are likely to lack specific types of “college knowledge.”

**Academic preparation of first-generation college students.** First-generation students are less likely to be academically prepared for college. Forty-nine percent of first-generation students were unprepared or marginally prepared for college, as compared to 15% of students with parents with at least one bachelor’s degree (Choy, 2001). This leads to important deficits in skills needed for success in college, including lower pre-college critical thinking skills (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Walpole, 2007). However, encouraging research asserts that high school preparation is the most important factor in college readiness, and can overcome other factors. A high quality, high intensity high school curriculum, including non-remedial courses in core subjects, AP courses, and high levels of math, has a greater impact on bachelor’s degree completion than any other pre-college factor<sup>2</sup> (Conley, 2010; Wimberley & Noeth, 2005). This includes standardized test scores and GPA, and this effect is seen regardless of socioeconomic class or race (Adelman, 1999). This preparation is particularly relevant for FGCS, as only one in three low-income students meet the National Education Longitudinal Study’s definition of “marginally qualified” (Bedsworth et al, 2006). An overwhelming percentage (73%) of students who did not complete college stressed the

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<sup>2</sup> Researchers recognize that math level is an easier measure of academic readiness than subjects like English, which are not clearly leveled and more difficult to compare, making the measure of academic preparation more problematic in those subjects (Bedsworth et al., 2006).

importance of preparation, and said that educators should, “Make sure that students learn good study habits in high school so they’re prepared for college work” (Johnson, Rochkind, Ott & Dupont, 2013, p. 20). These data have important implications for educators and other professionals interested in the success of first-generation students, for they suggest that adequate preparation can overcome many of the significant obstacles they face in attending college. Overall, many FGCS are struggling, especially in terms of persistence, and a key element in improving their success is stronger academic preparation before college.

**Transition to college and transitional bridge programs.** Further research on first-generation students suggests that students themselves have doubts about their ability to succeed in college, and that these doubts persist, and may even deepen once they arrive on campus. Even among students who are academically prepared, only 20% of low-income students will earn a degree, as compared to 60% of their higher income peers (Bedsworth et al., 2006). The sense that they are not academically prepared can lead FGCS to feel uncomfortable on campus, and may be a contributing reason to why one-fourth of them do not return the second year (Cushman, 1998; Horn, 1998; Woosley & Shepler, 2011). It is likely that in many cases, these doubts are the result of inadequate high school preparation compared to the academic expectations of college. The Spellings Commission of 2006 called this “expectations gap” one of the greatest challenges facing the future of higher education. Retention efforts must target this discrepancy, perhaps by providing the rigor and foundational knowledge that first-generation students may not have had in high school. Recent studies suggest that college planning and preparation needs to begin as early as middle school in order to ensure a sufficient foundation of

course work (Wimberley & Noeth, 2005). The educational aspirations of first generation students can be improved through bridge programs, including programs such as GEAR UP that provide basic knowledge about academic institutions (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996). The gap in college readiness in academic skills must be addressed at the K-12 level, and extensive research has been done in this area. Although one-third of low-income students plan to attend college, they do not take the coursework they need to pursue that path (Bedsworth et al., 2006). Because the importance of foundational knowledge and a rigorous high school curriculum is key to success and persistence of first-generation students in colleges, these efforts are closely linked. College and high school partnerships for readiness, such as GEAR UP are examples of successful combined efforts to mitigate this gap.

There is a clear need for more research on the effectiveness of summer transitional bridge programs (STBP) at particular colleges and universities. At this point, little empirical data have been gathered (Barnett et al., 2012), and the data we have is inconsistent (Cabrera, Miner & Milem, 2013). As one researcher put it, “empirical studies [of summer bridge programs] have remained largely descriptive and in short supply” (Strayhorn, 2011, p.142). There have been studies that suggest summer bridge programs improve academic performance (Santa Rita & Bacote, 1997; Strayhorn, 2011; Walpole et al. 2008). An external evaluation of the California State University system’s summer transitional bridge program showed encouraging results of impressive retention rates of students who completed the program, though the study recognized that weaknesses exist, and called for more longitudinal data (Guthrie, 1987). Other positive results show that although there was not a statistically significant difference in enrollment rates of students

who completed a transitional bridge program and a control group in the Texas state system, the STBP students attempted more college credits than the control group (6.1 credits vs. 5.4) during their first semester. These findings could suggest that students felt more prepared for college work than their counterparts who did not participate in the program, and that they had more confidence in their ability to successfully take on additional credits (Wathington, Pretlow & Mitchell, 2011). However, other studies indicate that STBP have no impact (Fletcher et al, 2001), and others show that even students who felt “adequately prepared” by bridge programs had substantial declines in their fall GPAs (Ackerman, 1991).

A recent study by the Pell Institute concludes that provisional acceptance policies may help low-income students persist, even when they are academically underprepared (Nicols & Clinedinst, 2013). Though summer bridge programs are just one model of provisional acceptance, this study found that despite being considered academically underprepared at admission, students in provisional acceptance programs persisted to their second year at the same rate as their peers, with more than seven out of ten students completing the first year (Nicols & Clinedinst, 2013). Findings such as this suggest that summer bridge programs have a positive effect on retention and success of low-income students, but more research needs to be done on specific curricular and programmatic aspects in order to determine what interventions are most effective. It is important that more empirical data is gathered on STBPs, as they are vulnerable to cuts when university budgets are tight (Cabrera et al., 2013).

**Gaps in the research: Academic integration.** There is a clear need for more targeted research on specific aspects of academic development among first-generation

college students. Although math skills readiness and success has received a good deal of attention as a factor for success among first-generation students (Choy, 2002), more work needs to be done on the findings of the first year reading skills gap, and its subsequent impact on broader learning outcomes. In particular, the demands of advanced literacy that are placed on college students, including deciphering complex texts and writing within the conventions of academic norms can present significant difficulty for first-generation students. More research needs to be done on the most effective ways to bridge this gap in advanced literacy.

In light of the correlation between Latino and first-generation students, it is noteworthy that Latino students are less likely than Whites to move to upper level courses, and even those students who persist to the third year of college are less likely to earn degrees (Schmidt, 2003). Language researchers have shown that while these bilingual students may reach oral English language proficiency in a few years, it can take them many more years to reach proficiency in the academic English that is necessary for school achievement (Collier, 1987, 1989; Cummins 1981). This language component is significant because sophisticated use of academic language is necessary for success in most college courses. However, if first-generation students are able to obtain a degree, their average annual salaries among B.A. recipients are no different from the population overall (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). These findings make retention efforts critical to the ultimate success and social mobility of first-generation students.

The past twenty years have seen an explosion of research on the retention of such students, and offers higher education professionals a range of strategies in promoting the persistence and success of FGCS. Many of the problems with retention seem clearly

related to student engagement, and numerous studies demonstrate that greater engagement with both academic and social spheres of college leads to greater persistence and success.

### **Engagement of First-Generation College Students**

Tinto's (1993, 1998, 2000, 2007) work on student engagement has been key to understanding on the persistence of at-risk students. Academic commitments are measured by grades and intellectual development, and together lead to academic integration. Peer, faculty and family interactions both inside and outside of college comprise social integration. Persistence and success depends on students' experience of social and academic integration. Unfortunately, FGCS tend to be less "engaged," by traditional measures, with the college experience. Research demonstrates that first-generation students face particular challenges in terms of both academic engagement, due to their lower levels of preparation, as well as social integration, due to their perceived lack of family and peer support, and the disconnect between home and school cultures (Thayer, 2000). Tinto suggests that students must weigh their commitments both inside and outside of college as they move through the experience, and the "pull" of these commitments determines whether a student will remain in college or leave. A recent study found that more than half the students who left college before completing a degree cited the "need to work and make money" as their reason, and students who drop out of college are far more likely to come from families in which neither parent has a college degree (Johnson et al., 2013). Clearly, many students feel a strong "pull" away from college because of familial and financial responsibilities. These students report lower levels of academic integration (30% vs. 19%), such as attending career related events,

meeting with academic advisors, or participation in study groups (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). It is noteworthy that this gap is significantly smaller at four-year institutions, perhaps due to the greater cohesion between the classroom and on-campus academic supports. However, levels of difference between first-generation students and their peers in social integration, such as participation in school clubs (38% vs. 19%), exist comparably at both two and four year institutions (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). This troubling result suggests that first-generation students may feel marginalized from the larger social community on campus, even when they feel connected academically.

Though these realities make college persistence more challenging for first-generation students, this research helps to suggest interventions that will make integration successful. If their interactions inside and outside the classroom are largely positive, students are validated and will persist. Tinto's (1998) revised work argues that social and academic integration are reciprocal and can work together, even asymmetrically. Therefore, integration can occur both in and outside of the classroom and there are different pathways for engagement. Tinto's influential model was critiqued and complicated by many later researchers, notably Bean (1990) and his collaborators throughout the 1980's and 90's. Bean's work relied on psychological models in the workplace that linked decision making to prior experiences, cultural norms and values (Bean, 1990). Although Bean's theory, like Tinto's, was both complex and longitudinal, it introduced two other important factors—environmental variables and student intentions—that later became a part of Tinto's revised models (1993, 1998, 2000, 2007). These factors are particularly important in understanding first-generation students who are subject to powerful environmental forces from both their familiar home



culture that may be resistant to the college separation, as well as an unfamiliar institutional culture that may not seem particularly welcoming. More recent research supports this understanding of the early integration experience of first-generation college students across a range of university contexts, including that of largely White cohorts (Woolsey & Schepler, 2011).

Although these forces exert powerful effects on the decision of first-generation student to remain in, or leave college before completing a degree, it also suggests that shaping those forces can encourage retention. For example, peer groups that are supportive of student success and establish a norm of academic achievement can offset less supportive influences. Research suggests that the normative pressure of peer groups, as well as the knowledge obtained through them over time can allow students to persist and succeed (Attinasi, 1989; Renn & Arnold, 2003). For first-generation students, this can mean peer groups of students from similar backgrounds on campus who help in the navigation of campus life have an important role to play in encouraging persistence. University personnel can play an important role even in establishing these support networks, even among students. Influential peer groups can be established and fostered by university staff, including faculty (Renn & Arnold, 2003). These connections between the classroom and the external lives of students can promote the social and academic integration that research suggests is necessary for success.

### **Alternate Frameworks for Integration: Cultural Capital**

Tinto's student integration theory (1998) is not the only lens through which the experience of first-generation students has been viewed. In much of Pascarella and Terenzini's influential work, the perspectives of social and cultural capital are used to

understand the challenges and outcomes for this group of students. Cultural capital is the idea that culturally based resources can act as a form of “capital.” Such understanding rests on Bourdieu’s (1977) notion that certain forms of knowledge are considered valuable within a hierarchal society. There is a two-tiered process of acquisition; one can acquire cultural capital through social origin (family) and through education (Bourdieu, 1984). The knowledge of higher classes can be accessed through formal schooling, making social mobility possible (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). However, Bourdieu notes that those who acquire cultural capital through family origin reap additional benefits through schooling, because teachers and others in the school system may reward, even unconsciously, a student who has benefitted from the cultural capital of their family over one who has not (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In this way, transmission of cultural capital serves as the basis of Bourdieu’s larger notion of social reproduction. The knowledge and understanding of the dominant culture, as cultural capital, appears detached from profits and power, but allows structural inequality to be legitimized and reproduced (Swartz, 1998).

Early socialization within a hierarchal culture fosters Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus,” the dispositions, tastes, and preferences which allows the pursuit of cultural capital to be normalized. Winkle-Wagner (2010) notes that cultural capital has been defined in various ways in educational settings, and seeks to clarify how Bourdieu’s concept can be applied. Her work cites Lamont and Lareau’s (1988) definition, “Cultural capital is institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high-status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, goals and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion” (p.156). Winkle-Wagner (2010) and Swartz (1998) both insist that educational

researchers who wish to utilize Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital specify what type they are considering (institutionalized, objectified, embodied), and that consideration of cultural capital cannot be detached from Bourdieu's notion of field, the context or setting where the capital is exchanged, because it is the particular marketplace that gives any form of cultural capital its value.

Social capital refers specifically to the relationships between individuals that transmit knowledge and exchange resources (Pascarella et al, 2004). Language skill is an important marker of social and cultural capital. One example in the research that confirms this reality among FGCS was an in-depth study of sixteen such students who cited "speech patterns" on campus as one factor that made them feel like outsiders (Cushman, 2007). Pascarella (et al., 2004) will go on to argue that this "deficit" of social and cultural capital may result in a less successful college experience for those first-generation students who do attend, and there may be lower levels of growth in cognitive and psychosocial outcomes as a result.

### **Language as Cultural Capital**

Scholars who are interested in the power dynamics of language as a form of cultural and social capital have demonstrated how they play out in the higher education context. White and Lowenthal (2011) focus on the role that collegiate literacy plays in student success and engagement with the college community. They point out that although there has been significant research done on the achievement gap in math and science, little work has been done to area of linguistic difference. They use the theoretical lens of the sociocultural nature of literacy (New Literacy Studies) to establish that the norms of academic discourse are not taught in most K12 schools that serve

minority students, and that language is tied to cultural identity. The field of Systemic Functional Linguistics asserts that literacy is dependent on context (Halliday, 1994), and though no one form of literacy is superior to another, individuals must be able to access and understand the frames of a given “discourse community” in order to be effective within it. Discourse communities are defined as spaces in which “people are held together by their characteristic ways of...interpreting and using language” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p.14). They require “distinctive ways of ‘being and doing’ that allow people to enact and/or recognize a specific and...socially situated identity” (Gee, 2002, p. 160). It follows then, that such discourse communities are defined by their own limits, are often exclusionary and meant to keep out those who “don’t speak the language.” It is clear that the university itself as a large and complex discourse community can exclude students who don’t “talk the talk” and aren’t even sure of the rules.

**Contributions of composition studies.** Composition Studies scholars have been calling for the implicit rules and norms of academic language to be made explicit for over twenty years. As early as 1977, Shaughnessy (1977) pointed out that problems encountered by basic writers<sup>3</sup> were not just the result of weak preparation requiring remediation, but also of cultural adaption to the discourse community of the university. Bizzell’s (1992) “The Ethos of Academic Discourse,” originally published in 1978, was an attempt to lay theoretical groundwork to address the conflict Shaughnessy describes, and called on writing teachers to analyze and teach academic discourse conventions to their students. However, such work remained focused on theorizing the authority of the teacher in the classroom, as well as students’ ability to reclaim their agency as learners,

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<sup>3</sup> The term “basic writers” is used throughout Composition literature to describe college students who require remedial support for their writing.

and the scholarship remained largely on a conceptual level. Rose's (1989) *Lives on the Boundary* furthered the understanding of how a lack of adequate academic preparation, social and economic supports impact the literacy skills of particular college students. Although Rose did not use the term FGCS, it is clear that his understanding of the struggles low-income students face in their transition to academia is foundational to later research. Although Rose's work is not scholarly in a traditional sense, his experience teaching students from a range of backgrounds from recent immigrants to returning Vietnam veterans led him to conclude that academia requires literacy skills that far exceed what many students are taught in high school, and that most universities have little interest in socializing them into academic language (Rose, 1989). Rose also offers the important insight, almost twenty years ago, that educators should not discount the literacy a student has gained from their home discourse community, and that they are capable of deep and thoughtful writing in spite of grammatical errors. These early concepts are still important in countering the deficit model usually applied to FGCS.

The Elbow/ Bartholomae debates of the 80's and 90's were public debates around the role of writers, teachers, the college classroom and writing instruction. Elbow asserted that students are writers from the start, while Bartholomae insisted they had to work toward authorship. Elbow's (1978, 1998) *Writing Without Teachers*, and Bartholomae's (1995) response of "Writing *With* Teachers" [emphasis added] gives a sense of their alternate perspectives on the role of the instructor in the writing classroom. In fact, Elbow envisioned the writing classroom as almost a utopian, free space, where students could discover their voices through "freewriting." Bartholomae (1986) countered that power dynamics and history are always present, and college classrooms are not

protected from those realities. Bartholomae (1986) asserts that the key features of academic writing include a self-conscious relationship with conventional discourses so that students can work within and against them, and that awareness and acquisition of academic discourse is the central purpose of first-year writing courses.

The debate over the purpose of freshman composition courses and pedagogical approaches to writing continued in Composition Studies throughout the 80's and 90's, with criticism on both sides. Scholars claimed that writing instruction either needed to go back to the rhetorical basics and define core principles, or that writing and concepts of voice were individual and boundless. Feminist scholars and scholars of color advocated the academic value of "nonstandard" forms of English, and emerging work on English Language Learners (known then as English as a Second Language) made valuable contributions to the field as well. The debate between Foundationalism, which called for a return to core values, espoused by scholars such as Hirsch (1988) and Fish (1985), and anti-Foundationalism, which critiqued such notions of authoritative certainty, became highly politicized. However, there were little empirical data on what worked most effectively for students, or even capturing the experiences of students themselves. Bizzell (2009) is still calling for more empirical research in this area, twenty years later. She recognizes that even though graduation and retention rates for students who begin outside of the university discourse community have improved, there are many variables at work, and it is difficult to understand the role that writing instruction has played in this progress.

**Acquiring academic discourse.** In recent years, education and composition scholars continue to assert that students need specific instruction in the rules of academic

discourse in order to succeed within that community. Delpit (2006) found that more unstructured, “process based” models of writing instruction were not effective for minority students, who need direct instruction in the language patterns of the “codes of power.” Though Delpit’s work focuses on students at the K12 level, its implications for first-generation college students seem helpful. Elbow (1998) asserts that students must master the dominant discourse unique to its particular setting in order to find success there, though he still finds a role for students’ home language in writing classrooms, especially in early drafts as “bridge” to more standard academic language. He applies the notion of “code switching” and insists that students add another language to their knowledge base in order to succeed in academia. White and Lowenthal (2011) suggest that if students understand the ways that discourse communities work, if the rules of academic discourse are demystified and deconstructed, they will attempt to learn and use them. It would follow that such students would develop a stronger academic identity and succeed within the academy, ultimately working to transform both the participants within the academy and language valued within it. More research needs to be done in this area to determine that if that is, in fact, the case.

It is also clear from this research that accessing discourse is not only about advanced literacy; it is closely tied to individual and community identity, and acquiring the discourse of academia can force the student to abandon that of home. Students may be forced to choose between acquiring the academic discourse that is necessary for college and professional success, and negating their cultural identity. Delpit (2006) discusses the painful choice between the “us” of their home communities, and the “them” of the often oppressive system of educational assimilation. To make this choice requires

what Tierney (1999) calls “cultural suicide” in order to achieve academic success. Such research argues that it is essential that students learn the rules of the academic discourse community while maintaining their cultural identities. It is important to note that mixed or “hybrid” discourses that combine the knowledge and language of communities inside and outside academia have become an important sub-set of Composition Studies (Schroeder, Fox & Bizzell, 2002). However, it is not clear that acceptance of such forms has extended to the larger academic community, and the development of academic language is still vital to success within it.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) grows out of legal scholarship that attempts to interpret jurisprudence and its role in constructing and preserving racism in the United States. CRT scholars view these laws as designed in an attempt to minimize power of subordinated groups, their property, legal standing and to construct a identity of inferiority (Matusda, 1991). The most fundamental premise of CRT is that racism is central to our society; it is “normal, not aberrant” (Delgado, 1995, p. xiv). Because racism is so ingrained, it appears ordinary and natural to those within the culture (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2010) though it has devastating effects on the everyday lives of people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). CRT scholars also point out that deliberate intention to discriminate is not necessary for an action or policy to be considered racist (Crenshaw, 1995), and that racism may be unintended, but what matters is the outcome (Gilborn, 2005). Widely cited is Marable’s (1992) definition of racism as, “a system of ignorance, exploitation, and power used to oppress African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Americans, American Indians and other people on



the basis of ethnicity, culture, mannerisms, and color” (p. 5). Racism often intersects with other forms of subordination, including class and gender, though racism remains a distinctive form of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989, 1993; Barnes, 1990). CRT scholars also posit that many civil rights actions have primarily served the interests of Whites, a reality known as “interest convergence” (Ladson-Billings, 2010). In a racialized society where whiteness is considered normative, individuals and actions are ranked and categorized in relation to that standard. This idea has particular implications for academic language, in that the norms of objective formal language are seen uncritically as somehow natural or organic, when they are in fact socially constructed within racist structures of power.

CRT challenges dominant ideology, and especially relevant in educational contexts, claims of meritocracy, objectivity, race neutrality and equal opportunity. Such claims mask the self-interest, power and privilege of dominant groups, as well as their efforts to maintain them. Some examples of institutionalized racism in higher education that are relevant to this study include: the assumption of a level “playing field” that ignores the differential burdens placed on students of color, individual “equal” assessments, and masking the racialized assumptions of academic language through notions of objectivity and accepted norms.

CRT scholars argue that many structures of racism in U.S. society stem from the notion of property (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). They remind us that this is a nation conceived and built on property rights (Bell, 1987; Harris, 1993), and was deeply influenced by the British notion that only people who *owned* the country were eligible to make decisions about it. This understanding has had the historical effect of keeping people of color and women outside the domains of power. Drawing from this foundation,

CRT scholars have come to view whiteness itself as a form of property. More specifically, “as a given right of the individual white person, whiteness can be enjoyed, like any property, by exercising and taking advantage of privileges” associated with it (Lorenzo, Z. 2002, p.38). This has important implications for institutions that maintain and disseminate power, such as higher education. Language itself can serve as a gatekeeper of white cultural property, adding the notion of ownership rights in addition to cultural capital. CRT attempts to question this value system and its racialized foundation.

It is because of the meaning and value placed on whiteness that CRT becomes an important intellectual and social tool for deconstruction, reconstruction, and construction: deconstruction of oppressive structures and discourses, reconstruction of human agency, and construction of equitable and socially just relations of power. (Ladson-Billings, 2010)

CRT is explicitly committed to social justice, activism and transforming structures that perpetuate racism, and to empower marginalized groups (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). It recognizes the value of experiential knowledge, and “counter stories” that have not been historically valued in educational settings. This knowledge is critical to understanding student experience and is seen as a source of strength by CRT theorists, who draw on it explicitly in their scholarship. These stories are important because they provide necessary context and subjectivity to the presumed “objectivity” or positivist positions (Ladson-Billings, 2010).

CRT also makes clear that race-neutral perspectives see deficiencies as the fault of individuals, rather than questioning the justice of the underlying norms. Methods of curricula, instruction and values such as academic language are assumed to be universal

and normative, and if students fail to master them, the fault must lie with the student him/herself (Ladson-Billings, 2010). Standard assessments may tell us that students do not know, but fail to tell us what students actually know and are able to do (Ladson-Billings, 2010). Fortunately, recent scholarship has challenged this deficit model, but such understanding has been largely limited to the K12 educational context, to the extent that it has been challenged at all. Higher education's concern with expectations and prestige, and ostensibly, with its relation to societal power, has been largely unwilling to broaden more inclusive criteria. Particularly because higher education has a greater awareness of critical perspectives, at least in theory, it is all the more unconscionable to deny these realities in practice. Many scholars have called for more explicit discussion of racist structures so that students can recognize it as a factor in their own experience, rather than placing responsibility for success or failure solely at an individual level. Rather than remediating the "deficiencies" in FGCS' academic language, CRT would ask:

How do processes of racialization affect students' fluency/acquisition of academic language?

How does institutional racism affect what is valued/defined as academic language?

Critical race pedagogy applies the same tactics that Critical Race Theory originally applied to law: the critical examination of racially structured rules for social participation and exclusion (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). Many practitioners and supporters of this form of pedagogy insist on helping students achieve within the traditional curricula, because it allows students to learn and practice "codes of power" (Delpit,

2005). This idea counters Audre Lorde's original conception with the belief that one can *only* dismantle the master's house by using the master's tools.

Scholars of CRT also challenge the assumption that students of color, who are disproportionately represented among first-generation college students (Choy, 2001), lack their own important forms of cultural capital. Social reproduction theory would agree, and assert that those in power establish distinct forms of cultural resources, including language norms. Cultural capital is usually focused on notions of class, but Winkle-Wagner (2010) points out that socioeconomic status has become racialized in the U.S., and is an important complication of Bourdieu's work in the field of higher education in this context.

CRT can be used to view the language of students of color represented within the first-generation college student population not only in terms of deficits, but also as having alternate value and an expression of lived experience (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). CRT extends the view of cultural capital to the assets and resources brought by first-generation college students from home communities outside of academia. In her summary of research on cultural capital in educational settings, Winkle-Wagner (2010) insists that more attention needs to be given to the cultural capital of non-dominant groups. This includes the particularly relevant concept of "linguistic capital" that highlights the additional knowledge and insight gained through familiarity with other communication experiences (Yosso, 2005). Although research has not yet explored the academic benefits of these alternate forms of capital, it is likely that they exist, and understanding of these students should look beyond a deficit model. In spite of these potential assets, it seems

clear that in order for first-generation students to fully reap the benefits of college, acquisition of academic language skill must be considered.

### **Institutional Responses to Cultural Capital**

There is the hopeful possibility that the college experience itself may provide some of the capital that first-generation students initially lack. Pascarella anticipates that college may help to remedy this deficit through social and academic integration, and in fact, this integration may act in a compensatory manner (Pascarella et al., 2004). FGCS may demonstrate greater cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes than their peers because their learning experience will be intensified. In order to test this theory, Pascarella and his colleagues rely on longitudinal models that compare pre-college cognitive skills with those acquired over the course of college in order to measure the degree and success of academic integration. Pascarella's (2004) longitudinal study on first-generation college students' experiences and outcomes is particularly valuable to consider as evidence, since it includes academic, as well as extracurricular experiences, and statistically accounts for other variables. According to this study, first-generation students demonstrated more significant cognitive gains from greater number of hours studied, term papers completed, or unassigned books read than their peers. These gains included critical thinking, writing skills and degree plans (Pascarella et al., 2004). In other words, first-generation students responded even more dramatically to academic interventions than students with greater parental education levels. Such results suggest that academic investments made by universities on behalf of first-generation students are likely to yield generous results. These results also support the theory that first-generation students can use higher education to compensate for their initial mismatch with the dominant academic culture.

The theory that the college experience itself can provide social and cultural capital for first-generation student seems to be supported by these findings.

The second clear result of research on college outcomes of first-generation students is that peer groups and extracurricular activities have a strong, positive effect on social and academic integration. First-generation students are more likely to benefit from peer interaction and extracurricular activities than their college peers, even though they are less likely to be engaged in them (Pascarella et al., 2004). Involvement in extracurricular activities had positive effects on critical thinking, degree plans, and sense of control over academic success. Although employment and collegiate athletics had negative effects on cognitive gains, this seems to be related to less time spent with a broad range of peer groups and social experiences (Pascarella et al., 2004). Time spent with faculty outside of large, impersonal classes had a positive impact on persistence (Tinto, 2003). Pascarella argues that these results suggest there should be less distinction between student affairs and academic domain, since their benefits are mutual (Pascarella et al., 2004). These results also support Tinto's student engagement theory that social and academic integration are reciprocal and mutually beneficial.

Theories of social integration and social/cultural capital both suggest that transactions of knowledge and resources can be gained through relationships and interactions with the dominant culture (Bourdieu, 1977; Swartz, 1998; Tinto, 1996, Winkle-Wagner, 2010). If these interactions take place with peers who transmit the values and cultural norms of higher education, first-generation students will benefit. They may benefit enough to overcome opposing forces, such as the perceived lack of support or isolation from the home community, as well as individual sense of self-doubt,

and enable first-generation students to persist and succeed in college.

### **Pedagogical Best Practices for FGCS**

There has now been more than a decade worth of research on academic strategies that promote retention and success, including the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education (WNSLAE) and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). The result of this massive collection of data is that “deep learning” that includes higher order cognitive tasks and integration of diverse perspectives supports student engagement and moral development (McCormick, Gonyea & McKenzie, 2013). Meaningful conversations with faculty and peers outside the classroom also promote the desire to engage in cognitive activities (Padgett et al., 2010), which may be particularly beneficial for students who have not experienced such dialogue within their home communities, as engagement had stronger effects on underprepared and historically marginalized students (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). Conley (2010) developed and validated a comprehensive model of college and readiness that defines four keys: (1) key cognitive strategies (KCS), (2) key content knowledge, (3) key learning skills and techniques, and (4) key transition knowledge and skills. This assessment can be used as a tool in assessing readiness, particularly among FCGS, and can be used by educators at both the high school and college levels to determine appropriate supports.

If research on student engagement and its benefits is to be taken seriously, substantial changes need to be made in the curriculum and methods of learning in the college classrooms of first-generation students, including, but not limited to, transitional bridge programs. Though most research on student engagement has occurred on the

student affairs side, pedagogical changes are necessary for academic integration. In Tinto's (1998, 2006) vision of "classrooms as communities" organizational changes would include "learning communities," where learning would occur across the curriculum through linked courses, related content and common students. Through these changes, peer networks that differ from the strictly social would develop, leading to more supportive and collaborative learning. Such a model helps to reinforce the connections between the social and academic spheres, and may have particular benefits for first-generation students who may feel isolated in both. However, there is tension between Tinto and other proponents of supportive pedagogy, and concerns about remediation and academic expectations in higher education. For example, Tinto and his supporters encourage informal and collaborative assignments to promote self-expression and validation, as well as foster collaboration in the classroom. Such assignments are typically ungraded, and Tinto suggests that credit-bearing courses are incompatible with learning communities (1998). Though his goals are laudable, it seems clear that academic credit is necessary, and that assessment, albeit in a more inclusive form, must be recognized from the outset as a reality of the academic world. Particularly in selective institutions, courses that do not bear credit or typical grades may be seen as lowering expectations. However, room for such collaborative, informal assignments may yield benefits even within a traditionally graded course.

Critical pedagogical practices that include and validate students' contexts and knowledge also may foster academic integration. Freire's (1970, 2007) groundbreaking notion that non-traditional students have the ability to make meaning and contribute to knowledge underlies the idea that there should be space within academia where the



“banking model” is regularly upended. Scholarly work on freshman writing programs is particularly relevant to first-generation students who may have been outside the academic community and are beginning to navigate their way through. Composition scholars such as Bizzell (1992) build on the idea that writing expectations and models have political dimensions, and negating or failing to recognize the unique contributions of non-traditional students has implications for their full inclusion in the life of the university. These classroom communities and critical pedagogical approaches have important implications for the academic integration of first-generation students.

Pascarella & Terenzini (2005) summarize most the research on effective teaching practices, including organization and preparation of material, clear explanation of concepts, and prompt and detailed feedback. Active learning, which includes class discussion, cooperative learning, and open-ended questions that require higher order thinking foster academic success in college (Braxton, Jones, Hirschy and Hartley, 2008). Active learning pedagogy has also been found to promote student retention by shaping student perception that faculty and institutions are invested in their learning, and leads to greater social integration within that community (Braxton et al, 2008). Such benefits may be particularly important for first-generation college students who are more likely to feel marginalized in other ways. It is imperative that instructors realize the challenges this may pose for first-generation college students. Such approaches have been termed “critical compassionate pedagogy” (Hao, 2011) because they require critical examination of texts and ideas while supporting students who may struggle with lack of preparation in such skills. Exposure to a range of writers, texts and dialects is necessary to validate students’ experiences, and to challenge the assumptions that have been previously taught.

Exposure to such texts in conjunction with student writing allows students themselves to recognize such connections, and creates space for their own “counter stories” within academia (Ladson-Billings, 2008). Although it may seem to put vulnerable students in a difficult position by encouraging them to share stories that reflect their own “difference,” this may also serve as a critical confrontation of the inequalities that exist and impact all students in the classroom, including those who have benefitted from such structures (Hao, 2011). When such assignments still provide the discipline and habits of academic discourse, students can develop fluency in their home and academic discourse, while broadening the array of perspectives represented in the academic context.

### **Systemic Functional Linguistics**

Even supportive pedagogy must socialize previously excluded students to the norms of academic discourse if they will be able to fully access its benefits. Research exists on strategies for direct instruction that may support fluency in academic language. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) provides a framework that may help students better understand the ways in which language works within an academic context, as well as the tools to use this language in meaningful ways. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) may provide a useful framework for developing advanced literacy because its central premise that language is shaped and defined by context, which is particularly relevant as students move between home communities and the context of academia. Schleppegrell (2009) recognizes the importance of meaningful grammar for students who come from backgrounds where informal, non-standard forms of English are more familiar. Since they are less comfortable with the demands of academic registers, they need direct instruction and modeling of grammars in different contexts. Schleppegrell

argues that such grammatical choices will allow these students to expand their options for expression and meaning-making. These advanced literacy capabilities demonstrate cognitive skills that are particularly valued in higher education, including abstraction, generalization, argument and reflection (Christie, 2008). This suggests that SFL informed instruction may yield important gains in first-generation college students' ability to understand and utilize academic language, which will allow them to access cultural and social capital they may initially lack.

### **Alternate Assessment: Critical Discourse Analysis**

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is both a theory and a method (van Dijk, 2004) that attempts to describe and interpret the relationship between language and the social world. CDA has often been used to emphasize the relationship between language and educational issues, is interested both in discourse in context as well as why and how discourses work (Rogers, 2004). CDA attends to both specific features of a given text (including grammar and vocabulary), as well as the social practices of a given context (Fairclough, 1993). Although CDA has been criticized for not describing specific analytical features (Rogers, 2004), it is a potential tool to assess academic language development with more of an empirical basis. CDA researchers have called for more research that not only defines loci of oppression in language and social practices, but also looking closely at texts for examples of agency and affirmation (Luke, 2004). As a methodological tool, CDA may provide an effective lens to understand the challenges that the academic discourse of the university poses for students who have not been socialized to it, as well as the ways in which these students can attempt to understand and

navigate it through their academic language development in the first year.

### **Additional Research on Sociolinguistic Challenges for FGCS**

**Oral language.** White (2005) offers one of the few studies on sociolinguistic challenges of FGCS. His research focuses on minority students at University of Colorado, Boulder, which struggles to maintain a diverse student body in part because of the high attrition rate of these students. White performed a case study of students of color from lower middle class backgrounds who were on academic probation and required to participate in academic support services. Although this group does not reflect all FGCS, the reflections of the students in the study reflect some of the more heartbreaking realities of the struggle to develop academic language, and adapt to the unfamiliar discourse community of the university. One example was student difficulty with short answer exam questions. Students took the phrase “short answer” literally, which White includes as a consequence of their unfamiliarity with academic discourse (White, 2005). The strategy here included better note taking skills to allow for more detailed answers, but did not cover additional challenges of written academic language. The aspect of language that White’s study focused on was oral language required for participation in the classroom. Students expressed fear that they did not “have the language, you know, the vocabulary” or “high language,” and without what another student described as this “college-like talk”, peers and faculty would “look down on [them] as stupid” (White, 2005, p. 384-385). White, a participant-observer as their academic tutor, had students “apprentice” their use of oral language with them, which focused mostly on developing a less uncertain, or “doubting” tone (White, 2005, p.387). Disclaimers such as “I’m not sure, but” or “I don’t really know” may be more common in oral language than written,

but other features of student self-doubt are likely present in written language as well. This study is quite useful in foregrounding the role that academic language plays in the initial experience of FGCS adjustment to college, and provides evidence that for many students, universities are an entirely different culture, requiring shifts in discursive and literacy practices (Gee, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991). White also points out that students need strong foundational skills to build literacy, such as time management and study skills (White, 2005). It likely that students may find additional linguistic demands in written academic language requirements, though this study did not explore that aspect.

**Generation 1.5.** Singhal's (2004) work with academic writing development in generation 1.5 students also yields helpful insights for pedagogical practice. Although not all FGCS are generation 1.5, usually defined as U.S. educated English Language Learners who may speak another language at home, her breakdown of necessary skills is helpful for a closer examination of how academic language develops. She notes that academic English is often under-emphasized in public school instruction (Scarcella, 2003), and that the first time students are faced with these expectations may be a college classroom. She defines three essential skill areas for college composition, though ideally, such skills will be developed in other classrooms as well. These include: (1) Four skill areas of reading, writing, speaking and listening, (2) critical thinking and (3) research skills. For the first skill, Singhal calls for instruction on writing sentences, paragraphs, and overall organization, purpose and audience awareness, and readings that expand vocabulary. For the second, oft-cited skill of critical thinking, Singhal argues that exposure to interesting materials and class discussions is important, but not enough, and students must engage in writing activities that actively hone these skills. Finally, research skills such as finding

and evaluating sources, as well as understanding and avoiding plagiarism are essential. She notes that academic language includes “multiple, dynamic and inter-related competencies” (Scarcella, 2003, p.7) and attention to all of these is necessary for successful development.

**Technology and college writing.** Recent research on the role that language development plays in the success of FGCS highlights additional obstacles. In a recent study of students participating in a transitional bridge program, researchers found that these students also lacked essential knowledge of the technology that has become fundamental to college writing (Relles & Tierney, 2013). From everything to conducting online research to submitting papers electronically, students are now expected to have sophisticated technological knowledge. Because this subset of students has been found to be disadvantaged in technological proficiency (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010), they are in fact at a dual disadvantage in terms of academic writing development (Relles & Tierney, 2013). Efforts to address academic writing development in FGCS must also address the technological component that it now clearly involves as well.

### **Other Institutional Supports**

Research repeatedly asserts that faculty involvement in these efforts would help to break down the academic/social divide, giving all students, but particularly first-generation ones, more opportunities for integration, and therefore persistence. Renn suggests that her “human ecology theory” of complex, overlapping “microsystems” of peers and faculty, can be used to better support first generation students (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Renn & Arnold, 2003). It is important to note that other factors also impact the engagement and success of first-generation students, though they may not

be as obviously related. Research on financial aid has shown that the cost of college impacts not only where students go to college, but also how they interact with that environment (Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda, 1992). Students who are anxious about their ability to pay for college are inhibited in their ability to fully integrate, both socially and academically, which in turn impacts persistence. Though most of this research has been done on low-income students, it is clear that it would apply to many first-generation students as well (Pascarella et al., 2004). Higher education professionals interested in the success of first-generation students should be aware that such seemingly external factors such as financial aid awards play an important role in students' ability to fully access higher education.

### **Future Directions for Research**

In the future, research could begin to explore more specific sub-areas of academic integration, including the development of advanced literacy skills, and determine the impact of specific interventions. In order to research academic language acquisition, various approaches must be employed, including foundational knowledge on language acquisition at the K-12 level. Methods such as Pascarella's (2004) approach of comparing pre-college cognitive skill levels to skill development following particular coursework, pedagogical approaches, and other interventions would help to determine which experiences were most beneficial. Although such research would encounter some of the same challenges of research on first-generation students overall, specifically controlling for other background variables, it would be likely to have the same broader applications and benefits. In addition to longitudinal data, research on the acquisition of academic language should reflect the voices of the students themselves. Therefore, more

qualitative research, including interviews with first-generation students about their academic experiences, as well as narrative accounts would contribute to the research in the field. Qualitative research on the academic language acquisition of first-generation students would help to tell the stories behind the data.

There is clearly more work to be done on ensuring opportunities for success of first-generation students. Since their numbers are likely to increase in the future, and their professional and economic advancement is largely dependent on post-secondary degree attainment, there is a compelling social need to consider the needs of first-generation college students. Although much of the research outlined here covers access and transition to higher education, there is clearly a need for further study on academic experiences and intervention in college itself. Although math skills have been given some examination, little work has been done on the acquisition of advanced literacy skills, and the preparation needed for the high expectations in writing and reading that first-generations students will encounter in college. Since significant numbers of first-generation students may speak another language at home—either literally or figuratively—they need to learn the language of academia. Although the field of Composition Studies has been well aware of this problem for decades, more empirical research is needed, especially in light of additional challenges for FGCS, such as the role of technology, that later research has revealed. Academic language development deserves further consideration, especially since upper-level coursework and intellectual development are dependent on it, and studies show that first-generation are less likely to obtain these benefits. For example, although first-generation students who complete a bachelor's degree earn comparable post-graduation salaries, they are still less likely to



attend graduate school (Walpole, 2007). Due to the demands of advanced literacy in graduate programs, the question of an academic language barrier, or more broadly, comfort with and competency in academic language may be a factor in this discrepancy.

Higher education has a particular interest in the access and retention of first-generation students. Not only is college completion necessary for the professional, financial and personal advancement of previously disadvantaged groups, these students bring a diversity that is essential to the democratic character of the institutions themselves. Moreover, the strategies that work for persistence and success for first-generation students are likely to benefit all students, though due to the particular challenges they face, the reverse is not true (Thayer, 2000). Interventions for success must be multifaceted, and include social as well as academic components to create a sense of both security and competence. Efforts to promote access and retention of first-generation students show an institutional commitment to racial and cultural diversity as well as social justice.

### **Chapter Three: Research Design and Methods**

This study followed the academic writing of first-generation college students (FGCS) at a selective, predominantly white university from a summer transitional bridge program to the end of their first year of college. Writing samples from four time points in the first year were collected and analyzed, after which ten students were interviewed about perceptions of their own academic writing development. Studies suggest that first-generation college students may make greater gains in cognitive development than their peers during the first year (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and comparisons of their writing development across this time period may help to identify facets of this development. Drawing on the theoretical foundation of cultural capital and Critical Race Theory, this study recognizes that the value of students' academic language cannot be fully captured by criteria that are based on "objective" norms alone because of their history and reflection of dominant values. In order to capture the experience of academic language acquisition more critically, the writing samples were also analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), to gain a better understanding of how students brought assets from their own experiences and home communities into the college classroom.

This chapter describes the research design and methodology of this qualitative study, the rationale for the data to be collected, as well as the value of supplementing these data with student interviews. I will explain the choice of population site and sampling procedures. I will describe my role within the traditions of practitioner inquiry and participatory action research, as well as the limitations of this positionality, and how I will attempt to address these limitations. I will then describe the methodology used to

analyze the data, including the criteria I used to operationalize a definition of academic writing from norms set by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), as well as how I used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as an alternate method of assessment. Finally, I will discuss concerns of rigor and validity. The informed consent form completed by all participants, the baseline writing sample prompt, interview protocol and the CDA analysis chart can be found in the Appendices of this document.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions will guide my inquiry:

RQ1: How do first-generation college students acquire academic language during their first year of college?

RQ2: How do these students perceive their academic language acquisition?

### **Research Design**

**Qualitative research.** This study is best served by qualitative research methods, as they are better suited to reflect individual points of view, as opposed to the broader perspective of quantitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It is also the most effective way to answer “how” questions, such as how academic language is acquired (Merriam, 2002; Yin, 2003). Qualitative research helps to capture the experiences of those who may not be adequately reflected by research on the dominant group (Museus, 2007), including FGCS who may have different experiences in the classroom than their peers. Qualitative research literature stresses the importance of forming relationships and building trust with research participants, particularly when using interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2005). This trust is particularly important within the group of students I plan to include in this study, as they may experience self-doubt about their own academic

abilities and sense of belonging at the university (White, 2005). It may be difficult for them to share their vulnerable position with a faculty member, and they may be hesitant to criticize an institution with a researcher who is associated with it. The foundation of trust I hope to have built with these students through our teaching and advising relationship, my association with a supportive program, and my own distance from a traditionally evaluative position, seemed to mitigate these concerns. However, my positionality as a faculty member/administrator in the eyes of these students is one I was aware of throughout the study. I took steps to identify and address this limitation, as described below. The sampling method I will use is criterion sampling (Patton, 2002), in that any student in the summer transitional bridge program for 2013 was invited to participate.

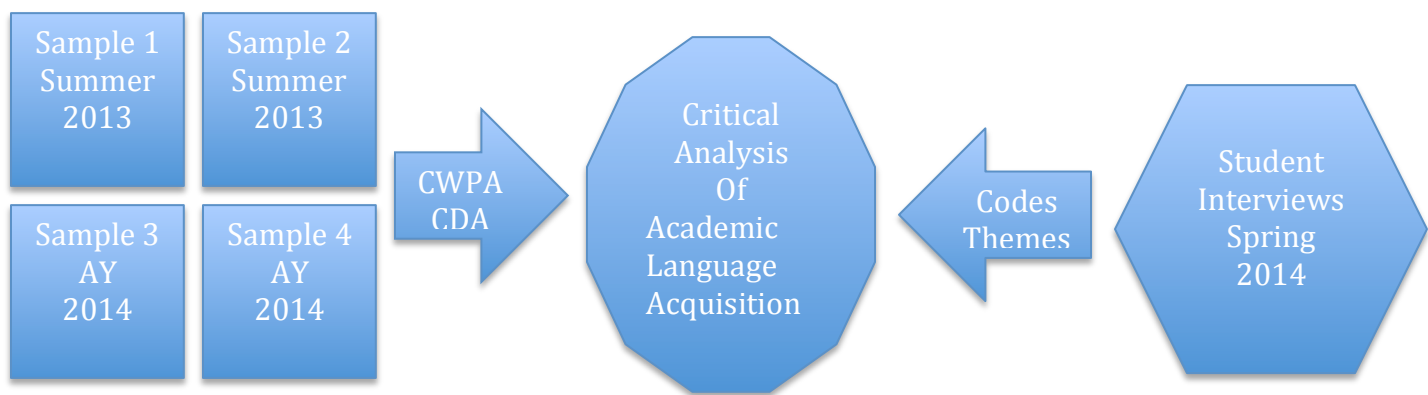
### **Methodology**

The approach in this study is informed by the traditions of practitioner inquiry and participatory action research. As an instructor who has taught in the program for ten years, I drew on the local knowledge and experience I have gained to critically assess my own practices and approaches (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Following from the goals of participatory action research (Herr & Anderson, 2005) it is also my intent to collaboratively engage the students in the research process. Although the students are newcomers to the challenges of college reading and writing, they possess a great deal of insight into the strengths and limitations of their own educational experiences. I informed them of the rationale and goals for the research, engaged them in selecting and interpreting their own writing samples, and in assessing the effectiveness of instructional approaches, as well as broader experiences that affect academic integration.

In order to thoroughly reflect the students' own perspectives, I asked them to choose two of the writing samples I assessed in the study within certain parameters designed to ensure consistency. These included two writing samples from the summer transitional bridge program, as well as two papers from the required First Year Writing Seminar, which students took during their first academic year. In order to ensure consistency across samples, I will ask for a narrative or reflective essay and a researched essay, though students are free to choose the samples they submit within those parameters. I requested these samples because they would capture academic language norms as well as personal writing that would demonstrate more lived experience. I asked students for their own feedback on these essays during the interview stage of the study. I interviewed ten students at the end of spring semester freshman year, and planned to use a maximum variance sample to select which students to interview in order to capture a range of experiences (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). Although I wound up interviewing most of the twelve students who submitted samples, they reflected a wide range of experiences. I used a semi-structured interview format, which allowed me to set predetermined questions focused on academic writing experience, while allowing the participants to offer related information that they feel is relevant (Glesne, 2011). Such interviews offered a rich source of data from the students' perspective, and allowed them to play a role in the interpretation and analysis of their writing samples. Students offered information on aspects of their experience that I had not anticipated in my interview questions, and the semi-structured format allowed this data to emerge. When possible, I used In Vivo coding to capture the words or phrases used by the students themselves. This form of coding is particularly useful in capturing youth voices that are typically

marginalized in academic research, and coding with their own language creates a more accurate depiction of their experiences (Saldaña, 2009). In Vivo coding is also used in participatory action research, since one of the goals of this method is to capture the participants' own language and views, rather than those of academics or professionals (Stringer, 1999). Students' perspectives of their own lived experience was essential for a critical understanding of these data. Analysis of both the writing samples and the interview data allowed me to construct a more complete picture of academic language acquisition during the first year.

**Figure 1.** Research Design



*Figure 1.* Research design including data sources and methods of analysis. CWPA= Council of Writing Program Administrators Criteria that will operationalize a definition of academic language, measured on a three-point scale. CDA= Critical Discourse Analysis

### Sample

**Population site.** This study covers a group of students who participated in a summer transitional bridge program (STB) at a highly selective, four-year liberal arts, PWI in the northeast. For the purposes of this study, the university will be referred to as TC (Traditional College). Due in part to university efforts to diversify student enrollment, the STB program has been in place for over twenty years. The students in STB are

primarily first-generation, low-income students of color from urban public schools and urban Catholic schools. The racial makeup of the group is roughly 30% African-American, African and African Caribbean, 30% Latino/Latina, 30% Asian American and 10% White. Approximately 40 % of the students in the summer program are students who grew up in a home where English was not their primary language. Most often the students were the high achievers in their respective high schools, but their standardized test scores are typically lower than the college's average score, and they may have attended an underperforming high school, or both.

The STB program runs for seven weeks and the primary academic components are the math and English courses, which are each held for two hours a day for six weeks of the program. If students earn a C or higher in both of these courses, they receive two college elective course credits. Students also take a non-credit oral communications course, and a course where they learn about the various offices and resources at the university. Students in the program are supported by peer advisors and have weekly meetings with trained counselors to discuss any academic, social, and psychological concerns.

The English course in the STB program is intended to cover both critical reading and writing. There are four sections of the course with 12-14 students per section. The four instructors work together to choose the course texts and to develop a shared course timeline with relatively similar assignments and exams. Each instructor does have flexibility in how the units are taught and how his or her classroom is managed. The English course usually covers the following types of materials: non-fiction memoir, novel or short stories, poetry, Shakespearean drama, and contemporary drama. A deliberate

effort is made to choose texts that reflect the diversity of the students' backgrounds that are interesting, engaging, and adequately challenging. Consideration is also given to the sequence of texts so that one unit builds on another. For example, the poetry unit is done prior to the Shakespeare unit to help students build on and develop their close reading skills. Another component of the English course is the assignment of a "writing fellow" to each section. The writing fellows are English M.A. students who have been trained to provide feedback to students. The writing fellows meet weekly with students for thirty-minute sessions to work on the current assignment.

Although the specifics of the STB program's population vary with each cohort, and each student is unique, this population provides a sample of students who may be unfamiliar with the conventions of academic discourse, and are transitioning to a highly selective institution where such background knowledge is assumed and normative. Therefore, this group is an information rich population (Patton, 2002) to consider in addressing my research questions. For the follow up interviews, an ideal sample size would be 6-12 participants. According to the literature, this should be enough to reach saturation, the point at which no new themes or codes emerge from the data (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). In this study, saturation of themes was reached by ten student interviews.

**Sampling procedure.** I used a purposeful criterion sample design (Patton, 2002) for this study, in that all students in the 2013 STB program were invited to participate. The 2013 class was smaller than usual, with only 37 students total. In addition, two students entered the program late and did not take the placement exam, and one instructor misplaced three exams during the course of the program. Because a baseline writing



sample is necessary to measure academic language acquisition, students without a baseline writing sample were not included in the study. For the subsequent writing samples, I emailed the remaining 32 students in the program and asked them to email a second paper that was required in all four English classes, a formal literary analysis paper on Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. I also asked students for two papers that are required components of the required First Year Writing Seminar, which all students took during their first year. This course requires that all sections assign some type of personal narrative essay, as well as one researched paper. These are the two samples I asked for, in order to have some consistency across rhetorical situations. I asked students to submit paper copies that were not graded, in order to increase response rate, and so that my own analysis was not affected by this assessment, though I asked students about grades and feedback as part of the follow up, since this no doubt played a role in students' perceptions. I explained the purposes of the study in that email, and that the samples will be used anonymously, though I kept student names attached in my own files so that I could analyze the writing over time, and connect it to interview data. I hoped that the purpose of the study would be important to the students, as the goal is to better understand their experience in order to provide better support in the future. I also hoped that their familiarity with me through the program, and later as an academic advisor for many of the students, would encourage them to participate. It may be less likely that students would share academic materials with a stranger, and I hope that my positionality will be beneficial in this regard.

The literature suggests that a good response rate for surveys is between 30-40% (Beam, 2012), and though this request for writing samples was not the same as a survey,

a response from 11 students would be large enough to provide a range of student writing. I had 12 students provide writing samples, which meets this minimum response rate. I did not seek to make generalizations about *all* students in the program; I hope to collect a range of data that provide an accurate picture of experiences. When initial participation was low, I offered small incentives, such as gift cards for coffee or ice cream at local stores. According to IRB, the incentive must not be considered inappropriate or extravagant, but my hope is that this small token merely showed my appreciation for their critical participation. My goal, which was met, was to interview a minimum of ten students who submitted all four writing samples. Semi-structured interviews with 6-12 participants are considered enough to reach saturation, the point at which no new themes are emerging from the data (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). This is particularly likely in a case such as this, where participants are chosen according to a common criterion, which here was enrollment in the STB program.

### **Pilot Study**

Prior to beginning my research, I conducted a pilot analysis and interview with a second year college student who had completed the STB program in the summer of 2012. I had his personal narrative and a researched essay on *Merchant of Venice* from STB that I could analyze for academic writing criteria and with critical discourse analysis. The pilot interview yielded several important insights. First, it was important to include questions about high school writing experiences. I had not asked any initially, because my intention was to focus on the transition to college, but it was immediately clear that high school writing had a great impact on college preparation and attitudes toward written work.

Second, I expected that a semi-structured interview would lead in several potential directions, and in my conversation with this student that was readily apparent. He touched on many aspects of his own personal history, his neighborhood and peers, popular culture, Cornell West and Barack Obama in the course of a too-short hour. Although these points were not called for in my interview, I found them extremely valuable in understanding his perceptions and awareness of language “rules,” cultural contexts, and the personal choices he was forced to make as a result. As a result of the pilot interview, I decided to cut back on some of my prepared questions, leave only those that seemed most critical to the study, and allow for more open-ended responses.

A final insight from the pilot was the emotional response that students may have to past pieces of writing. This student is in his second year, so he was faced with a personal narrative that was almost two years old. Though I was struck by the powerful content when I revisited it, he was embarrassed by what he saw as rough and immature work. The content of the essay included his struggles to adapt from rural Haiti, to an all-white high school in New Hampshire, to an African-American community in Dorchester that was plagued with violence and gang affiliation. I was prepared to ask him how he felt about those transitions now, if he saw them as seamless and positive as he conveyed in the paper, but his first reaction was embarrassment over his grammar. In my interviews with students in the study, I was more aware of potential sensitivity around the samples of their writing that may seem less polished to student writers, and tried to frame the differences in a developmental manner. This pilot study also helped to clarify and develop codes for subsequent interviews in the study.

### Data Collection

A primary source of data in this study is writing samples from students who completed the STB program in the summer of 2013, gathered from four different time points in their first year of college. The first sample was a placement exam used at the start of the summer program (June, 2013). Because no human subjects were used, only writing samples gathered outside the context of a course, IRB permitted an exempted review. As we assure our students, we do not use this exam to level the classes, and instead attempt to balance the four English classes according to students' expressive styles and language backgrounds. The exam (Appendix B) is based on a poem that would likely be unfamiliar to the students, so that previous knowledge of literature is not a factor. For the first question, students are given a choice between two questions that require close reading and interpretation of specific textual elements of the poem. The second exam question is deliberately more personal and open-ended, so that students may demonstrate their writing skills in what may be a more comfortable context. This baseline writing sample was helpful to compare to later examples of writing development.

IRB approval was obtained for the collection and use of the three additional writing samples. In order to establish consistency, students were asked for their *Merchant of Venice* essay required as part of their summer English class, the personal narrative or reflective essay for their first-year writing seminar, and the required researched essay for that same required class. Although the subsequent samples likely reflected more time spent, feedback from an instructor, and the motivational value of a grade, all of which distinguishes them from the baseline sample, they will still provide evidence of further

points in students' writing development. Once again, this process involved voluntary submission without penalty for choosing not to participate.

The second data source was semi-structured interviews with ten participants who had submitted all three writing samples. This part of the study required IRB approval as well, also through an expedited process, as the risks are minimal. IRB's greatest concern was that there would be no real or perceived possibility of coercion to participate in the study because of my position as a researcher in relation to the students. I clarified my purposes on the consent forms, and did not interview the two students from the program that were enrolled in a literature class with me during the time of the study. I conducted semi-structured interviews with eleven students in the spring of 2014. The interviews attempted to capture the lived experience of academic language acquisition for the student. The interview protocol is found in Appendix C of this document.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis will take place in three phases, described below.

**Table 1**

#### *Data Analysis*

DATA SOURCE	DATA	METHOD/INSTRUMENT
Writing Samples (4) x Time	Norms of Academic Language	WPA Outcomes Statement Criteria/Three Point Scale
Writing Samples (4) x Time	Assets/ Alternate Capital	Critical Discourse Analysis
Interviews	Student Perceptions	(In Vivo) Coding/Themes

**Phase I: Writing Samples/Academic Language**

The first part of the analysis consisted of evaluating the student writing samples according to the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) criteria, which operationalize a definition of academic language norms.

1. Objectivity and awareness of appropriate response to a formal academic rhetorical situation.
2. Demonstration of knowledge of conventions such as structure, paragraphing, tone and mechanics.
3. Claims supported by evidence from the text or other primary sources.
4. Critical engagement with sources, integrating their own ideas with those of others.

(Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2001).

These criteria are based on those adopted by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) (2001) as part of their “Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition.” In the U.S., the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition has been constructed to identify common knowledge, skills, and attitudes desired by post-secondary entry level composition programs (Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2000, 2008). The Outcomes Statement has been used as the basis for assessment of student writing and for program evaluation (Thomas, 2013). Directors and faculty of university writing programs use these criteria to determine effective pedagogical practices. The writing program at the university considered in this study used these criteria to pilot an assessment of the first-year writing program during the summer of 2013. Though the focus there was critical engagement with secondary sources in

writing samples specifically from the first-year writing seminar, they also provide a useful measure by which to evaluate the academic writing of first-year students because they indicate features that are valued by the university in assessing student writing.

These criteria, which have been determined by a third party based on consensus of writing program faculty and administrators, also allowed me to be more aware of my own positionality as a researcher and instructor of first-year writing. I have been accustomed to evaluating student writing critically, measuring it against such norms. Although I am aware of the challenges that academic writing presents for students who have not been fully socialized to it, I still uphold these norms in my own classroom, and recognize that this type of writing will be valued in an academic context. Although I realize the assumptions at work in these language values, they are a reality for the academic audience these students will face.

I used a three-point scale to assess the four criteria separately. The three values will measure whether the criteria is (3) established (2) emerging or (1) not apparent. The addition of a +/- rating will allow more finely grained data to emerge. I will assess each writing sample for these criteria to determine changes in student academic writing over time. The scale is intended to be a heuristic (Kelly-Riley & Elliot, 2014); it is not a precise instrument, and I expected the analysis of the samples to be imprecise. I will attempt to increase validity by taking the following steps. Each baseline writing sample has already been ranked by the English instructors of the summer bridge program. The instructors are experienced writing teachers who have assessed the placement exams for the program in past years. Collaboratively, we read and assess the exams and use this process to generate balanced English classes with a range of student strengths. Since

these samples have already been assessed, I will have a general sense of the success of each student's academic writing in the context of the prompt, according to a skilled evaluator. For the subsequent samples, I will have the prompt as well as the student's grade, as a comparative measure of success. Although such measures are subjective, they will provide a measure of the student's academic writing mastery as measured by their instructor, which is a key source, for both external success (grades) and students' own perceptions of their ability.

I also recognize that my efforts to support these students in their transition may make my evaluation of their writing more generous than a wholly disinterested evaluator. Since my positionality no doubt informed my interpretation of the data, I had an initial second reader, also an instructor of first-year writing, but not familiar with these particular students, evaluate samples to complement my analysis. In spite of these efforts to heighten validity, I recognize that this type of assessment is complex and subjective. Since this is a qualitative study, precision of quantifiable measure is not the central goal. I hope to understand how academic writing changes over time, and the process described above demonstrates some of those changes. I graphed these changes as part of my data reporting, and included key variables such as student gender, racial and/or ethnic identification and ELL status, which will be relevant in a critical analysis. Since this is only one aspect of my analysis, I augmented it with other methods, detailed below.

### **Phase II: Writing Samples/Critical Discourse Analysis**

Because so much of the scholarship on language and cultural capital is conceptual in nature, theory played an important role in the interpretation of data. It is central to the purpose of this study to assess academic writing in ways beyond the norms described



previously. I went back over the writing samples and analyzed them a second time using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This method helped to address the notion that many seemingly objective measures of academic skill, including writing, are shaped by White, Western norms (Yosso, 2005). A discourse analysis allowed me to evaluate the normative features of academic writing development along with alternate forms of cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) that students may demonstrate, but are not reflected in these values. I read the samples a second time with values assigned for alternate elements of capital, such as evidence of agency, subjectivity, awareness of alternate perspectives and resistance. Such values will begin to include knowledge that historically has been discounted (Delgado Bernal, 1998, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2000) in academic settings.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a method with an explicit agenda to address inequality by highlighting power relations at the level of language. I used this method to analyze writing samples closely and draw out textual evidence that captures the strengths these students bring to an academic writing context. Written language has a way of making such abstractions more concrete, and this will be vital as I explore academic language development in this group of students. CDA attempts to describe and interpret the relationship between language and the social world, and this method has often been used to emphasize the relationship between language and educational issues (Martínez-Alemán, in press). CDA is interested both in discourse in context as well as why and how discourses work (Rogers, 2004). CDA attends to both specific features of a given text (including grammar and vocabulary), as well as the social practices of a given context (Fairclough, 1993). In this analysis, I will move between specific features of a given text of student writing, and the societal context of the university. For example, if a student

uses the informal “I” pronoun in an analytical essay, it is noteworthy not only that the student chose a more personal and subjective frame of reference that may demonstrate the writer’s agency, but also that this position is one that is not accepted in an academic context that values more seemingly objective forms of meaning making. CDA makes such abstractions concrete at the level of language, and was a valuable tool in this study.

Although CDA has been criticized for not describing specific analytical features (Rogers, 2004), to code for specific features that can be tracked over time, I attempted to define such features in my analysis. CDA researchers have called for more research that not only defines loci of oppression in language and social practices, but also that looks closely at texts for examples of agency and affirmation (Luke, 2004). In order to expand the data interpretation, I coded for alternate forms of capital (Yosso, 2005) in these writing samples, to begin to find ways to begin to value the knowledge that these students bring with them to the academic context. As a methodological tool, CDA enabled me to understand the challenges that the academic discourse of the university poses for students who have not been socialized to it, as well as the ways in which these students attempt to understand and navigate it.

### **Phase III: Interviews/ Student Perceptions**

Once I had the writing samples, I planned to select interview participants based on maximum variation sampling. Unfortunately, I only had writing samples from 12 students, though those 12 captured a broad range of experiences with academic writing. I solicited interviews with students who have been strong writers from the outset, those who had improved or remained consistent, as well as those who were struggling. This variety of samples allowed a range of experiences to be captured. According to Patton

(2002), by including students who self-identify as having very different experiences, it is possible to more accurately “describe...and to *understand* variations in experiences” (p. 103, emphasis in the original), though this does not mean they can be generalized to all participants. I integrated students’ interview responses on their own perceptions of academic writing acquisition with their writing samples in order to gain a better sense of how language has affected their initial integration into academic life. I interviewed eleven students to capture their perceptions of their own academic writing development; these are essentially student’s own stories of his or her development as a writer during the first year of college. The interviews were conducted in the spring of 2014.

Glesne (2011) reminds researchers to be sure to establish a level of trust before moving to interview questions that may be more difficult for participants. Based on my pilot interview, I realized that students may still be uncomfortable discussing their writing, even with a researcher who has obtained some level of trust. Particularly if academic competency, and writing in particular, are sources of self-doubt for students, asking them to respond to their own writing with a university professional may be unsettling. I began by asking students broad questions about their first-year writing experiences, drawing on connections and commonalities from our shared experiences in the STB program. Once that rapport was established, I moved on to more probing questions around classroom and other pedagogical experiences, peer interactions around writing assignments (since many first-year writing classes include workshops and other student interactions), sources of support for their writing, and student perceptions of their own strengths and weaknesses as an academic writer.

As students confront the norms of academic language, and the values placed on them, including grades and inclusion in the academic community, their sense of their own merit, and even their identity as students may be challenged. Interview data helped to capture some sense of this experience, and the conflict it may pose for these students. As in many areas of academic scholarship, student expertise has been de-valued as part of a deficit model, and is left out of the discussion (Fine, 2006). This research aims to bridge this gap by featuring students' perceptions and reflections on their experiences with academic writing.

In order to confirm my findings, I shared my results with the participants (member checking). I wrote up an executive summary of my findings, including both an overall analysis of the writing samples, and themes to emerge from the interview data. I sent this summary to study participants in the fall of 2014.

Overall, this methodology attempted to integrate students' interview responses on their own perceptions of academic writing development with their writing samples in order to gain a better sense of how language has affected their initial integration into academic life. The two sets of data (written texts and interview data) constructed a more complete picture of the dynamic relationship between language and context. This helped enable me to understand the challenges that the academic discourse of the university poses for students who have not been socialized to it, as well as the ways in which these students can attempt to understand and navigate it through their academic language development in the first year.

**Rigor and Validity**

There are several ways I endeavored to enhance the rigor and validity of this study. Because I am in the role of a participant-observer, and someone who has worked with many of the study's participants, I was as transparent as possible about my role and the limitations it may pose in data interpretation and analysis. I used the first person pronoun "I" whenever I am speaking about my own experiences and opinions. For the first part of the study, the writing samples, I had another English instructor at the same university read and utilize the operationalized definition of academic writing based on the 2001 WPA standards. We assessed samples separately and then discussed examples before I analyzed the rest. In this way, a greater level of detail in the criteria was achieved, and my own limitations were clarified and addressed. Because CDA relies on critical analysis of actual text, I included the text from the samples so that the original and my interpretation are distinct.

After analyzing the data, I sent a summary of key findings to the student participants. Although I recognize the inherent power dynamics between teacher and student may inhibit participant's ability to respond candidly these results, I attempted to mitigate this effect by emphasizing the value of such input to the study. Though students responded casually and briefly to the executive summary, their reactions were positive, and were pleased that some of the challenges of college writing were recognized on an institutional level. These "member checks" helped to confirm the validity of my data (Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2005; Patton, 2002). The analysis of the writing samples also benefitted from these member checks from my participants. As part of my interviews with students, I asked them about the writing samples they selected, to clarify, or offer

their own interpretation of key text. Such input helped to expand and complicate my interpretation. The interview questions provided additional context and allowed the students to offer their own perspectives. As an instructor, and administrator in an academic department, I realize that students see me as part of that institution, which may have limited their responses. However, because my instructor relationship with these students was long over by the time of the interviews, and other instructors will have already graded the writing samples, there was less at stake for them. The fact that students in the study were asked to submit the samples themselves, also allowed them to have a greater measure of control over the process.

According to Creswell and Miller (2008), researchers should employ at least two means of verification to ensure validity. In this study, I used three—prolonged engagement/ persistent verification, clarification of researcher bias through a second reader, and member checks with the participants. It is my hope that these methods of verification enhance the rigor and validity of this study.

All participants consented to the study and signed an Institutional Research Board approved consent form that states the purpose of the study as well as any perceived risks. In this study, there are none. However, it was possible that participants could be upset by my findings, including what may be perceived as a negative assessment of their writing. However, this was not the case. Students were far more critical of their own work than I was, and were surprised to see their writing assessed in a more complex way that recognized many assets. I explained to students that the purpose of this study is to design more effective supports for FGCS in their academic writing development, and their experiences, however painful, will make those interventions more successful. Students

were eager to offer their input, as they recognized the need for improvements at the university level. I provided personal feedback on student writing, resources and supports for improvement in their academic writing, as well as the emotional burden of self-doubt, which is found to exist within this group of students (White, 2005). Although I was very concerned about this potential risk, I recognize that disappointing grades and resulting self-doubt were already a reality for these students, and participation in this study allowed them to recognize their experience as part of a larger, structural problem (Hao, 2011). Of course, the overarching purpose of this study was to minimize such experiences for future students by placing the experience of academic language acquisition in a more critical context.

## **Chapter Four: Data and Analysis**

### **Phase I: Writing Sample Findings**

The gaps in existing research suggest there is a need for more empirical studies on how first-generation college students acquire academic language during the critical first year of college. Although there is significant theoretical discussion of the role academic language plays in both academic and social integration, there is little examination on what interventions and strategies work to develop it. Therefore, the research questions considered in this study were:

RQ1: How do first-generation college students acquire academic language during their first year of college?

RQ2: How do these students perceive their academic language acquisition?

In order to address these questions, I examined writing samples from four time periods to understand how academic writing changes over time (RQ1) and interviewed students to capture their reflections on that development (RQ2). The findings and analyses of these data are discussed in this chapter.

Following IRB approval, a request was sent by email to the summer transitional bridge program class of 2013 describing the study, and asking students to participate by submitting three writing samples (their summer research paper, a personal narrative from their first-year writing seminar, and a researched essay from the same writing class). I already had the placement exam writing samples from an IRB approved pilot the previous year. Initially, eight students responded to volunteer with writing samples, and a follow up email yielded four more. These twelve students were asked to participate in an interview to discuss their experiences with academic writing during the first year of



college. One student failed to respond to requests to schedule an interview, and another had an atypical first-year experience that made his responses to interview questions less representative. This left ten students from the summer of 2013 who submitted three writing samples voluntarily, and were interviewed in April 2014. Table 2 describes the students in the study, who have been identified by pseudonyms, but self-identify their ethnicity, language, and high school characteristics. The total cohort for that summer was 37 students, thus yielding a 37% participation rate. This is in line with the response rate of 30-40% encouraged in survey literature (Beam, 2012).

**Table 2***Student Participant Characteristics*

<b>STUDENT ID</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup>LANGUAGE</b>	<b>ETHNICITY</b>	<b>GENDER</b>	<b>HIGHSCHOOL</b>
<b>Grayson</b>	English	Biracial, U.S.	Male	Urban Public
<b>Biba</b>	Liberian English	African Immigrant	Female	Urban Public
<b>Philipson</b>	English	Haitian	Male	Urban Public
<b>Erika</b>	Spanish	Latina	Female	Urban Public
<b>Ngoc</b>	Vietnamese	Vietnamese	Female	Urban Public
<b>Abjeet</b>	Farsi	Afghani Immigrant	Male	Suburban Private
<b>Carly</b>	English	Portuguese	Female	Urban Public
<b>Juliana</b>	Spanish	Dominican	Female	Urban Public
<b>Phat</b>	Vietnamese	Vietnamese	Male	Urban Public
<b>Luke</b>	English	American	Male	Suburban Public

I operationalized the criteria by defining specific features within the samples (Appendix C). For example, the first criterion of objectivity was measured by noting appropriate use of the first-person, use of slang or other informal language. Criteria two considered logical paragraph breaks and overall organization of content. For criteria three, I looked for credible academic evidence that was related to the writer's claim. For criteria four, I considered how well the writer seemed to understand and interpret sources, and how it was integrated with their own ideas. For all full list of examples operationalized in the WPA Outcomes Statement, see Appendix C. Though the criteria taken from the WPA Outcomes Statement "articulates what composition teachers nationwide have learned from practice, theory and research" (Thomas, 2013, p. 165), it was intended by the WPA to serve as a heuristic, and it not a precise instrument (Kelly-Riley & Elliot, 2014). Recognizing my own subjectivity in assessing these samples and in writing assessment in general, a peer review can serve as an external check (Cresswell, 2007) that reduces the bias from only one reader (Patton, 2002). Before scoring the submitted students' samples, I met with a colleague in the English department who helped oversee the pilot assessment of the university's first-year writing program the year before. Our discussion of the samples was helpful in that it helped to complicate and expand my thinking about the criteria, including what constitutes "critical engagement" with a source. Our discussion of the criteria in conjunction with the actual samples was helpful in refining the specific markers and adding some additional features, yet the subjectivity involved in writing assessment remains a limitation of this study.

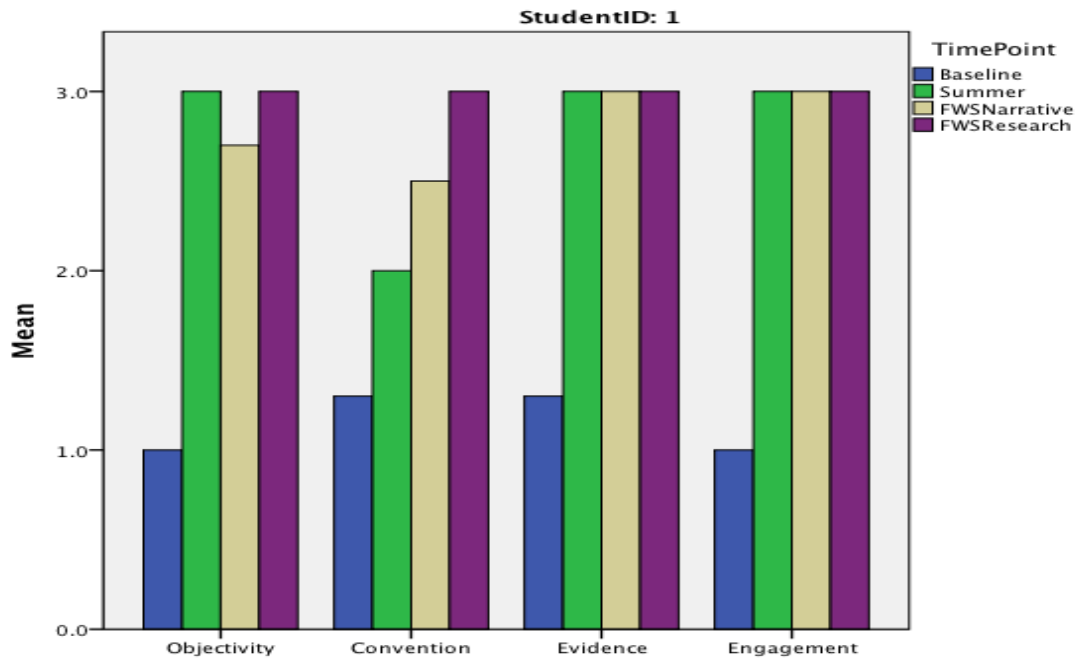
As I scored the subsequent samples, I kept notes about how I determined each score, so that when I compiled the findings I would have a record of my impressions.

Although I originally planned to use a three-point scale to minimize subjectivity, I soon added +/- ratings to capture more subtle differences. For example, in the criteria listed above, if I had a sample that demonstrated appropriate conventions of organization and tone, but had some notable, but not “persistent” grammatical errors, I would rank it a 3- (2.7), assuming that such errors would be considered in a traditional grading schema. It is also worth noting that I did not use the + measure above 3, because there are no A+ grades or over 4.0 given at this university, and I attempted to keep those measures consistent. An example of two scored samples is included in Appendix D.

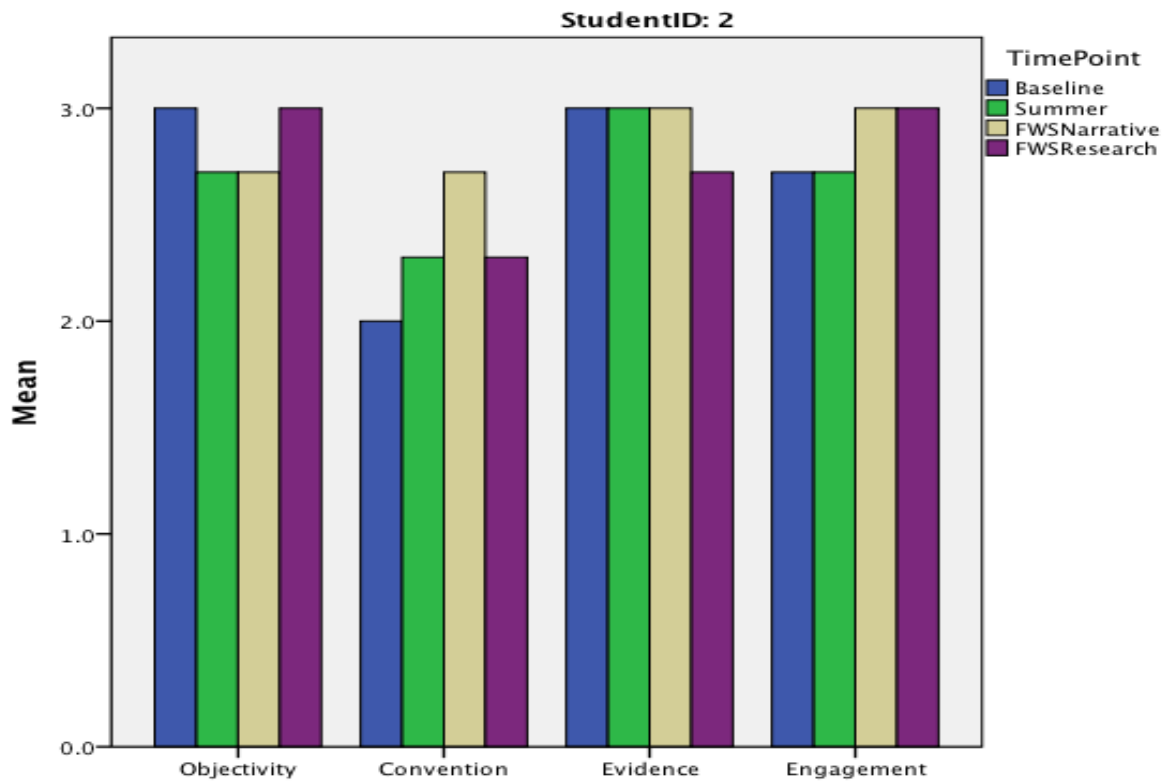
Initially, I scored each writing sample using two different rubrics, the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) and the rubric used in the assessment of our university’s first-year writing program. The latter rubric focused solely on the writer’s use of and engagement with secondary sources. Although I found a high level of consistency between student scores on comparable criteria, I found the WPA rubric better able to capture all aspects of academic writing across assignment types, including personal narratives, which was one of the four samples collected.

This scale and ratings system are not intended to be precise or definitive, and I do not consider the results to be precise or definitive. Results intend to simply provide a general sense of how students’ academic writing changed over the time period of the first year, identify the relative strengths and weaknesses in that writing, and offer some context to ground students’ interview data. The narrative that accompanies each chart attempts to provide some additional factors and interpretation of that development or change.

Low placement exam scores skew Grayson's results (Table 3). He appeared rushed and confused in his response, which clearly did not reflect his ability. However, it is clear that some skills developed over time, and the clear guidelines established by his writing teacher in both the summer and the academic year helped foster more formal writing skills. Since his baseline sample was not representative, it is unclear where his skills were upon entering college. Although persistent mechanical errors undermined his summer research paper, his topic choice on the shifting identity of Jewish characters in *Merchant of Venice* demonstrated strong analytical skills. In first-year writing, the combination of topic choice and clear guidelines allowed Grayson to demonstrate his abilities more clearly. His narrative focusing on the death of a high school classmate, and the response to that death on social media was so powerful that it was selected for the university's online text for the program. His research paper on the history of family relationships in television sitcoms allowed Grayson to bring his own interests in television and screenwriting into an academic context. Through the support of his instructor, he was able to locate and identify credible sources of research that brought his "hidden intellectualism" (Graff, 2012) into an academic setting. Unfortunately, Grayson reports struggling with analytical writing in his other courses where there is less direct instruction. Grayson is currently an English major with a well-established interest in creative writing.

**Table 3** *Academic Language Acquisition: Grayson*

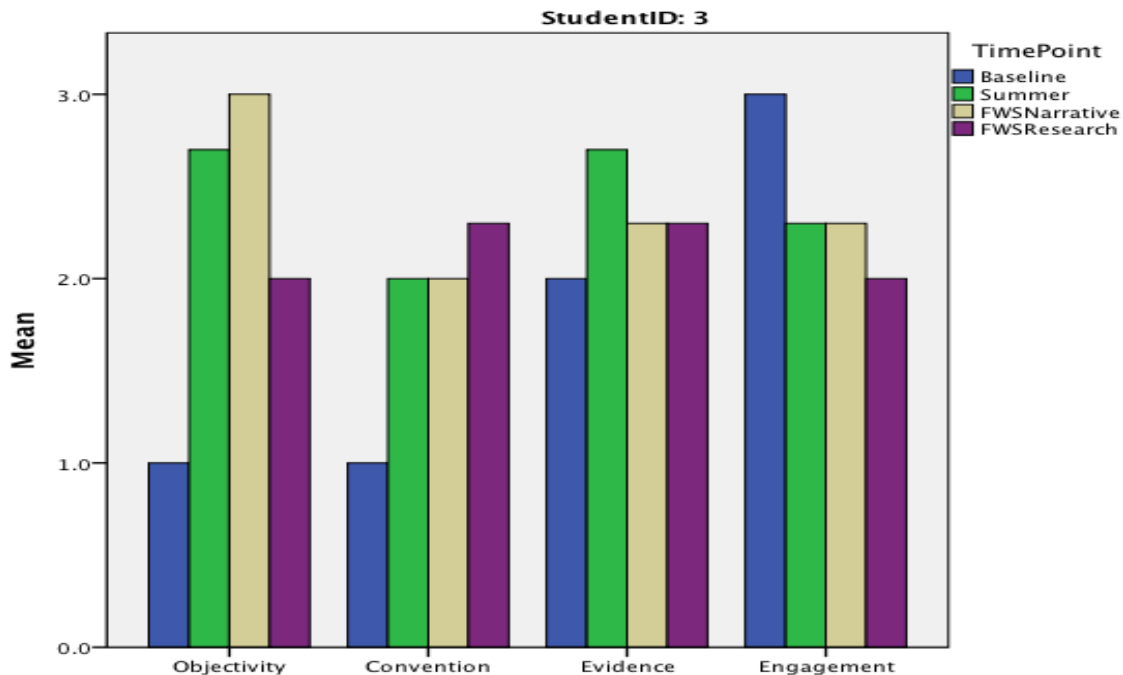
Biba (Table 4) was a strong writer coming in to the summer program. Although her knowledge of some conventions improved, other important aspects, such as her use of and engagement with evidence were strong throughout her first year. Although she was somewhat less engaged with her explication essay on *Merchant of Venice* than her research paper for first-year writing on the rise of for-profit colleges, her critical thinking skills were consistently apparent. Her reflective essay described her struggles and growth during her first semester of college. In each of these examples, she uses concrete, thoughtful evidence of her struggles and growth. She reports worrying about how much of herself to reveal in her writing because of her audience's response, and prefers more analytical assignments. Biba is a student in the business school with an undecided major, though she feels that strong writing skills will be essential to her future career.

**Table 4:** *Academic Language Acquisition: Biba*

Philipson (Table 5) began the summer with low scores on measures of objectivity and adherence to conventions such as paragraphing. However, these skills developed over time, and he made significant gains with the direct instruction in the summer bridge program. His engagement with sources decreased from the baseline, even though his AY research paper focused on the rise of charter schools, something that reflected his own experience. The baseline source, which was a poem, seemed to resonate with Philipson's own difficult elementary school years, where he described himself as the target of ridicule and bullying. It is possible that this connection allowed him to engage more deeply with the source, which is reflected in his high score. Although Philipson continues to face challenges in his academic writing, he has decided to major in philosophy. His

interest in the subject, along with the progress he feels he has made during his first year, gives him confidence that he will be able to handle the academic writing demands.

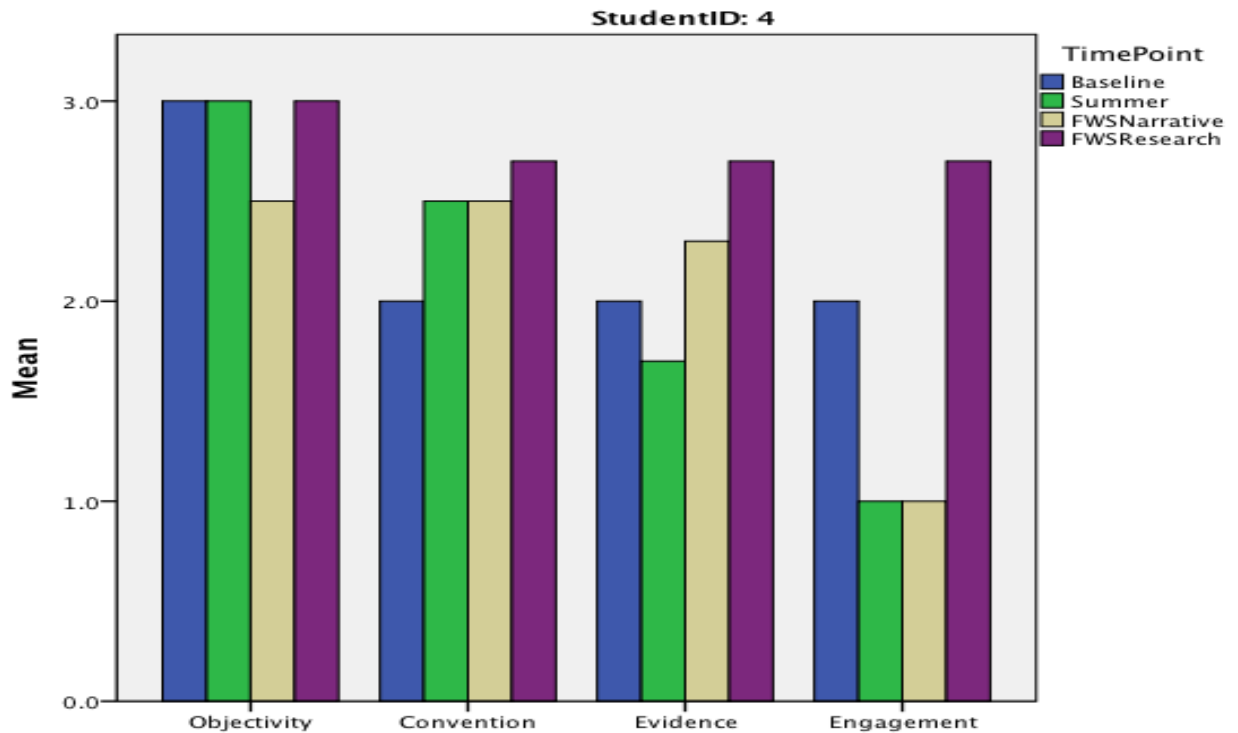
**Table 5** *Academic Language Acquisition: Philipson*



Erika (Table 6) began strong improved in all areas except for objectivity. Her writing teacher placed a particular emphasis on research writing and her strength in that area was clear. Her narrative was something of a hybrid genre, combining stories about her brother's experience in foster care with an analysis of problems in the system overall, which made her scores somewhat uneven. As with other students faced with similar assignments, Erika struggled to cite appropriate references, and seemed unsure of which ideas were her own, and which ones needed citation. For example, she describes a program her bother attended where "They have higher rates of kids staying out of trouble and actually pursuing a higher education," without any documentation of a source. However, her researched essay was a literature review, and much stronger. She seemed to be more successful in assignments that had clear guidelines of genre. Erika is considering

a major in International Studies or working for a nonprofit. As she put it, “I just want to make sure that whatever I do, I’m helping people.”

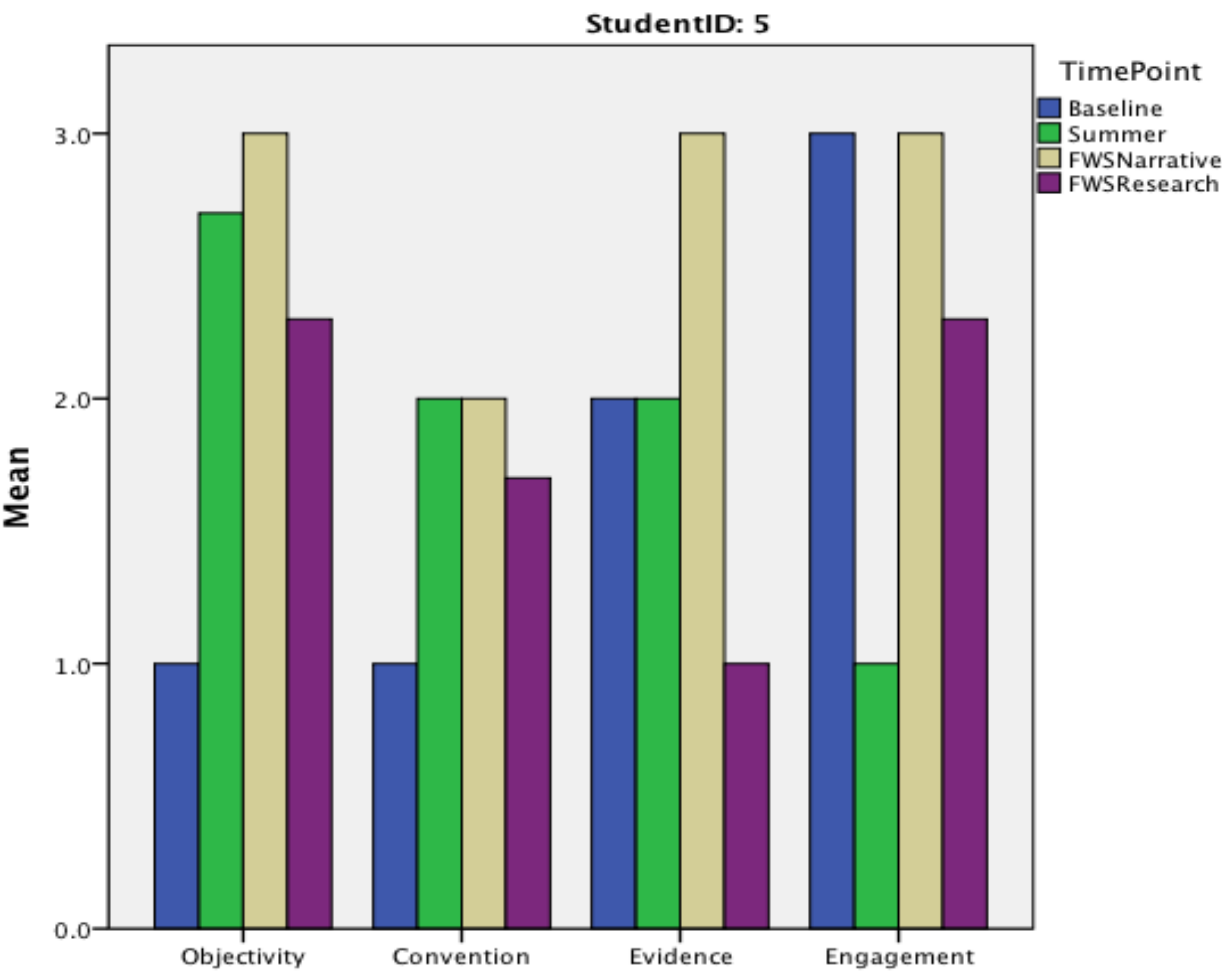
**Table 6** *Academic Language Acquisition: Erika*



The highest scoring writing sample Ngoc (Table 7) authored was her AY personal narrative that described her movement between her home city, often portrayed as impoverished and dangerous, and the college campus where she now resides. Her writing teacher encouraged her to write about this topic, and it is not clear if Ngoc would have done so without this initial push. Her research paper on education during the Jim Crow era showed a solid level of engagement, though her evidence was weak. Her slim citations include the popular film, *The Help* and the A&E television network. She struggled to find and integrate sources her in more formal researched essay.



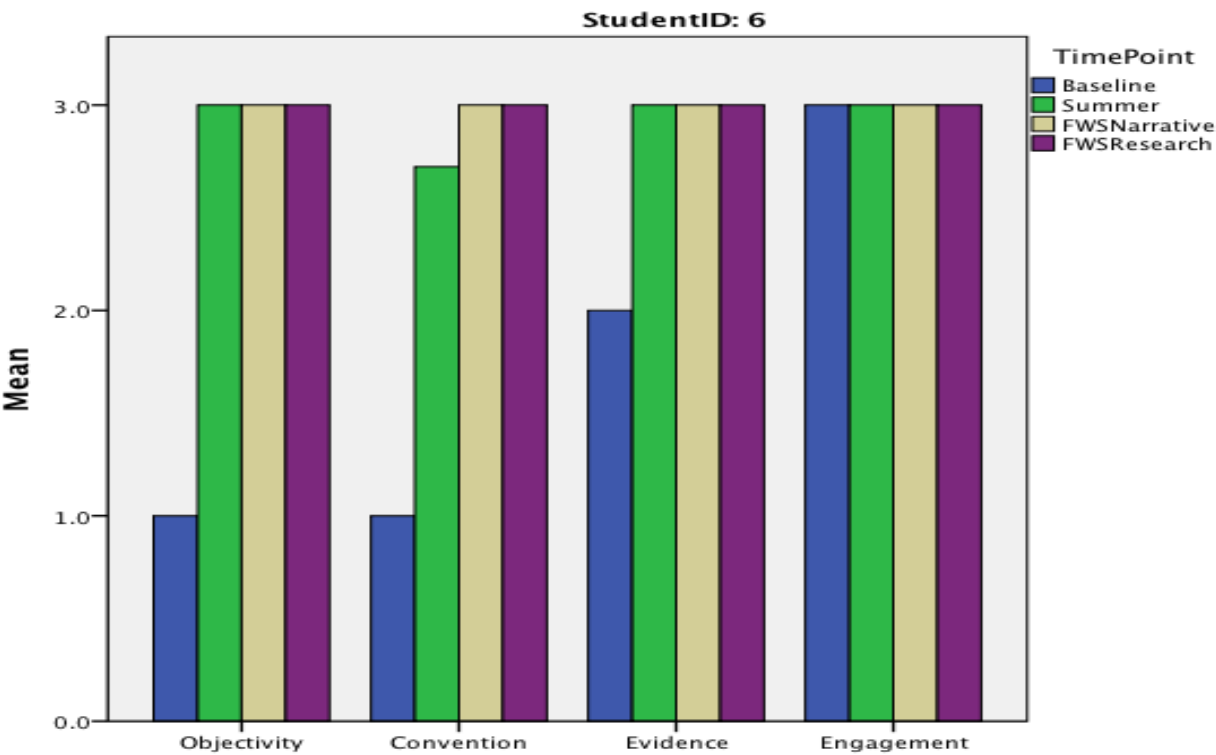
Table 7 Academic Language Acquisition: Ngoc



Abjeet (Table 8) is an unusual student of first-year writing by any measure. Although he faced significant challenges as an immigrant and English learner in middle school, he brings remarkable assets with him to college. Aside from his family’s emphasis on learning, Abjeet is a remarkably self-directed student who reads voraciously outside of class, and writes long letters to his older brother to hone his writing skills. Although Abjeet scored lower on some measures of his placement exam, he was the only student in my memory who compared the poem to a Chekov story. With some knowledge of conventions fostered in the summer program, Abjeet’s own analytical skills were

apparent. From his personal narrative describing his time in a refugee camp to his research paper on the lack of college student’s engagement with ”deep learning” (Bain, 2012), Abjeet is a remarkable first-year writer. He is majoring in Political Science and hopes to work for the United Nations. Simply put, he says, “I want to make the world better.”

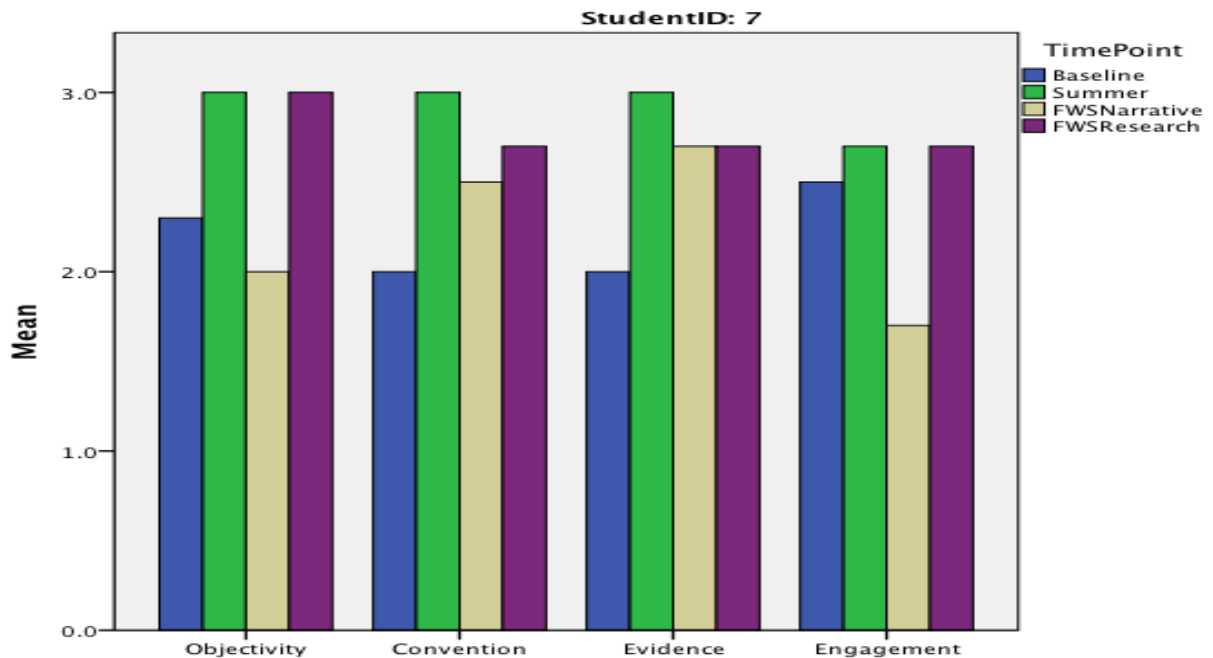
**Table 8** *Academic Language Acquisition: Abjeet*



Carly (Table 9) was a strong student who made full use of academic resources. She described visits to the tutoring center and office hours, and taking two courses with a writing fellow as factors in her success. Although Carly’s research paper from the summer scored the highest of her writing samples, this could be attributed to the nature of the assignments. Her research paper during the academic year was on the rise of vampire culture, and she struggled to find appropriate sources, even with the help of her writing instructor. Her personal narrative detailed her older brother’s depression, violence and

drug abuse—a painful topic in the recent past. Carly clearly struggled to write about this subject in a formal academic context, and though she provided many specific examples from her own experience as evidence, it was difficult for her to interpret them and attain the perspective that formal writing requires. Carly relied heavily on her writing instructors for guidance, including finding sources for her researched essay. With this support, Carly became confident in her writing skills, which she feels are important for her career in Nursing.

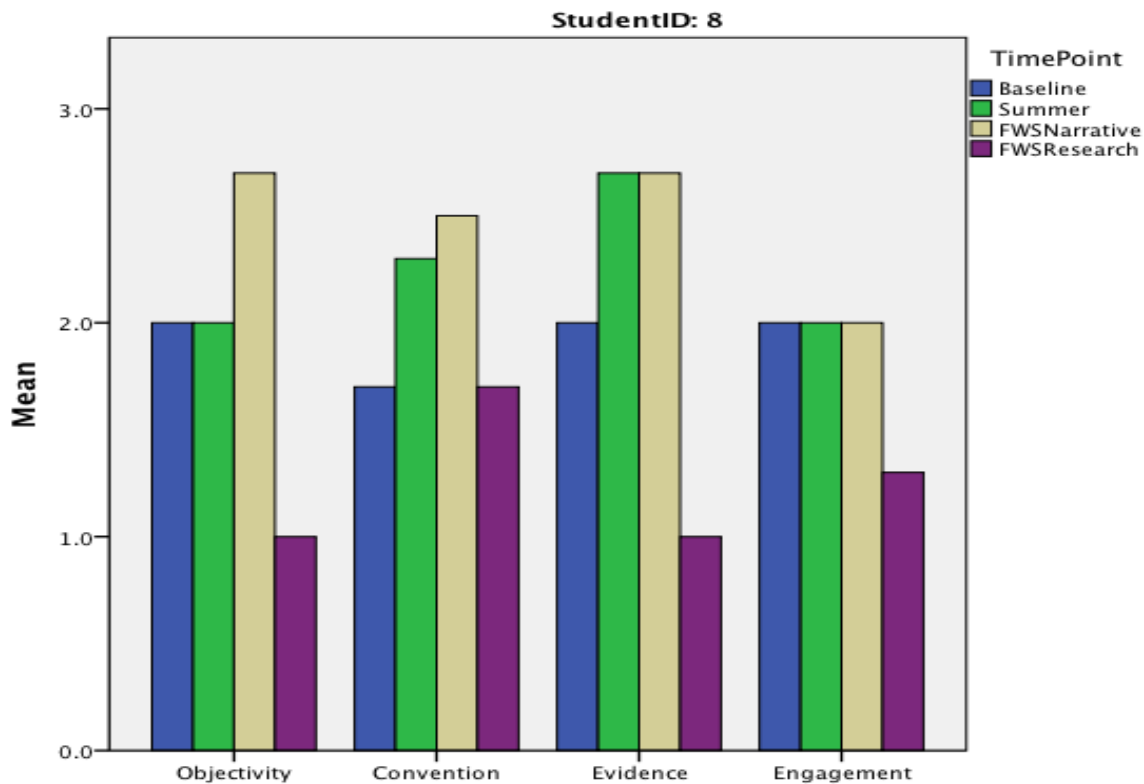
**Table 9** *Academic Language Acquisition: Carly*



Juliana's writing (Table 10) showed improvement in some areas over the summer, but was uneven during the academic year. The clear guidelines for her summer research paper helped her incorporate textual evidence and adhere to formal conventions. She did a particularly strong job on her personal narrative for first-year writing, which described the slow and painful dissolution of her parent's marriage. However, her researched essay for the same class was quite weak, lacking adequate evidence and citations to support her

claims. Her grade on the paper was solid (B+) suggesting that her instructor did not perhaps emphasize such aspects (Ngoc, who was in the same class, showed a similar pattern of strong narrative and weak researched essay). The difference could also be due to Juliana's engagement with the material, since she expressed a strong preference for creative and personal writing. Juliana's major is currently undecided, and she is enrolled in creative writing elective.

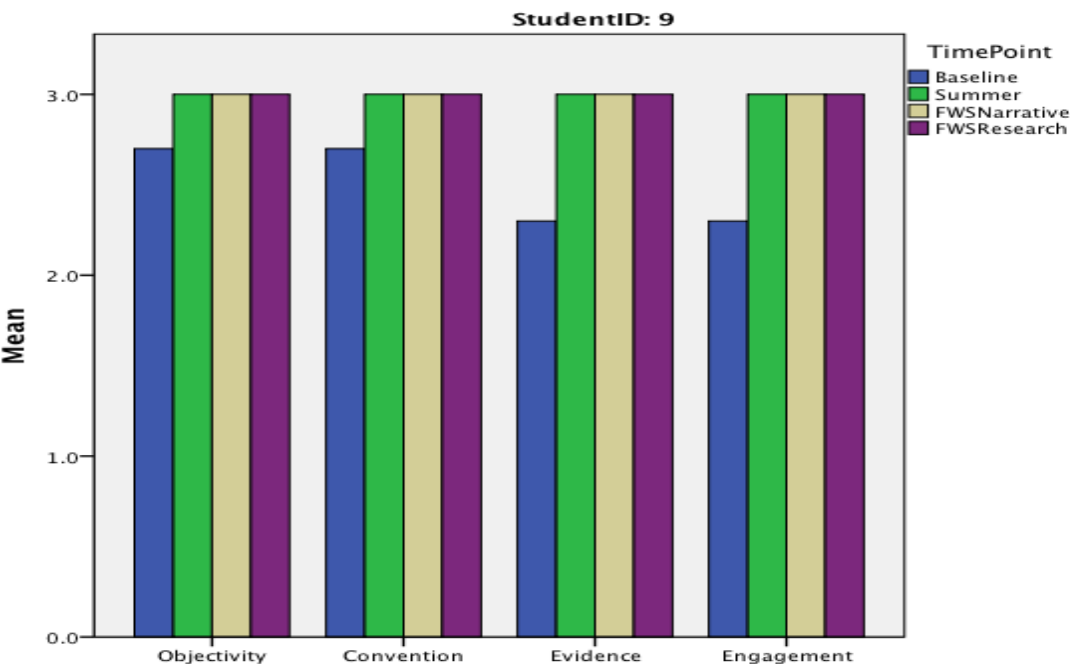
**Table 10** *Academic Language Acquisition: Juliana*



Phat's writing (Table 11) shows initial and immediate improvement from his solid baseline and illustrates strong ability. It also reflects his work ethic and willingness to seek help. In the spontaneous writing sample at baseline, Phat was not able to use these resources. However, throughout the academic year, he made extensive use of resources and excelled in his assignments. As Phat's first language is Vietnamese, he did encounter

some mechanical errors in his initial drafts, but he worked tirelessly to address them. His writing teacher, also bilingual, knew of Phat’s language history, and went out of his way to support him, providing supplemental grammatical and mechanical resources of which Phat took full advantage. The impact of his efforts is apparent in his academic writing development. Phat also made use of the resources provided through the Nursing program, where he is enrolled, including writing fellows, and claims that he visited the learning center “all the time.” Phat feels that writing is essential to both his academic success in his college courses, as well as graduate school where he plans to become a Nurse Practitioner.

**Table 11** *Academic Language Acquisition: Phat*



From the outset, Luke (Table 12) was a solid writer in many areas. He did particularly strong work during the summer program, and consistently during the academic year. His unusual choice of topic for his first-year writing research paper on PDA, as in “public displays of affection” posed some challenges. He struggled to find

appropriate research materials on this topic, though he showed improvement in his ability to engage with them, perhaps because of his interest. Luke felt that his family’s emphasis on story telling and language helped develop his writing skills. He also felt that time management, and spending adequate time on the writing process of each assignment was important, so it is possible that his researched essay, completed at the end of first semester, reflected the increased demands of his workload at that time. Luke also reported that he felt his writing improved with regular practice, which may have been fostered during the intensive summer program, where students wrote papers every week. Luke is considering a linguistics major, and though he has not yet taken a class, he reports that he has studied it on his own.

**Table 12:** *Academic Language Acquisition: Luke*

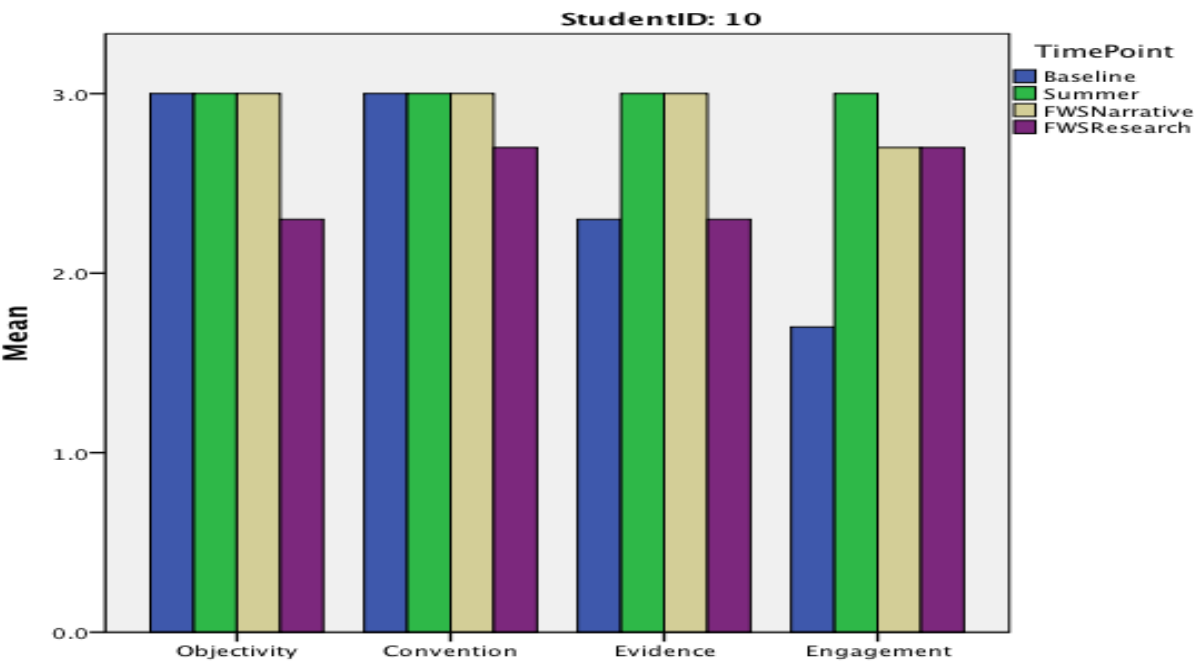


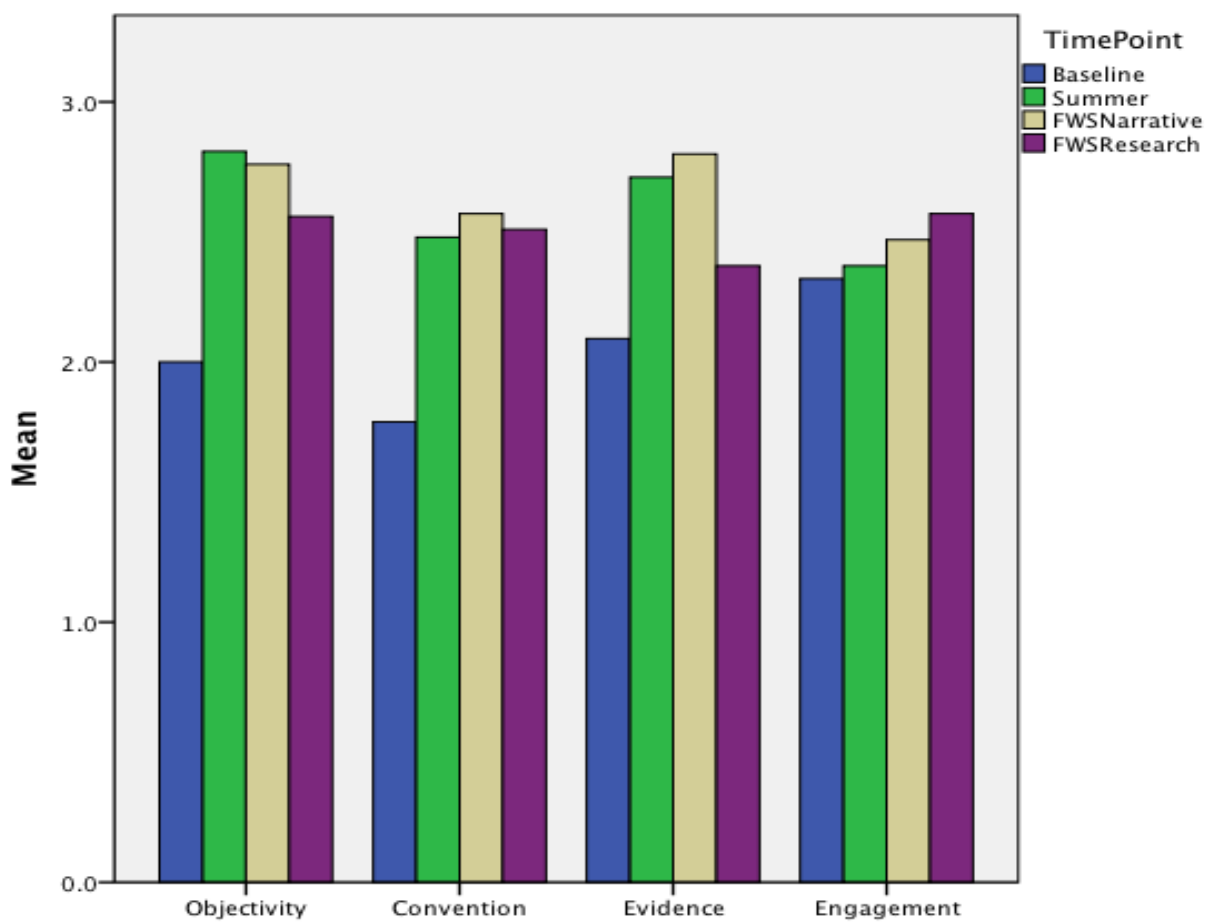
Table 13, which shows an overall pattern of students’ academic language acquisition in the first year by comparing their mean scores, reflects the following major findings: (a) students experienced difficulty integrating their own ideas and research

evidence; (b) personal narrative is often the preferred genre, in part because it allows for personal voice; (c) direct instruction of language conventions (including citations, references) and strategies for integrating evidence and building an argument are the most effective interventions. However, this data must be interpreted with full awareness of its limitations. This study did not consider forces outside the classroom, such as workload for other classes and personal difficulties that certainly may have impacted individual assignments. Although the slight upward progression in all areas from the summer baseline is encouraging, the individual writing samples reveal that there is wide variation within the group over time. It is assumed that the intensive and direct instruction in academic writing provided by the summer bridge program and the first-year writing seminar would result in some improvements. Most students did improve on measures of objectivity, conventions, and evidence over the summer with some direct instruction in their transitional English class. However, students used that evidence most effectively in their personal narratives (time point three) that allowed them to use evidence from their lived experiences. Use of evidence from research sources proved difficult for some students even by the end of the year, as they struggled to find appropriate academic references or to integrate source material with their own ideas. Combining opportunities for writing about lived experience and personal interests with direct instruction of academic conventions seems to be the most effective approach for developing writing skills in the first year.

Students were most successful when they were able to choose topics that interested them on a personal level, such as Grayson's analysis of sitcom families when he has been writing his own TV pilot for years, or Erika's exploration of foster care

because of her families' own experience with the system. Students needed encouragement from their instructor to recognize and pursue these topics as legitimate areas of inquiry. They also needed help finding credible academic sources for their topics, and this support often exceeded what was provided in class or even with brief interventions from the reference librarian staff. Even when sources were incorporated, students struggled to distinguish what needed citation, or how to follow up and interpret sources with their own analysis. More sustained and comprehensive instruction on all steps of finding and integrating academic research with students' own ideas is necessary to bring their voices effectively into academic contexts.

**Table 13:** *Academic Language Acquisition: Overall*





**Phase II: Critical Discourse Analysis of Writing Samples**

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used as both a theory and a method (van Dijk, 2004) to describe and interpret the relationship between language and the social world. CDA examines both specific features of a given text, including grammar and vocabulary, as well as the typical practices of a given rhetorical context (Fairclough, 1993). Although CDA has been used to identify sources of power and hegemony that often go undetected at a textual level, it can also be used to locate efforts of agency and resistance. In this study, CDA was applied to student writing samples to locate such practices, and to recognize areas of strength that may not be valued in traditional assessment.

In this study, I used the CDA template developed by McGregor (2004) and enhanced by Martínez Aleman (2014) for use in educational research. This template was originally intended to provide researchers with guidelines to identify hegemonic practices and power relations at the level of the text. However, it is possible to use those guidelines as a way to identify student efforts to resist those structures, and to assert their own power in their writing. This is what I have attempted to do in the chart (Appendix E) and discussion that follows.

Because the unit of analysis in CDA is the text, and discourse is structured at the sentence level, the chart (Appendix E) contains a quote from ten students in each of the four genres of the writing samples. In choosing the quotes, I was deliberately selective, looking for evidence of alternate cultural capital and student agency at the sentence level. Though I recognize that one of the criticisms of CDA is that the theory drives the data so that “the reading of ideologies is imposed rather than systematic” (Lewis, 2006, p.373), I

stand by this approach. Since it is rare to see students resist dominant discourses, it was important to target such instances. As other researchers who have used CDA, I have combined my selections with other qualitative data, in this case, the student interviews, to provide context. The analysis through CDA should always take place within that context (Gee, 2004). In my selection of quotes from student texts, I was looking for language that reflected the context and experiences from the interviews, as well as moments when students resisted the dominant discourse, words that “speak to what is possible, the affirmative and critical potential of discourse as social, cultural and, indeed political practice” (Vadeboncoeur & Luke, 2004, p.202). There are ten quotes per genre, reflecting all the students in the study and each of the writing samples.

**Topicalization.** There are several ways in which CDA reveals how power is structured within a text. The first is *topicalization*, which prioritizes certain elements of the sentence by placing them in the initial topic position. In some cases, the student would place themselves in the topic position, establishing the primacy of their own control over events that would otherwise subsume them, including “I strived” to overcome obstacles and “I changed” the direction of writing assignments. Such moves assert the students’ own sense of power over circumstances and the importance of their role. Students were also able to use topicalization to privilege aspects of more formal writing, including textual analyses, as when one student emphasizes the role that “Cosby” played in changing the portrayal of African American sitcom families, or that “prejudice” is the central conflict between the main characters in *Merchant of Venice*. Students are able to identify and highlight the ideas and agents they see as having the power in a given text, and are able to express them at the sentence level.

**Agency and active verbs.** Students also expressed their agency in other ways. It was often directly expressed, as in the examples above, particularly with the use of active verbs. CDA claims that hegemonic structures can be maintained through nominalization, the shifting of a verb to a noun, or use of passive verbs, to suggest that things just “are the way they are,” the actors are removed, and the power relationships are unquestioned. However, many students resisted this passive nominalization. In many of the examples noted here, students were the definitive actors in their texts, “striving,” “wiping away tears,” “pushing aside,” “interpreting,” “trying,” and “helping.” It is important to note that students used active verbs even when discussing characters in texts, suggesting that they are concerned with power relationships there too, and seek to uncover them. The verb choice of “strive” came up frequently, with regard to students’ own experiences, as well as characters in Shakespeare, and those students who enroll in for-profit courses as a subject of a research paper. “Striving” is worth noting because of its frequent appearance in the samples, likely because the students have been identified as “strivers” themselves. In the context of their samples, it seems that students define “striving” as persistence and success in spite of obstacles, and attempts of a character to move beyond an established position in society. Students clearly recognize examples of “striving” in literary characters and it comes up as a frequent focus in their critical reading of texts.

**Connotations and presupposition** Such diction relates to another aspect of language emphasized in CDA, which is the particular meanings or suggestions of a given word, often described as *connotations*. *Presuppositions* are used in CDA to describe assumptions that are often taken for granted in the text. Students in this study used connotations and presuppositions that drew on cultural knowledge. The student who

describes college credentials as “cliché” knows that admissions offices are not completely forthright in their statements about what they are looking for in potential students. He understands that colleges actually look for things in applications that they do not explicitly state or ask for. The connotations of the term “cliché” suggest both that the colleges are not being completely transparent in stating their admissions criteria, and that the student writer is aware of it. The writer presupposes his audience will draw on a shared cultural knowledge of elusive sources of institutional exclusion.

Another student drew on the negative connotations of the term “teacher’s pet” to describe the difficulties that she experienced as a talented student in her urban high school. She uses the presupposition that being perceived as caring too much about academics and teachers’ esteem is to risk alienation from peers. She assumes that her audience shares this cultural knowledge. Grayson asserts that *The Cosby Show* brought a Black family to primetime ‘without compromising their culture.’ Here, he presupposes that his audience will appreciate that such compromise is usually necessary. In these and other examples, students use connotations of words to suggest less normative meanings that capture their own experience. Presuppositions are used to value cultural knowledge that is often marginalized or seen as less valuable.

**Modality.** Modality is used in CDA to convey certainty and authority. In the samples, students used their own authority often to counter dominant readings of texts and to privilege subjectivity and lived experience. Counter to the dominant reading of Shylock as either cruel or sympathetic, one student recognizes his “pent up anger” at those who have “disrespected” him. Another student recognizes the desire to attend college, but she prioritizes the reality that for many, work and family responsibilities

make an online, for-profit degree attractive, in spite of the risks. A student's lived experience with the foster care system allows her to convey the emotional reality that many families "do not allow themselves" to think of connections to foster children as permanent as a means of emotional protection within an unjust system. Another student recognizes the negative stereotypes associated with students of her background, but insists that "The past doesn't define you & the future shouldn't be defined for you." It is this critical questioning of norms, and resistance to dominant narratives that makes these students' contributions to academic writing so valuable. This subjectivity and integration of lived experience is essential to upending historical power structures that are perpetuated at the level of discourse.

**Register.** In sociolinguistics, *register* was originally defined by Halliday and Hasan (1976) as one of the defining features of the text that captures the overall response to a given rhetorical situation. It is helpful to think of *register* in terms of coherence within the text, and how effectively it achieves its purpose in a given context. *Register* has also been used to describe the formality or informality of the language in a text, including diction and grammatical choices. However, in CDA, *register* conveys authenticity, similar to ethos in Classical rhetoric—"do the words spoken ring true?" (Martínez Aleman, 2014). CDA identifies words in texts that create mistrust in the reader, usually because they seem inauthentic. Use of 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> person can also be used in *register* in order to distance the speaker from the text and the claims made therein taken as a given.

It is perhaps not surprising that students in this study used register as a means to convey their authenticity and ethos, as claims were often supported by lived experience

and knowledge that was openly subjective. Although it is perhaps less valued in formal academic writing, students' use of less formal vocabulary, such as Portia and Bassanio mentioning "money in each other's faces" suggests that the speaker has an understanding of the text that is raw and immediate; he is calling it as he sees it, in a more authentic way. Juliana's use of the Spanish phrase, "Papi se fue," as the "simplest way possible" to describe her father's abandonment, also captures the immediacy of that emotion and truth. In fact, students' adherence to the "I" pronoun, often seen as a less formal means of expression, is also a testament to this authenticity. In many areas of academic discourse, this authority is discouraged through prohibition of the "I" pronoun. However, students privilege their own lived experience and subjectivity as the basis for their knowledge. The examples in which students used 2<sup>nd</sup> person, including, "the past doesn't define you" and people "must know" the power of language, express impassioned beliefs that the text earnestly attempts to impress upon the reader.

CDA provides a toolkit for examining power structures at the level of text, and exposes how social practices are enacted at the level of language. By examining how students utilize and subvert these structures, it is possible to not only understand some of their conventional errors (Shaughnessy, 1977), but to recognize a conscious effort to identify and upend such structures.

### **Phase III: Themes to Emerge from Student Interviews**

Analysis of student writing samples using both the WPA Outcomes Statement criteria, as well as Critical Discourse Analysis provided some answers to RQ1, which asked how students acquired academic language during their first year of college. In order to answer my second research question, which asked how students perceived this

acquisition process, I needed to ask the students themselves. I conducted semi-structured interviews with ten students in April of 2014. Although I had hoped to receive enough writing samples to allow a broad choice among different students, the response rate was too low to allow for this selection. However, the inclusion of ten students still meets the response rate of between 30-40% suggested for qualitative studies (Patton, 2005), and the samples reveal a broad range of student abilities and experiences. The interviews lasted approximately one hour, and though I had prepared questions that were approved by the IRB, the participants often spoke about their broader experiences during the first year, and our conversations had many “side trips” (Corbin & Morse, 2003, p.343). This can also be attributed to the fact that most of the participants had a prior relationship with me, either as students in earlier classes, or as an advisor/ administrator. I am not sure how this relationship influenced student responses, but it is important to recognize that it may affect the findings, and I must be responsible for attempting to understand what they were (Patton, 2002).

I had anticipated broad student responses following a pilot interview conducted with a student who had completed the STB program the previous year (2012). Although I had focused my questions around academic writing experiences, the pilot student often used these questions to transition to larger issues around the academic and personal adjustment to college. This is not surprising, given that such topics are likely more salient and interesting to students, beyond the specific focus of academic writing. I revised my interview questions after the pilot, in an attempt to make them more targeted, but the responses did not always follow. It is clear that writing is tied to many other aspects of

academic integration and students' sense of their own shifting identities as they adjust to campus.

As a result of the interviews, three major themes emerged:

- Adjusting to college writing was difficult even for students who perceived their academic backgrounds as strong, due in part to the unclear expectations, and may reflect student efforts to resist academic power structures that limit their agency.
- Seeking support ("help seeking") was difficult because students saw themselves as self-directed and autonomous learners, a perception and behavior fostered by their educational histories.
- Shifting between home/family language (discourse) to academic language (discourse) was recognized by students, and something they have done throughout their lives.

### **Transition to College Writing**

**Background in high school writing.** The first prominent theme to emerge from the interviews was the difficulty developing academic writing when the expectations are unclear, even for students who felt they already knew how to write. Of the students interviewed, 7 of 10 students felt they had a strong high school background in writing, including AP classes. Three of 10 felt their high school background was weak. It was not surprising that most students referenced their high school's emphasis on test scores, and the related practice of timed essays with little opportunity for revision as inadequate preparation for college writing. Even students who felt they had a strong background in high school had to adjust to the expectations of college writing, often because the guidelines were less clear. As Biba put it, "No...I don't know if it's just me, but I just



felt like I wasn't ready. And I was like, kind of scared, but I don't know." Erika described this difficulty in more detail, including the unclear expectations and assumptions of her college professors:

I went to this really interesting high school... It was very rigorous... We had the highest standardized test scores in the State... For some reason, I never had a problem writing papers in high school. It was like, no problem, and I would just bang it out, and get really good grades. But for some reason at [college] I was really nervous about the whole thing. I was really nervous about writing essays. In high school they didn't really like *stress* citations, when you were writing an analytical essay, you would just write the page number. And I remember I wrote an essay for one of my classes at [college], and I just kind of continued the whole high school thing, like I just put the page number. And my professor was like, "Don't you know how to cite?" and I was like "Whoa." I didn't really realize that I was doing this wrong my entire life, basically.

Erika and other students often emphasized their lack of familiarity with formal citations, but it is clear that was not the only convention that required clarification. At times it seemed the focus on citations was a concrete way to address the other more nebulous academic conventions that were expected by their instructors, but not clearly defined. Students reported they often had little guidance about written assignments, including genre, audience and purpose. Students often blended genres, such as incorporating personal experiences and opinions with research, and were surprised to learn that was not permitted. For example, in Erika's research paper on the foster care system, she states, "I believe that if we are funding this system, that we should also

assure that it is used in the most beneficial way to the children.” Although this idea clearly comes from her own extensive experience with the system, she struggled to articulate that view as a formal argumentative thesis. Expectations of formal tone were unclear to students who used phrases and expressions that were clearer reflections of their own voice. For example, when discussing college admission criteria, Philipson shifts to a direct address to his audience: “SAT scores, combined with the GPA, also tell them about your skills academically.” Luke includes in his research paper the point that “In Peru, I was told by one individual that PDA abounds because the “public is the only place where you can do stuff like that.” As Erika stated in her interview, the fact that formal citations were expected came up frequently as a surprise to most students. Without other instructions, students relied on what was expected in high school, often with disappointing consequences that resulted in feelings of embarrassment and self-doubt. It should come as no surprise that students fell back on high school strategies, as all of these students were very successful there, so those strategies had worked. However, even with the transitional bridge program, the lack of clarity around particular assignments across a variety of classes made the transition to college writing difficult for most students. Students were most successful when assignments were explained in some detail, and when revision allowed opportunity to redirect efforts that were misguided.

**Learning the rules.** In transitioning to college writing, students often relied on the “rules” they learned in high school or earlier, and referred back to them in college, which often did not provide direct instruction. This direct instruction included models of successful assignments, clarification of whether or not they could use first person, types of citation required, and resources that were incorporated into the course. Students who

reported such direct instruction in college relied on it heavily, though it often came in the transitional bridge program, or in academic support classes. For example, when asked how she found sources for a research paper in her first-year writing class, one student explained, “I used the thing that showed us in {STB}. It was hard because I forgot most of it, but I re-looked it up, and I mainly used that.” The “thing” that she referred to was a library instruction course guide prepared for the summer English class that included links to relevant databases and models of search terms. She held on to that resource and drew on it in her first year classes. Another student took a class second semester that focused on study skills, time management, and planning for long-term assignments. Here she explains how the direct instruction in that class helped her navigate academic writing:

I’m not an outline person. I just do my thing. But [in support class] one of the skills you have to do is like, chunk by chunk, so that’s kind of relieved my stress. It’s basically like, look at the question, make sub-questions. Then it’s like your thesis. Then part two is like you make index cards answering the questions, put the citation in the index card, then your rough draft, put your citations in your rough draft, and your put your citations in that. So it’s kind of like forces you to put it in at each step. Because I didn’t really have the skills before, I was just like, I’m gonna type.

Demystifying and explaining the “rules” was essential to student development of academic writing. It is important that these rules were broken down and laid out for students directly, as students were often uncomfortable asking for clarification or explanation of “rules” they were expected to already know. Many students felt that it seemed “everyone else” in their classes already knew what to do. Although this is likely

not the case, this sense of not knowing what their professors assumed they knew, and that they alone lacked, deepened their academic difficulties and sense of difference from other students in their classes.

It is worth pointing out that two students admitted resisting the “rules,” although they acknowledged that they might be helpful. These two students, Abjeet and Grayson, had been successful in high school by breaking the rules that were set for them, and often excelled because of their own intellectual curiosity and creativity. Though this resistance is important form of alternate cultural capital (Martinez Alemán, 2014; Yosso, 2005), it was not always helpful in academic success. Although this strategy has continued to work for Abjeet, it is clear that it has become an obstacle for Grayson in his more traditional college classes.

I’ve always hated the five-paragraph essay, because I don’t just want to explain something. I want to say what I thought about it. And a lot of times if you’re doing it for a grade, you can’t do that... I never liked the rules, but I understand them, I follow them. I know why they’re there, but I don’t like them. [Abjeet]

Grayson describes his ambivalent relationship with rules, or what he described as, “the required boxes” in this way, “I still don’t like them. I don’t know if they are helping me. I think they may be helping me.” Although Abjeet will likely be able to follow his personal interests more closely in advanced coursework, and for now he is resigned to following the rules, in order to be successful. It is important to note that Abjeet was strong writer, so he was able to successfully complete the five-paragraph essay form, though it is possible that this resistance is a defensive response to uncertainty.

This seems to be the case for Grayson, who is not inclined to follow the rules either, but also struggles to understand them. He opted to take some advanced writing courses, such as Screenwriting in his freshman year, but without having some of these basic rules of academic writing clarified and practiced, he reported struggling in those classes. He may be somewhat naive in that he assumed that his years of writing a TV show on his own prepared him for an advanced creative writing course. Grayson spent a good deal of our interview talking about “my show,” and when I pressed him, I realized both the limitations, and the personal investment he had in his creation. “I’ve always wanted to write TV, and that’s always been my show. Since I was 10....it is written. But it’s not on TV. Someone will buy it someday. Probably HBO, because I’ve always pictured it on HBO, since I was 10.” Grayson registered for both a Screenwriting class and an Advanced Screenwriting course (simultaneously) as a first semester freshman, before completing his English core classes, and against the advice of his academic advisor and his summer English professor. Though he is clearly a talented writer; he had an essay from his first-year writing class selected for the online text for the course, he does not always exercise sound judgment in his course selection, and may overestimate his current abilities in that context. Grayson may think of himself as an advanced screenwriter based on his lived experience, and resisted the typical course sequencing as a result.

**Practice.** Several students reluctantly wished that they were required to write more for classes, knowing that the practice would help, but admitting that they did not have time to do it on their own. Students often felt that when they had to write more frequently, writing came more easily and they improved. However, many core level

courses do not require extensive writing assignments, and student experiences of academic writing vary with the number of courses in which regular writing was required. Students recognized that although writing requirements were burdensome, they would be beneficial.

I know I would be [a better writer] if had more practice. And I feel like if I had little assignments to write. Like if I could, or I wanted to, I could probably write something every day. And I've tried doing that. But you get busy with other things. But I think if I did that, I'd be a way better writer. [Luke]

Students who had more writing intensive classes in one semester than the other frequently discussed this difference, and how they “got used to writing” when they were required to do it. This regular practice seems to benefit writing development, in spite of students’ understandable reluctance to take on more work.

### **Voice in Academic Context**

Even though most students perceived writing in college as difficult, they all recognized that it was vital to their academic and professional success. Students provided examples from entrepreneurs to nurses who need to write effectively in their professions. One student eloquently tied this to her larger sense of educational purpose:

I just want to make sure that whatever I do, I'm like helping people. Like giving them a voice, they don't have, because I feel like I'm really good at being that voice. Like when I'm speaking for someone else. You have to know what to write, and how to speak right, and you're on your way. [Erika]

At least in their initial transition to college writing, most students preferred to write essays that were personal, or at least that they could bring their own ideas and

experiences to. Clearly this is related to a difficulty with college writing reported later, that students found understanding, or mastery of the primary content of an essay, such as philosophy or Shakespeare, an initial obstacle in approaching a writing assignment. Student's sense of understanding his or her own stories made them easier to write about, and personal papers did not seem to have the same "rules" as more analytical academic writing. As Juliana claimed, "I personally prefer personal papers because it's your life, and you can just write whatever. Analytical papers, you have to...not everybody has the same interpretation, so you really have to support it, really like good with it." Other students felt they could bring more enthusiasm to topics that were relevant to their own lives:

I like personal...I don't know, you get to like, there's just more passion behind it. You know how people can read literature and there is passion with literature too. But I feel like when you've been through the experiences, it's kind of nice.  
[Phat]

This preference for personal writing even included writing about painful topics. It was striking how many students opted to write for their academic classes about deeply personal, painful topics, including death, drug abuse, and gang violence within their families and home communities. Some students acknowledged the risks, such as Biba's concern in writing about her immigration and mother's death, that "I didn't want to them to feel bad for me," but felt that she really did not have anything else to write about. After all, she noted, this was a "personal narrative."

However, other students felt that because their experiences were in the past, they were easier to share. Philipson wrote a personal narrative for first-year writing class

describing his own behavioral problems in middle school that led to his suspension. He explains his willingness to share his story in this way, “Now that I’m older, and I’ve grown from them [the experiences]...I feel like people wouldn’t judge me as much as they would have.” Some students also noted that writing, as a particular medium of expression, allowed them to communicate more freely. Erika notes, “I have a hard time speaking about my personal things? But writing you can say things that I wouldn’t necessarily say out loud. I think that’s great.” Others felt that writing about experiences gave them control over how the story was told. One student, Juliana, writing about the dissolution of her parents’ marriage, said, “In that story, I didn’t end with them getting back together, but I could. I could have ended it that way.”

Personal writing allows students to draw on several important forms of alternate cultural capital, including knowledge gained through lived experience, knowledge drawn from their familiar and home communities, as well as their agency and control over the content (Martinez Alemán, 2014, Yosso, 2005). It is likely that the ability to utilize these alternate forms of cultural capital was a factor in their preference for this genre. It is worth noting that in spite of the challenges presented in academic writing, students recognize its value in their academic and professional futures, *and* see it a means of personal expression that can bring their perhaps atypical experiences into the academic context in a meaningful way.

### **Difficulties with Writing in College**

**1. Difficulty in understanding content.** A common theme when students explained their difficulties with college writing came from the subjects they were writing about. Most students expressed some struggle to understand subjects such as philosophy



or literature, and this limited their ability to write about them effectively. Erika described her trouble in her philosophy class, as well as her sense that she was an exception within the class, “I’ve never really done anything like that before, and I’m just like trying to understand it, and everyone in the class, like gets it. Like, I don’t know what’s going on.” Others noted that analytical papers required them to refer to these difficult texts for evidence. This proved challenging because of the dense content, as well as the volume of reading required.

You could say [philosophy papers were the most challenging], in a way, because I’m still like learning philosophy, and for me, when it comes to my philosophy papers, I don’t really like try to go back to the text, like for Lit, I usually try to base it on my own opinion. [Philipson]

And that was the hardest part for me...its very evidence-based writing. So [Shakespeare] obviously says this this and this, but then at the same time, as a student, I was like, I *think* that’s what he means, and then it gets confusing.

[Luke]

It doesn’t come from your head, it has to come from the book, and there is a lot of reading. It’s something I’m working on because in my high school, in a year we’d read three to four books, but in [this] class, we’ve read like six in a semester. It’s more compressed. [Phat]

Here students capture the dual difficulty of not being able to rely on their own voices and lived knowledge-- something that was clearly valued in their discussion of personal writing-- and the requirement to use material that is dense, complex, and unfamiliar. Students would often shift to including their own opinions in essays, without supporting

evidence from the text, and this was penalized in an academic setting. However, mastery of that textual evidence was often challenging, and students did not feel they knew it well enough to write about effectively. This two-fold challenge came up frequently when students explained the difficulties of academic writing.

**2. Instructor expectations and assessment criteria.** One of the greatest struggles students described with academic writing was their own sense of uncertainty around what the professor wanted or how they would be graded. In any given rhetorical situation, a writer must address audience and purpose, which often eluded students in this study. This student seemed to find little rationale for both high and low grades, and found they were not correlated with the amount of work put into a given assignment.

Sometimes I do well on a paper, and I didn't even know. And they'll hand it to me, and I'm like surprised, because I did it kind of last minute. Other papers, whereas I've taken some time, and I hand it in, and I haven't gotten as well as, as good a grade as thought I would. [Philipson]

Students also had trouble deciphering instructor comments and feedback, and found it difficult to translate general comments into concrete strategies for improvement. In this case, a student expresses frustration that she was often told her writing was "too vague," when it seems the same could be said about the feedback she received:

And a lot of feedback that I got was that I was too vague. But I was like, what do you mean? How else could I say it? And I never really got that. It was just kind of like, figure it out yourself... Yeah, and it was true with my research papers too, because there were like, three. The feedback was like, "Good, but a little vague. Good, but a little vague." And I was like, what else can I say? [Carly]

One student captured an overall confusion about what “analysis” actually is:

I’m not even sure what I’m supposed to be doing. Like, I don’t know what he’s talking about specifically by analysis. And I don’t know, but I felt like I never used to have this problem. And it’s not just him, like in general; I have a problem with it. [Grayson]

Clearly, a more thorough description of instructor expectations, including rubrics and explicit defining of terms would help students to approach writing assignments more effectively. In addition, students would benefit from more detailed feedback and the opportunity to discuss that feedback further with their instructors. Many students were unaccustomed to extensive feedback in high school, and had difficulty making sense of it in college, even though they clearly needed it to improve their skills. Students appreciated feedback that was pointed and specific, a need that is compounded by the fact that most students were uncomfortable asking their instructor for further clarification.

**3. Translating ideas into academic language.** Even when students had a sense of their subject and felt they knew what they wanted to say, they struggled to capture their insights into acceptable forms of academic writing. This mysterious act of translating personal voice into academic language persisted through the academic year.

The hardest thing, I think, is not necessarily thinking about what you want to say, it’s just putting it in a way that matches the academic language that they’re looking for? So I had these ideas, but then they wanted me to word it in such and such a way. [Luke]

This struggle often made writing an unpleasant experience, even for those students who had previously viewed it as an area of strength.

I really really enjoyed writing when I was in high school, I got like awards for it, but here, I don't like writing... Sometimes the hardest part is finding out the right way to say things, because she's like, if you have a professor that's like a hard grader, I don't really have like, the vocabulary sometimes? [Erika]

Because writing is essential to academic success and also provides an outlet for personal expression in an academic context, it is vitally important that students learn how to translate their insights into academic language. This difficulty sometimes took the form of just knowing what others wanted to hear, similar to theme number one. Students recognized that this limited how much of their own ideas were acceptable in a formal paper. In the following two examples, the first student Abjeet, was able to follow the instructions for the assignment successfully, even though he was frustrated at having to suppress his own voice and intellectual curiosity:

Well, I've learned that you have to write what that professor wants you to write for that assignment. So like if I want to write about this one paragraph in this book, you can't because you have this specific question, you have to stick to the specific guidelines. But I don't usually worry about it. You have to figure out exactly what they want, and I don't like that. [Abjeet]

As noted earlier, Abjeet was able to follow the rules and navigate the assignment successfully, and will hopefully have other opportunities to explore and write about his own interests in future courses. This is a slightly different problem than the one Carly and others described, in which the need to balance the expectations of others made their writing sound like someone else's.

[In] first year writing...we would do these groups' sessions, and I would get so

much feedback, and sometimes it was like, this is how I wanted it to say? That was the thing that I really had to get used to. Trying to incorporate the feedback that I got, but also keeping my paper how I wanted it to sound. [Carly]

It is important to note that this is a frustration felt by many students in peer writing workshops, and may not reflect the struggle to develop academic language. However, it is possible that the experience and language differences of students in this study made that feedback more difficult to hear and utilize. As in the “resisting the rules” theme noted earlier, many of these students have become successful because they have resisted the often low expectations of others and have worked hard to retain their autonomy and agency. Some students resisted giving this up even in an academic setting where it would cost them some measure of success, in the form of a higher grade. However, it is also likely that asking for extra help can be seen by students as a form of difference or deficiency, and they prefer to proceed in a way that is familiar, rather than taking on the difficult work that such change would require, especially with so many other demands.

**4. “Basics, like time management”.** Many students found that the challenges they faced more broadly in their transition to college also impacted their writing skills. Finding adequate time to write and revise a paper was difficult, even when students knew it would help.

I learned a lot about writing, especially like the process of it. But I found it more difficult to actually do the process of it they way you’re supposed. So you’re supposed to write the first draft, and then revise, and then proofread it, revise it again, right? But I usually wound up doing it a day or two before, just because it’s busy or whatever. If you want to be a good writer, it kind of comes down to the

basics, like time management. And I haven't been the best example of this either.

But if you can do that, you can really start writing early and that definitely helps.

I've done that to a degree with some of my papers, and that definitely helps.

[Luke]

This awareness will certainly help students approach their writing assignments in the future, even if it came late in their first year. The value of academic skills such as planning and time management in writing was recognized by students like Luke, who were successful writers, as well as those like Philipson, who struggled with writing throughout the year.

I would say to get a good head start on your papers, especially at the beginning of the year. I feel like I would have done better if I did. Especially in the beginning of the year when you have less work, I feel like that messed me up first semester.

[Philipson]

These insights are hard won by many first year students, and may pose additional challenges for students who did not experience long-term writing projects in high school, as was the case for many students in this study. However, it is also worth noting that many of these students were able to learn and apply these lessons during the critical first year. Philipson has tentatively decided to declare a Philosophy major, because he came to love the material. When I asked him about the extensive amount of writing required within that major, he felt that he had learned to handle it in his first year courses. Though it is possible that he may find those assignments more difficult than he expects at this early stage, it is notable that the writing load was not a deterrent.

However, it is also important to recognize that for many students, the stakes are higher for academic failure. Rather than just struggling with a disappointing grade, many of these students noted the pressure of the expectations of their families and home communities.

[T]hey're [family] like, "you're the one, you're the ticket." And I'm like; this is a lot of pressure. Because what if I'm like, there was a time, points in the year where I was like, I don't want to go to college. But I didn't really have a choice. And first semester, when I was doing really bad, I was like, I'm failing, and everyone is depending on me. I was losing it. But now I've got it more under control. [Erika]

This additional burden may impact student attitudes toward themselves and their abilities, and may make it more difficult for them to seek help.

### **Sources of Academic Support**

The second prominent theme that emerged from the interviews was the difficulty that students had in asking for academic support. This difficulty stemmed from a variety of sources, including a deep sense of self-reliance, the novelty of needing help, embarrassment, and uncertainty around where to go, and even articulating what they needed help with. Unfortunately, it is also often the result of being unaccustomed to having support available in struggling schools, the history of institutionalized racism and limited resources. This struggle persisted even though the summer transitional program makes great efforts to explain and connect students with resources. In general, students who were able to utilize these supports were more successful academically.

Clearly, students still struggle to get academic support in spite of university efforts to explain and expand resources. Some of these reasons are driven by students' sense that they are responsible for their learning, a sense that was likely created by years of education that required a high degree of autonomy and self-direction. Ngoc explained her perception as, "It's my writing and I should be able to get through it by myself... it's just like really difficult for me to just like, ask for help." Abjeet noted:

I've had tutors and stuff, but I can't really say that it's developed my writing. To be a good writer, you just have to really think about what you want to say, and this sentence here, and then this sentence here.

In both these examples, the students felt that the responsibility to improve their writing fell squarely on them. Some of this comes from the sense that because writing is tied to their own experiences, ideas and voice, it is a solo pursuit. This attitude is more detrimental for a student like Ngoc, who struggled with some basic skills in her writing, than a student like Abjeet, who was a strong writer and could address many of his difficulties through additional time and effort.

An obvious source of help, it would seem, is the learning center. However, the university's tutoring center received mixed reviews. Some students had heard from peers that it wasn't helpful, and that the help was uneven, depending on the tutor. For obvious reasons, peer testimony is a powerful influence. Several mentioned that they felt the tutor would not be able to help them because they did not know the book they were writing about. A recurrent theme was that students needed more direct help than college tutors/teachers will provide, and feeling frustrated by that.



When I went to [the tutoring center] last semester, some of them hadn't read the book that I was doing, so I had to explain, like give a whole summary, but then when I had a specific question, they wouldn't know because they hadn't read the book. [Phat]

Of course, the learning center staff is not expected to read every book, and they would make a compelling argument that they can support students effectively without having done so. However, the perception for the student is often that their ability to help is hindered, and this can be particularly difficult for a student who has finally mustered up the courage to ask for help. This difficulty is related to the larger issue of struggling to articulate what the student needed help with, and to ask in a way that would be acceptable in the often vaguely defined academic relationship with their instructors.

I don't know, like, [professors] say, come talk to me with anything but...it's cause I don't know what to ask. I don't know how to like, frame it. I don't want to ask, "what's going to be on the test?" because you're not going to tell me that. [Juliana]

This comment was particularly striking because Juliana was a student in my literature class first semester. I had always thought I had made my openness to help clear, and yet the difficulties in asking for help remained even in that context. I was similarly surprised to hear Biba's frustration with her writing tutor in the summer bridge program. These writing tutors spend 30 minutes per week throughout the summer working with the same students, and even this framework, which seems supportive, had definite limitations.

"She wasn't really helpful with like, telling me, what I needed to do. Maybe I was asking for too much. Maybe I was in like, that high school mode of like, needing more." Biba

recognizes that this shift from direct instruction is certainly an adjustment for many first year college students. However, the impact of not seeking help may be more pronounced for students with weaker high school preparation or who have not yet been familiarized to the norms of academic language. This too, presents a linguistic challenge of how students should ask for the help they need in appropriate ways, ways that other students from other backgrounds may have mastered by this point. It is worth emphasis once again, that the students in this study have succeeded thus far largely *because* of their independence as learners, so asking for help is unfamiliar and often difficult.

When students are offered direct support in specific ways, they recognize the benefits. The university has a writing fellows program in which writing tutors (usually graduate students who have worked as tutors in the learning center) are matched to a particular freshman class, and work with instructors and students on tweaking and clarifying their written assignments. Although this partnership is not always successful, as Biba described above, it was helpful for other students, such as Carly and Phat, who were writing for unfamiliar assignments in their Nursing classes. It is likely that direct instruction was more assumed in this context, since the course content and forms were unfamiliar to most of the students in the class, regardless of academic background.

[I]n my Intro to Nursing class, we worked writing fellows twice. And that was super helpful. Like even APA format, because I've never done that before, ever. Especially on the second paper, that was a lot of theory, and not very interesting. And my writing fellow was amazing. She recorded the session, and sent it to me, and I just felt like I knew what I was doing, when I passed it in...I was like, I got it. It was great; it was a great paper... She wanted specific, concise examples

within a seven page limit...and she would give me some of her examples, just to show me, and then she'd be like, now make your own. I really, really enjoyed it. It was really helpful. I got my first paper back and I got like an 84 and I was like, eh? And then with the writing fellow, it was really intense, and I think we met twice, and I got a 98 on it. [Carly]

Overall, it seems that students benefit from academic supports when they are introduced to them directly, as in tied to a class, and the tutor or instructor provides concrete strategies. More abstract feedback is not only less helpful, it can frustrate the student who then feels more removed from understanding both the content and the instructor's expectations. It is also important for programs to realize that simply introducing and explaining sources of support may not be enough, and that more direct steps may be necessary for some students to avail themselves of these resources, rather than the more comfortable step of asking their peers for help.

**Peer support.** Students' use of peers for writing support is complicated as well. On the one hand, peers are the most accessible source of help, both practically (late nights, in the same dorm room) and emotionally (not as threatening to ask). However, many also recognize that their peers are struggling with their own work, and are reluctant to add to that load. Biba worried, "I don't want to like, burden my friends with like, feeling like they have to help me with my homework." Others recognize that peers may be limited in their ability to help because they are also unfamiliar with the primary material, and may find it difficult as well. Philipson noted, "It's like very difficult to get the understanding of it, especially when there's like a lot of reading as well." Students continued to recognize the limitations of support from their peers, especially by the end

of the academic year when they had seen the results. Luke reflected, “I had my roommate read it, and he said it was good, he just changed a few words, things like that. So I wish that maybe I had gone to someone who would have critiqued it better?”

In spite of these clear limitations, peers seem to provide a helpful testing ground for students to transition between informal and academic language, as well as translating their own ideas into academic context. By “talking out” their ideas with a supportive peer, students were able to transition to a more academic language. Erika described this process with her roommate from STBP, “I can say to [her], I want to say it like that, and she’ll be like, why don’t you say it like that? And then I think, I should write that down!”

This is clearly similar to the rationale behind peer groups in freshman writing classes, which has solid support in the literature (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, 1991), particularly for students with backgrounds similar to those considered in this study (Seifert, Pascarella, Goodman, Salisbury & Blaich, 2010). However, these students may be less comfortable working with students who are not moving between languages or have very different backgrounds. Sharing with students in that context may leave them vulnerable and feeling further marginalized. In many cases, students in this study felt overwhelmed by the amount of feedback they received in class-based peer workshops, and uncomfortable sharing their work with students who they at least perceived as stronger writers. Both the benefits and pitfalls of peer group work should be considered when implementing in a context that involves students from different writing backgrounds.

**Shift between Languages of Home and School**

One striking theme in this study is how sophisticated students are in their recognition of the language shifts they are required to make between their home communities and academia. They recognize such shifts as necessary and inevitable, something they have done their whole lives. When I asked students if they shifted language between home and school, they seemed to find the answer obvious.

I automatically do it anyway, it's not like I feel like I have to. It's mostly with my sister, or like, anyone in my family, I talk more African I guess... So I do that, but I don't feel like I have to, either talk down, or pretend to be smarter... No, I don't feel like I do that here either. I say stupid stuff all the time. [Biba]

When I talk on the phone with my friends, or [family], we don't talk about *Morning Becomes Electra* [a text he is reading in Lit class]. I don't want to talk about that stuff... because I tried to collide the two, and as much as I think I want to, I realize I don't want to. I don't want to talk about one thing with the other thing. [Grayson]

I think I have to transition to like different slangs when I'm here and back home. I don't technically feel like I'm two different people, but I always feel that I have to transition who I am, depending on who I'm talking to. I feel like I'm more of my [home city] when I'm speaking to [friend from home/STB], so it's not just if I'm back home, it depends on who I'm talking to... I wouldn't say it hurts me, but it's different sometimes and it sticks out... I'm gonna have to go through it anyways. I'm going to be approaching different people my whole life. [Ngoc]

In Biba's example, she sees the language shift as inevitable, but not necessarily as one from high to low. It is more of a shift between groups that she has a different "insider" language with—the more familiar "African" language of her family, and her friends at school, who she is comfortable enough to be "stupid" with, implying a less formal, academic language. Ngoc's description of different "slangs" is similar, though she specifies that she can only use that slang at school with her friends from STB. The fact that her home language "sticks out" when she is in the classroom suggests that she has not yet mastered the academic language she sees as normative in that setting. It is not clear if that is Ngoc's own perception or if has been reinforced concretely. Though Grayson's comment is more about content than language itself, he feels the need to keep his home community separate from that of college because it seems that they would not understand or appreciate each other. As much as he feels that he would like one to "speak to" the other, his sense is that that he cannot and should not "translate" between them.

Since several of the students (40%) speak more than one language, they have a deep and complex understanding of its shifts and subtleties, including the difficulties of translation, and the differences in language "levels".

Even in my own language, Farsi, on TV, it's almost like they are speaking Shakespeare. It's just this incredibly elevated, every word, I just don't understand a single one. I can speak to my mother in Farsi, but I cannot speak that. It's so different, it takes so much education to get to that level. We just speak it like to a friend, like on the street. But I can't understand the Farsi they speak on the news...It definitely changes. [Abjeet]

Yeah, definitely. When I'm with my family and friends from home, it's more free. We can just say whatever you want. When it's a more formal setting, you have to like, use big words all the time... [but] it's never been a problem for me. It's like the same thing, I can move from Spanish to English pretty easily. [Juliana]

However, the shift between languages is also tied to larger shifts between home and college, and those shifts, like language, are closely tied to identity. Although most students did not perceive the shift from home to school *language* as problematic, this larger shift was often difficult. This was the case for one student who took a class her first year that studied the social problems of the city where she was from.

So it made it really weird to be in class when a lot of people categorized "these people." Like I was part of "these people" and now I'm in class with them. So at first people are trying to figure out like, what are the issues, and they're not really aware of these things. And it was really hard to just sit there. I felt like I couldn't really talk to people in my class? Like, you guys are not going to get me. You're not going to know what it feels like to live in \_\_\_\_\_. It was really weird, and I felt like I couldn't really be myself at first. I just felt like I was always really quiet. And I was always going home every weekend. And if I wasn't going home I was like working like crazy. But now this semester, I like talking in my class, and I'm myself, but it took a while. I had to talk to a whole bunch of my mentors. [Erika]

This student spent a good deal of our interview talking about the problems she encountered with writing for this particular class. Not only could she not bring her own voice and experiences to the assignment, she was also required to include evidence from dense philosophy texts that were difficult to understand and connect to her lived

experience. Although the rhetorical situation of the assignment posed many challenges, it also made Erika confront how different her own life had been from those of her classmates, and how these differences were expressed in an academic context.

Some students used language shift as a way to demonstrate how college required them to distance themselves from family and friends, even though they appreciated the opportunity, saw it as vital, and were willing to make the shift.

A lot of my friends...like joke around, "Oh, I guess you have to go to [college name] now" like you can't talk with us. They're joking around. But I feel like there's a difference, there's definitely a difference. [Even with family] It hasn't been too bad, but there is definitely two different environments...it helps that my sister has been through it. I think she is better at balancing the worlds...it's hard because if my mom comes to campus, it's hard because she's very confused.

When we came for admitted [student] day, she was confused... Yeah, she's very happy, but confused. [Phat]

Students' sophisticated understanding of the role language plays in defining identity often pre-dated their arrival on campus, and many seemed conscious of the choice they were making, as well as the potential dangers of that choice.

I do know that when we used to visit colleges, we would always try to count how many Black people there are? And then we would talk to them, to see like, how it was. I remember this one guy, he was speaking really formally, like academic language and I remember one of my friends was like, he's not really Black...[some students here] sound, I don't know, higher than--Talk above people. Think highly of themselves. And you can tell it by how they speak. [Biba]



By the end of the first year, students could recognize the change that had taken place in their language and identity. Their overwhelming consensus was that they were proud of themselves, and thought that change was positive, though clearly, there are compelling reasons to view it in a positive light, especially because many students saw “positivity” as key to success. Students may see this change as positive because they were the ones who made it, and feel they have to accept the consequences of that decision. Students in this study were also planning to remain at the institution, so they continue to be invested in it. Finally, in speaking to me, an instructor/administrator who is representative of the university, students may feel obligated to portray their experiences in a more positive way. Although it is impossible to account for the factors at work in each student’s response, it is important to recognize that responses are shaped by these and other factors (Patton, 2005). At this early point in their academic careers, recognition of the change itself was apparent, even though students may not have had the opportunity to fully process and reflect on that change.

I’ve changed. Through my writing, kind of. Cause like, I have to write formally. And sticking to it. Instead of just like when I was writing [the paper about her home city] for first year writing, I went back and forth with like, formal and informal. And I think there is a difference now. [Ngoc]

It is important for those working with these students to recognize the gravity of the change we ask students to make in their language and identities when they attend college. Although students are willing to make this change in order to attain professional success, and often see it as vital to their families’ and home communities’ future as well, the shift is one that is felt by the students and reflected in their academic writing. A sense

of ownership of this choice, as well as their own determination to succeed for personal and larger gain, seems to help students feel more comfortable making this shift.

### **How Students Persisted**

**Positive attitude.** Many students connected their strategies for academic success to the larger struggle to engage and persist in college. Students frequently referred to “positivity” as a factor in their persistence in college, and it is important to recognize this attitude as an autonomous effort to control their reaction to circumstances. Many students saw their attitude as a form of agency and self-determination. This positivity was not shallow and superficial, but deeply conscious and hard fought. Students may have overstated this aspect to me, as a teacher and administrator who clearly has a stake in the institution. Students may not have felt comfortable relating the extent of their despair or frustration to me, in particular. However, it is noteworthy that students did share experiences of great difficulty, including depression, during their first year, but seemed to find a change by the end of the year. These findings should be considered in light of the context and other research that explores student perception of their experiences, especially while they are still undergoing that transitional process.

I love it here. I mean, it's hard. I'm not going to put all my struggles on [college name], because even if I weren't at [], I'd still have my struggles anyway, so I'm not going to allow that to cloud my vision, because I really like being here... stay positive and have positive people around [me], because that's like, really important... Just being negative can have such a great impact on your work. And I don't think people realize that. If you're feeling negative, or like feeling bad,

there's just less motivation to actually work, and you have to work to get a good grade. [Biba]

In this example, Biba connects larger supports and personal well being to academic success. Recognizing that she has some measure of individual control over how she approaches challenges gives her some measure of autonomy and agency. This sentiment was echoed by Carly, who describes her success in college as a fight that she feels she is winning.

I feel...stressed. But I'm proud of myself. I'm from \_\_\_\_\_... I was the only one who went to a place like this... and for me, at least in my case, I'm still doing well, even though I'm really fighting for it. I'm really proud of myself. [Carly]

**Support from STB peers.** Perhaps not surprisingly, many students noted that their peers were an important source of support during their first year, especially those peers they met through the summer bridge program. As Biba noted earlier, these relationships provided a sense of well being that impacts their academic success, even if it just helps them from feeling defeated and isolated in their struggle. The value of this particular type of support has been documented in the literature (Arzy, Davies & Harbour, 2006). Biba went on to say, "I know you should go out of your pocket and meet people who are different, but I feel like sometimes it's not bad to go toward people who are like you...who, like, I guess can help you with that." Erika made a direct connection between peer support and her own persistence, "Those friendships [from STB] are really strong. Because when I struggled at the beginning of the year, I wasn't the only one." Juliana expressed a similar sense of the unique understanding among her STB peers, "Literally, all of my friends are from there...[they are my support system] if I'm failing a class, I'm

pretty sure I'm not the only one." Carly and Phat noted that their STB peers were "family" away from home as well as an important source of academic support:

I'm just so grateful for the [STB] program and the connections that I've made.

Because a lot of people say if you go to [STB], don't just hang out with [STB] people, but they are like my family here...that's how I stay at home with them here. When I'm having difficulties with my courses, I go to them. They are my support system. They are a group that I'm really lucky to have, because they help me study for this, because they know where I'm coming from. [Carly]

[Y]ou know when you have someone struggling with you, it's reassuring? It might not improve your grade that much, but it improves how you feel. You have a better mentality. So those small things do help, but not directly. You can't quantify it. I've made friends that aren't in [STB}, but some of my friends from [STB] are ones that I go to and talk to... and other people wouldn't even know what [STB] was, so it's like a secret bond, and I feel like that's a perk. [Phat]

Though it may be problematic if students connected to only peers from STB and were unable to make friends after the program, this did not seem to be the case. Most students asserted that they had made other friends on campus, but their closest and most supportive relationships on campus were STB peers. Much like models such as the "posse programs" (Singh, Chresfield & Salau, 2012) these relationships form a stable "holding environment" (Kegan, 1982) that provides strength and support for vulnerable students during their first year. Although most of these students were not in the same classes as their peers, they were able to benefit from the common experiences and shared struggle. This can be viewed as an alternate form of cultural capital in that individual

students can resist isolation and self-doubt through the community and shared experience of their peers.

In addition to peers, one student, Erika relied heavily on adult mentors that she had from high school, who provided her with personal as well as academic support. Although Erika was the only student who mentioned high school mentors as an important source of support, the direct support they provided her during her first year is worth noting:

I'll start going, "I need your wisdom." My college counselors were like my mothers, so every time I email them they are like quick, on it... Yeah, I have a lot of moms everywhere. Like the executive director of my high school was like my advisor, and I emailed her to say "I am struggling so bad in [philosophy], I don't understand like Plato and Aristotle, and she legit was like, send me a book. She was like, "what's your address?" and she sends me a book. She was like, read this book, it will make so much more sense.... Yeah, it made so much more sense.

In this case, Erika's mentor sent her a book that helped demystify the difficult content of her philosophy course. Erika evidently felt comfortable enough asking these women for help in direct ways, something that eluded other students in terms of campus resources. It is likely that the past shared relationships with these women created a foundation of trust that allowed Erika to share her feelings of self-doubt (Arzy, Davies & Harbour, 2006). In addition, the high school mentors were responsive, which was not . Although this level of support may not be possible, or even desirable for college students developing their autonomy, it is perhaps more important for these students, whose parents are not as likely to intervene on their behalf (Lareau 1987, 2000). Mentors through the summer bridge

program are offered to students, but the program is optional and introduced late in the summer, before relationships can be well established. Erika's experience shows that if mentor relationships are established before the struggles of first year, students may be more likely to take advantage of them when they are most in need.

### **Conclusions**

By late second semester, when I interviewed these students, most seemed to feel that they had made it through the most difficult part of the adjustment and had persevered beyond their setbacks. Phat noted the danger of losing a positive attitude and falling into despair over academic pressure, a combination that can defeat vulnerable students.

Don't lose that positive spark. Because for me, mid-semester, it died out...schoolwork. You're just drained, in a different setting. Even when you have moments of fun, you're so tired that they're not as enjoyable... Yeah, it's really hard. Those were bad days. But I'm dealing with it better. It's slowly improving.

By the end of their first year, many students recognized that connecting to resources was helpful, and it would have helped them to seek help sooner. This came in the form of both direct academic tutoring and more general personal support. Students often noted that they knew of these supports from the beginning, but it took time to take advantage and recognize their value for their individual circumstances. Students may also finally realize that asking for help is not an admission of failure, though no one described it that way.

[STB] would say, you have [tutoring] Center, and you have us, and they said it all the time, and I was like whatever. But there really are so many people that want you to succeed, that I've been taking advantage of so many tutors, study

groups...APA format threw us, because only two of us had done that before...we talked a lot to our TA about it, and we had a discussion board for it on

Blackboard, and our TA even made a little video about it and put it on YouTube.

They gave us so many resources. [Carly]

However, Carly's experience in the nursing program provided many opportunities in which students did not need to go out of their way for academic support; it was provided to them directly and consistently. Carly here notes APA format particularly, and the fact that her program provided direct instruction in a convention of academic writing that was unfamiliar to her and her peers. This ongoing, direct support, where there are no "stupid questions," provided to students with minimal effort on their part, is linked to academic success. As Juliana noted, "The hardest thing is getting help. Like I know there's many resources and stuff, but it's hard to get yourself to go to office hours."

For the transitional first-year, we need to bring office hours and much more direct support, directly to the student in terms of academic writing and broader academic challenges. Only then will students learn to trust those resources to be accessible and helpful, and eventually to trust themselves to seek help and find those resources that will help them succeed. It is also important to note that students found writing for their classes an important way to bring their unique voices and lived experiences into a setting that can too often seem unwelcoming and alien. The need for academic writing skills for academic and professional success and the opportunity for meaningful inclusion requires that universities provide direct instruction and opportunities for engagement in first-year writing.

**Alternate Frameworks of Cultural Capital**

Although the previous section of this chapter focused on normative measures of academic language and difficulties students encountered in acquiring it, this is not the only means of assessment. As Critical Race Theory reminds us, seemingly objective measures of value, including the CWPA criteria used in this study, are often based on White, Western norms (Yosso, 2005). Although written academic discourse is a reality of college work, this study attempts to recognize aspects of their writing that have value not typically measured in the classroom. Yosso (2005) terms these values “alternate cultural capital,” because they serve as a form of currency that can serve individuals who may lack other forms of dominant capital. In both their writing samples and their interviews, students demonstrated all six forms of alternate cultural capital: familial, aspirational, linguistic, social, navigational and resistance. These forms of alternate cultural capital draw on community cultural wealth, and students seemed well aware of this value in their lives, and are explicitly proud of its influence. In this section, I will discuss these findings of alternate cultural capital present in both writing samples and interviews.

**Familial capital.** Yosso (2005) defines familial capital as value and strength that is drawn on from one’s family. This can include awareness of community history, memory, and cultural intuition. Moreover, it can provide a broader sense of responsibility and kinship to the larger community. Most often, students regarded their families’ determination that they attend college as a source of strength and motivation. Even when students experienced these familial expectations as pressure to succeed, they recognized that without it, they would have been more likely to give up.



They [parents] sacrificed their lives so their children would have a brighter future and they have so far succeeded, and my brothers and I never forget it...I definitely don't want to take all the credit. A lot goes to my parents—it wasn't a choice in my house it was like, you're going to college. [Abjeet]

This expectation of student success from family and home community was perceived as both pressure and a vote of confidence. That they could and had to succeed in college came up frequently in both the interviews and the writing samples.

Often students discussed how they had learned important values from their families, including a sense of responsibility for others. Carly used her baseline sample to recount a story of how her father gave doughnuts from his shop to a group of homeless men who waited outside each early morning. One of the men returned to tell her father that he had found a job, and Carly connected that success to her father's kindness, a form of kinship and community that Yosso (2005) suggests is related to familial capital, "[H]is story told me that generosity; honest generosity can empower others and push others to do great things."

Many students carried more family responsibility than typical students at this college, including financial contributions to family expenses and tuition, care for younger siblings, and navigational support for their parents. Although this responsibility was often a heavy burden, it often seemed to provide students with a sense of their own competency, as well as a deep responsibility for others.

When I was in high school, I never thought about myself, I was always like, my family, I have to do this for my family...Like for me, at my house, if I didn't do

stuff, it's not going to get done. It's hard to leave my family, for them to figure it out. [Erika]

It is not surprising that Erika cites "helping people" as her main ambition, and most of the students in this study felt a similar sense of duty to benefit others through their educational opportunities.

Familial capital was apparent even when students were describing painful memories. In these recounts of family hardship, students often emphasized how they grew closer to their family and community or how they had personally grown stronger and more capable as a result. Carly's personal narrative described how her older brother's mental illness and drug addiction became the family focus, which made her more self-sufficient at an early age and responsible for caring for her family.

Everyone seemed to forget about anyone who wasn't [my brother], especially me. [My brother] needed help, support, and love from all of us. And being his sister I knew I had to step up and help my parents watch over my brother and guide him into the right direction. [Carly]

Biba also expressed the strength she developed at a young age after her family's emigration from Africa and her mother's death.

I feel like I've built up this persona- I don't want to sound fake- to be the happy person, and like, the stronger person in the room, I guess. Not like intensively, but like emotionally, I...want to be there when other people are feeling down, because I feel like I can do it, and suppress my doubts or whatever enough to help other people. [Biba]

Although students are no doubt choosing to view hardships in a positive light, this attitude fostered a sense that they had the strength and supports to endure other challenges, such as the adjustment to college.

Like I definitely have to try harder now than I used to. But I think that with all the stuff we went through, in high school as a family, I think it's easier for me. Had we not gone through what we went through, then I would be like that [struggling].  
I feel like I'm more grounded. [Grayson]

Students had a sense of themselves as “stronger” and “grounded” as a result of hardships they endured. Although this did not always translate to academic success, it reinforced a sense of their own capability that they carried with them to college. Some students linked their families directly to their academic success, including Luke's claim that his family of “storytellers” led to his aptitude for writing, and Abjeet's assertion that disagreeing with his parents over religion cultivated his early argumentative skills. Although most students reported that they did not use their families for direct academic support, they did depend on their encouragement and “check ins”:

So throughout high school, my mom and step dad always expected me to do well, and then when a report card came in, it would be like, why did you get his? But now they'll just occasionally ask me how I'm doing, and they'll be like, okay good. [Ngoc]

One student even sent papers home to his Grandma to proofread. Although he recognized later that was not the best strategy, it is important to note the support he felt from her, as well as the confidence he had in her ability to improve his college level work. This evidence is important to consider in light of the perception that parents of low-income,

FGCS have families who are less involved, or that cannot provide important support for their college student (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; 2001). The students in this study felt and depended on family support, even if it came in ways that recognized their competency and independence. Although literature on parental support of college students often suggest parents who hover and intervene on their students' behalf (Lowry, 2001), the students in this study benefitted from their family's belief in them, and the strength that they had developed as part of their families' histories.

**Aspirational capital.** These experiences demonstrate that familial capital can lead to aspirational capital, a form also recognized by Yosso (2005). Aspirational capital enables students to maintain their hopes for the future, even when confronted with obstacles. Erika described one common example of this connection between familial and aspirational capital in her baseline sample, "My mother's story of coming to the United States alone and providing for a family inspires me to do good. It not only teaches me to not only be a strong individual but also want more for myself." Students knew from experience that success does not always come easily, but that it was still possible. Though many college professionals claim that Millennial students are fragile "teacups" who are crushed by their first setback on campus (Lowery, 2001), the students in this study were accustomed to struggle and persevering in the face of it.

I still knew that life was not always going to be about what makes us comfortable. There are times we have to feel uncomfortable and go through adversities, and if we are smart we will learn to use these challenges to our advantage. [Biba]

Abjeet even connected adversity to learning, suggesting that the only way real learning comes is through breaking down assumptions and being pushed out of one's comfort

zone. This is an experience that many students in this study have had before. “I don’t think I’ve been challenged until someone really offends my beliefs... That’s what you have to do, you just genuinely have to break down someone’s beliefs, their entire worldview, and have them build it back up again.” There is evidence that experiences of adversity inform student writing in their critical inquiry of topics that have affected their lives. Students chose topics such as the foster care system, educational inequality, imprisonment of the mentally ill, and the rise of charter schools in low-income neighborhoods, which are all realities that have had a direct and often negative impact on their lives. Students’ willingness to address these important issues in their writing is a source of capital that should be encouraged, even when their writing skills are stretched to handle the complexities of these topics.

Aspirational capital is also important to students’ attitude toward adversity, and the deep sense of hope that has been fostered throughout their lives. Abjeet describes his survival in a refugee camp in for three years as developing his sense of belief in something better as, “[M]ostly my incredibly optimistic imagination lead me to great thoughts of happy situations.” Even students who grew up in areas that would be considered hopeless because of limited educational and employment opportunities were able to find a sense of optimism there that informs their own outlook, such as Ngoc’s view that “The passion and hope within this city has grown deeply onto me. It has created a huge part of who I have become.” Although it is clear that such optimism is not always possible, and many low-income, FGCS are not able to persist in college in spite of overcoming past obstacles, this form of capital is vital to students who do succeed.

**Linguistic capital.** Forty percent of the students in this study had a first language other than English. Although in many academic settings in the U.S., including college campuses, this is seen as a deficit, it is important to consider the value that bilingualism may hold for students (Lvovich, 2003; Orellana & Reynolds, 2008). Though most research focuses on the K-12 level, it seems that in college as well, and perhaps more so, “vast repertoires of linguistic skills often go unseen and untapped.” (Martínez, Orellana, Pacheco & Carbone, 2008, p.422). Yosso (2005) notes that students who lack traditional forms of capital may come to school with multiple language and communication skills, due to the linguistic complexities within their home communities. Specifically, “they must often develop and draw on various language registers, or styles, to communicate with different audiences” (Yosso, 2005, p.79). Such awareness is described at the K-12 level as “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992), though the benefits clearly extend to higher education. This was a consistent finding in the interviews, as well as in the writing samples used in this study.

As noted in the previous section, these students seemed quite aware of the shift from language of their home communities to the academic language that the transition to college required, and it was clear this type of shifting was familiar and conscious. Although Biba’s first language is Liberian English, she described how another student wasn’t “really Black” because of his formal language, and that she speaks a more “African” form of English at home, especially with her younger sister. Abjeet described the different levels of Farsi, from the elevated form spoken on the television news that he could not understand, but his mother, who was educated in Afghanistan, could. He was able to speak a less formal version with his family, and with people “on the street.”

Abjeet used this example to explain his familiarity with language shifts, or code switching when I asked him about them at college. Juliana also described the difference in home and academic language as “the same thing” as adjusting from her native Spanish to English when she moved to the U.S. in the third grade, and that “it’s never been a problem” for her. Clearly, the confidence that students have in their ability to acquire academic language comes, at least in part, from the linguistic capital that comes from having done it consistently throughout their lives.

Moving between languages also helps students to develop skills that they would not likely have developed otherwise. One clear example of this are students who acted as translators for their non-English speaking parents. Abjeet still retains this role out of his three brothers, and explained why he has that role, “Maybe it was because I was a bit competitive, I wanted to show them. I wanted the approval of my parents.” It seems that Abjeet realized that being a translator for his parents was a form of capital within his family, which would win him respect from his brothers and esteem from his parents. Mastery of language here is recognized as a form of power. Although the responsibility that comes with translating for parents can be burdensome, it is important to recognize that valuable academic and social skills can be developed in students who are required to do so at a young age (Orellana & Reynolds, 2008). Research at the K-12 levels suggests that students who use these translation skills take them for granted, but explicitly encouraging these students to apply these skills to their writing would elevate the visibility and subsequent value of these skills (Martínez, Orellana, Pacheco & Carbone, 2008). Such potential benefits must be valued in a higher education context, as it is critical that students draw on the full range of their linguistic skills for academic writing,

not only as a means of improving written discourse, but also as a means of sharing linguistic talents with their peers and professors.

A final aspect of linguistic capital among this group of students is a bit more difficult to capture. In many cases, familiarity with the complexities of language, and the benefit of having the full resources of another language to draw on, made these students write in richer and more evocative ways. Bilingual students have broader cultural contexts from which to draw references, imagery, and experiences (Gee, 1996). Researchers who study these students at the K-12 level note that many have “literate underlives” (Reyes, 2009) that are not recognized in the classroom, but can serve as the foundation of powerful writing (Cuero, 2010). They often rely on concrete language because the abstractions and clichés are more difficult to translate. This diction often makes their writing more descriptive and originally detailed. Phat, a student who speaks Vietnamese at home and translates for his mother, had striking examples of this language throughout his writing samples. Even his baseline sample, which described a summer job he held at a local hospital, opens with a catalog of sensory images: “The smell of cleaning products and hand sanitizer fill the atmosphere. Across the corridor, I see doctors assisting those who were ill. The air conditioning sends a coldness down my spine.” Similarly, Juliana compared the fading of the bright color of a childhood blanket to the dissolution of her parent’s marriage:

Papi’s love for music was transparent and the first question he’d ask when walking into a room was “¿Dónde está la música?” Mami would look at him with these eyes, eyes as sparkly as the smile she had on her face. They were radiant together and just like my blanket, I wanted their color to last forever.



Ngoc describes her home city with rich language that helps to create a sense of place.

Hungry? You'll pass by ten bodegas going down one of the main streets. Need a haircut? There's a barbershop at every corner of these streets. Outside of these barbershops are old men sunk in their chairs, telling stories about the good old days.

These students clearly bring a great deal of linguistic capital to their academic writing, and drawing on and valuing these assets more explicitly will foster their success, as well as bring the diversity of their lived experiences to the university context.

**Social capital.** Yosso (2005) describes social capital as the people and community resources that provide practical knowledge and emotional support. As discussed further in the interview data, many students noted their STBP peers as critical sources of support during their first year. Students informed each other about classes, professors and work-study opportunities. In fact, most of the students in this study worked at the campus library based on positive experiences reported by peers, and saw each other frequently at work, creating more opportunities for knowledge and support. Social capital leads to knowledge gained through networks, and it is clear the STB staff attempts to create these networks by fostering connections among current students, older students in the form of preceptors in the program, faculty and staff, who often serve as the students academic advisors. All students relied on at least some of these connections for practical and/or emotional support.

Another form of social capital that many students in this study brought with them to campus is the ability to move between different types of social and cultural groups with an ease that eludes students from more homogenous backgrounds. This comfort with

differences may prove helpful as students enter the unfamiliar campus culture, as captured by Ngoc, who is Vietnamese, describing her cross-cultural friendships with Hispanic families in her home city.

With open arms, walking into a Hispanic household you'll be greeted with a hug and kiss on the cheek by the mother of your friend as if she have known you since you've been in diapers. She'll feed you like you haven't eaten in days...[entering college] I understood that I wouldn't be surrounded by a majority of Hispanic people but that now I will be that one person who will stand out in a room full of White people. It's a different feeling. The way I carry myself around campus is not so far different from how I carry myself in [home city].

This form of social capital helped students to apply interpersonal skills they had learned at home to the unfamiliar college community. It enabled several students to make connections that helped them succeed beyond those made at STBP. One student who did not want to participate in the "party scene" on campus found important social support through a gospel-signing group.

I was able to meet and become friends with some of the most wonderful people who just loved singing and praising the Lord. Being a part of [it] made this semester so much better, because I always had something to look forward to every Tuesday and Thursday. The love we had and showed one another made it worth taking time out of our busy schedules. [Biba]

Because Biba's faith was central to her persistence, it was important that she find social connections that supported it. From there, she developed friendships beyond her initial group of STBP peers.

Other students, who also created networks of support and knowledge, noted this progression, as Philipson explained this way, “However, from the darkness come light, and that “light” being able to become a part of the [college] community. This helped me be able to deal with my academic struggles in school.” This student was referring to a student group he joined that promoted racial awareness, and another leadership group for men of color. This experience not only provided social support, but also helped this student to succeed academically and decide on a course of study. Philipson went on to say that “I feel like it’s good to get involved, because like, to me, in terms of what you’re trying to major in, a lot of the involvements are good segue ways.” His experience reflects Tinto’s (2000, 2007) claim that social and academic engagement are reciprocal. The forms of social capital that students bring to campus should be recognized and reinforced, and new opportunities for connection and knowledge should be fostered, as academic, pragmatic, and personal gains are likely to result from those interactions.

**Resistance capital.** Resistance is a form of capital that is historically nurtured in communities affected by injustice (Yosso, 2005). Yosso cites examples of parents in such communities teaching their children to identify and resist sources of oppression, and there is no doubt that students bring this awareness with them to campus. As noted earlier, students often chose to write about these subjects in their writing samples. They used their awareness as a way to identify sources of inquiry, and attempted to show resistance by highlighting their injustices in an academic context. This is a form of resistance that should be fostered in institutional of higher education, as it is central to the mission of social justice. Instructors can help foster this by helping students to articulate experiences of injustice into viable research topics, and encouraging students to make

those connections in their writing, a stretch that often proved challenging, as students struggled to make those shifts between the personal and the political.

Individual students also displayed resistance to institutional constraints, even in the classroom. The interviews revealed that several students resented the conventions and norms of academic writing because they felt they limited their intellectual curiosity and voice. Instead, they knew they had to “write what the professor wants” at their own expense. Interestingly, the three students who voiced the most resistance, Abjeet, Luke and Grayson were all male students and all strong writers. Though Abjeet and Luke expressed a desire to resist academic norms, they recognized that following them was necessary for success and did so, albeit reluctantly. Grayson continued to approach assignments more creatively, even though he knew it would negatively affect his grade because he was not following the assignment guidelines. Though he noted some confusion with those guidelines, and recognizes that he “doesn’t even know what analysis means,” it is also important to recognize this as an effort to resist oppressive norms and remain true to his own voice.

**Navigational capital.** Navigational capital describes to how students maneuver through institutions, and recognizes individual autonomy within institutional constraints (Yosso, 2005). In this study, students clearly brought some navigational skills with them that they had learned in high school, and they were able to acquire new sources quickly. Students like Erika had extensive mentoring in high school, and were able to continuing using these resources once on campus. Although she was not able to find newer mentors at the time of our interview, she realized the value of these relationships from past experiences, and will continue to seek them out. The STBP helped students begin

connecting with resources early on, and students who took advantage of them realized their benefits. Students learned quickly that there are resources to help with navigating the campus landscape and unfamiliar academic terrain. When Carly realized she was struggling in her classes, and did not understand what her professors were looking for, she sought help in a variety of ways, noting, “I really take advantage [of writing fellows, tutoring center, office hours]. They gave us so many resources.”

Navigational capital came into play when students learned to use resources that were newly available to them on a college campus. Abjeet used his work-study job at the library to stock up on books, which he reads in between classes. Even with classes and a part-time job he finds he has more time than he did in high school, where he carried additional family responsibilities. He uses that extra time, plus the campus resources, as a way to further his knowledge through additional reading. This helped him to navigate through college, even when the academic aspects were not particularly engaging.

I’ve been able to check out books at the library, just like, several of them. Read them, because I have all this time. Sometimes the readings for class aren’t that interesting. Sometimes the teachers/professors aren’t that interesting, but at this point *I* have an interest in academics (emphasis his).

Work-study jobs themselves also helped students navigate their schedules, often more free than they were used to, and helped them structure their days. Biba notes, “I realized just how much having a job really helped me with managing my time.” Although all college students need to learn time management, the students in this study found navigational capital that helped them work through their own unique challenges, such as extra curricular activities that helped them cope at a primarily White institution.

Our discussions really go in-depth into searching for where racism lies in society and deconstructing it; we have discussed the different types of racism and racism in Disney. I like going because the comfort of the people not being afraid to discuss race openly in such a diverse group. From these groups, I have gained a system of support and stress-relief. [Philipson]

Membership in extracurricular activities helped students to connect with older students who had made pathways through the university already, and were able to share this knowledge. Students were able to access this capital through same age and older peers. By the end of his first semester, Philipson reflected, “It feels weird understanding the social map at [college], but it makes it fun to network with someone else if you both have a mutual friend.”

To conclude, alternate forms of cultural capital come with students to campus, but must continue to be facilitated during their transition to and during college life.

Recognizing and reinforcing these alternate forms of capital helps these students be perceived beyond a deficit model, and allows their considerable strengths and supports to be drawn upon as a valuable resource.

### **Chapter Five: Implications for Practice**

The key findings of this study are:

(1) even students who perceived themselves to be strong writers in high school struggled with the transition to college level academic writing;

(2) students benefit from direct instruction of academic conventions as well as assignments that allow them to draw on their own interests and experiences; and

(3) students possess familial, social, aspirational, navigational and linguistic capital that are not being recognized in their first-year college writing.

These findings offer valuable insights into my research questions, which asked how students acquired academic language during their first year of college, and how students perceived this development. The findings are based on analysis of four writing samples, using the WPA Outcomes Statement criteria, and CDA, along with student interviews. As a result, there are implications for practice that are relatively simple to implement, and would benefit first-year students as a whole. In terms of academics, students reported needing more clarification around writing assignments and direct instruction of formal conventions. Students were most successful in writing assignments that were engaging and drew upon their own interests and lived experience. Both academic and personal support were often difficult for students to access, so the university needs to make those supports more directly connected to courses and students, especially during the first year. Finally, the university needs to create more opportunities in which students can utilize their alternate forms of cultural capital in academic settings. Some concrete strategies for pedagogy, faculty development, student support,

opportunities to leverage assets and directions for future research are discussed in this chapter.

### **Strategies for Academic Writing**

All first-year students at this university are required to take a first-year writing seminar. This common course experience is a valuable opportunity to build in additional support for academic writing development. On a programmatic level, professional development for instructors who include long-time adjunct faculty as well as graduate student teaching fellows, must include resources for direct instruction of a variety of assignment types, and other formal aspects, including citation formats, a frequently noted source of student confusion. The university's newly established Center for Teaching Excellence must facilitate the development and distribution of these resources, including teaching workshops, print and online materials for classroom use. The Center for Teaching Excellence, which "aims to help faculty members refine their craft in the most comprehensive way" (Smith, 2014, p. 1) must also clarify strategies for more concrete, readily understood feedback on student writing. This would include rubrics for different writing assignments according to genre, sample essays that can be made available to students as models, and examples of clear language to capture strengths and weaknesses in student writing. Such strategies should be employed not only by the course instructor, but also in other contexts where students receive feedback, including tutoring and peer workshops. Students reported very different experiences in first-year writing, depending on their instructor's interests and emphases. Greater consistency across sections will ensure that students learn the basic skills they will need for college writing, while still allowing for flexibility and creativity among different classes.



As central as the first-year writing seminar is to academic language development, by itself, it is not enough. Students reported that their writing skills stagnated when they were not writing frequently for classes and knew they would benefit from more practice. Because the first-year writing seminar is the only course that requires frequent writing assignments and revision, more writing must be required across the curriculum. Most students in this study report this is not happening, as responding to student essays is more time consuming than grading exams, and first-year students are often enrolled in large courses where little or no writing is required. Students acknowledged that their writing improved when they were required to do so consistently and when revision was required, though there were few classes where this took place. Not only does this limit opportunity for practice, it also prevents students from learning about academic language in different disciplines and for different rhetorical situations. In order to encourage academic writing across the curriculum, the university must support programs that make designing assignments, writing support, and assessment easier for faculty. The Center for Teaching Excellence can play a role in providing both professional development opportunities and resources, and the university must make a more explicit commitment to writing across the curriculum. Several additional strategies are outlined below.

**Writing fellows program.** Departments that are included in the core curriculum must set expectations around minimum writing requirements in these courses, and implement mechanisms to meet them. For example, the writing fellows program, which provides graduate student writing tutors to classes across the curriculum, can support students in meeting assignment requirements through weekly scheduled conferences, which are recorded for students' ongoing review. Although this program has been

implemented successfully in some courses and programs, including for the Nursing students in this study, the program must be expanded and encouraged.

The writing fellows program was implemented at the university in 2004, and has three main goals; to help students develop their writing skills across the curriculum, to provide faculty with aid in designing assignments and other pedagogical tools, and to prepare graduate students for teaching fellowships (DeRosa, Mathieu, Barrett & Floyd, 2014). Currently, there are twelve writing fellows drawn largely from the English department's M.A. program, and two from Philosophy. The program hopes to become more interdisciplinary in nature, and if the program were to be expanded, graduate students from other disciplines could also be included in this group. Each writing fellow works with fifteen students per semester, and receives a stipend of \$1000-1200 per year depending on prior experience. In the 2012-2013 academic year, writing fellows partnered with faculty and students in Accounting, Education, Nursing, Philosophy, Psychology and the Summer Bridge Program. The program's funding was expanded to hire an Associate Director, the number of writing fellows was expanded from eight to twelve, and four additional laptops for writing fellows' use with students were purchased. This is an encouraging sign of the university's commitment to the program, and given its success, expansion of the program would be helpful to all first-year students, and particularly for the students in the STB program.

During the 2012-2013 year, over 90% of the students in the fall, and 98% of students in the spring believed the program improved their writing. Ninety-five percent of students would take another writing fellows class or recommend that a friend do the same (DeRosa et al., 2014). In addition, all of the faculty members who participated found the

program to be a helpful resource that informed the way they will shape and communicate their writing assignments in the future. An instructor in the Psychology department noted that the writing fellows “Were able to give students feedback in a way that I couldn’t. I can tell them to address issues more ‘deeply’ but you were able to give techniques and break down the writing process” (DeRosa et al., 2014, p.7). Given students’ struggle with vague feedback reported in this study, this is an important intervention. Other faculty commented that the program helped them adapt assignments and expectations, and provided strategies to make them more concrete. Finally, faculty felt that the program encouraged them to include more writing assignments on their syllabi, knowing that their students would receive the support necessary to complete them successfully.

This program can be expanded to serve more students, so that more core classes include writing experiences, and students receive the support they need to be successful. However, until the program is expanded, STB advisors must know which sections of core classes are staffed with a writing fellow and steer students toward those classes. Currently, advisors do not have that information, and it is necessary to determine appropriate class selection for students who need additional writing support. Core instructors must include writing assignments on their syllabi, and necessary supports in place, in order to support the academic writing development of all first-year students.

Academic support at the course level is one way to bring resources directly to students, but it is also important to bring additional resources to the students themselves. In addition to describing such resources both in the summer bridge program and in first-year courses, students benefit from having a required class visit to the tutoring center, in which students meet with tutors in small groups or one on one to try out the experience in

a low stakes setting. Instructors can also require students to submit a paper to the online writing lab, or to meet with a tutor, so that there is an additional incentive to do so. It is clear that asking for help is difficult for these students, so a requirement to seek it out is necessary, at least initially. Staff at the learning center that are known to be particularly effective with students from STB can be highlighted and matched, so that students are more likely to have a positive experience. Students were more likely to pursue supports that their peers found helpful, so this form of social capital can be leveraged to improve their experiences at the tutoring center.

**Critical reading skills.** A fundamental problem that students had with academic writing is that it often required critical reading comprehension of difficult material. Several students reported struggling to understand content well enough to write about it, which researchers recognize as inevitable, since reading and writing skills are “transactive” and “poor reading is both a cause and effect of poor writing.” (Henry, 1990, p. 430). When student readers cannot adequately understand the content, whether it is philosophical ideas or Shakespeare’s language, it is impossible for them to analyze it or attend to other features of organization or style. A solid foundation of reading helps students have a rhetorical plan for their own writing, and provides the prior knowledge that is required for the wide range of subjects required in college (Henry, 1990). This prior knowledge has been recognized as necessary for what has been called “mature literacy.” In this study, it seems that this was a factor in some students’ struggle with academic writing, and their sense that other students in their classes from more advantaged educational backgrounds already seemed to know “what was going on.” Many students referred to the fact that other students seemed to catch references to

literature or history that they missed, and were not sure where and when they missed learning about them. Reading can provide this broad base of knowledge, and must continue to be encouraged at the college level (Marschall & Davis, 2012). Erika was able to better understand her philosophy class when a high school mentor sent her a book that helped explain it in simpler terms. Alternately, students like Abjeet, who had very difficult educational histories, were able to compensate for gaps because of wide and deep reading habits, which at least in part contributed to his strong writing skills. In his discussion of writing, he noted his understanding of how words and sentences fit together as being developed through his own reading foundation. Reading and writing are inextricably linked; thus it is essential that reading comprehension must be addressed to enable competent academic writing. In other words, “Unless we enable student reading, we will make few inroads in enriching student writing.” (Henry, 1990, p. 432).

Several strategies can be employed to enhance students’ reading comprehension of college level material. Small discussion groups linked to a given course can be added for an additional hour per week. In the English department, such groups have been established for classes where a difficult text, such as *Paradise Lost* is the focus, and even advanced English majors struggle to understand the language and content. This meeting hour is optional, but many students find it so valuable that they attend regularly. The professor and a graduate teaching assistant facilitate the Milton “reading group,” but other models could be employed, including sections staffed solely by a TA, or that are required for students who are having trouble, or that meet in smaller, more supportive groups. Such groups, sometimes known as “literature circles,” have been found to encourage reflection, comprehension and more critical responses to texts (Sanacore,

2013). These practices, which encourage personal responses to content, reflection on experiences, and interaction with others is one way that literacy specialists have implemented Dewey's concepts of reflective thinking (Rogers, 2002; Dewey, 1938). Dewey's model required systematic evaluation of evidence, which can help students' critical reading move beyond initial reader response. These reading groups that help students better understand difficult concepts have academic benefits beyond writing, and benefit STBP students in particular, as literature circles have been found to foster, "[A] sense of social justice for all learners, including those at risk for failure, because all learners have opportunities to engage in dialogic activities that support their active and successful engagement in learning" (Sanacore, 2013, p.117). Such practices can be expanded beyond literature classes, and implemented in any course that requires comprehension of difficult content, including the natural sciences and philosophy, a frequently noted source of confusion for the students in this study.

The Writing Across the Curriculum strategies that have come out of Composition Studies also offer some valuable strategies for reading comprehension. One strategy that has been successfully implemented in the natural sciences is to have students use writing as a tool to master difficult content. This is employed not as a technique to improve writing (though such benefits seem possible), but rather as a way to teach complex science. Some examples include writing a letter to a friend explaining an area of content covered in a textbook or in a lecture, using only language that the friend would understand, and without scientific jargon (Greenstein, 2013). This may be particularly helpful for students who would have to translate academic concepts into the language of their home discourse. Another example is to have students construct an analogy that

connects scientific ideas into terms drawn from their own lives and culture, allowing students to use their prior knowledge to understand a novel concept (Greenstein, 2013). Such strategies would be particularly helpful for students in this study, and ostensibly could be used to better understand philosophy and Shakespeare as well as the sciences. The Center for Teaching and interested faculty members in individual departments can share these strategies.

**Living and learning communities.** Students also benefit from the living and learning communities proposed in Tinto's (1998, 2008) work on student engagement. The fact that most students in the program informally opt to live in community by opting for housing on the multicultural floor suggests that they seek out such opportunities for connection. In this study, students who lived with STB peers benefitted from shared academic knowledge, informal advising and emotional support. Recent research (Wilmer, 2009) shows that living and learning communities had a statistically significant effect on the levels of peer and faculty interaction, academic and intellectual development, and institutional and goal commitment for students enrolled in developmental English compared to those who did not participate in the communities. Although this population of students is somewhat different, in that the university does not offer a developmental writing course, students similar to those who participated in STB and would receive the same benefits. The university would enhance social and academic capital by creating more opportunities for living and learning communities where students can ask questions and raise concerns in a safe space.

**Alternate assessment.** This study revealed that traditional forms of assessment do not always capture the strengths of FGCS writing. As Shaughnessy (1977) pointed out

over thirty years ago, by focusing on grammatical and other conventional errors, we overlook many of the strengths and strategies at work in these texts. The WPA criteria focus on academic writing conventions that students inevitably must acquire, but in the process, we overlook their assets, such as those captured in the Critical Discourse Analysis. Clearly, some of their errors are an effort to situate themselves within, or resist, the dominant discourse. In Botma's (2012) analysis of the assessment of writing samples required for entrance to a journalism program South Africa, he found that assessment must be interpreted in the broader sociopolitical context of language. In that case, those grading the assessments are grounded in the dominant discourse, and assessment is highly interpretive, which can increase bias. Explaining the persistent racial gap between students admitted to the program, Botma (2012) insists that historic and current relations of power around language must be considered in assessment of writing. In order to achieve more equitable enrollments, he calls for a restructuring of selection processes, course content and assessment practices.

Such measures can be considered in this setting as well. Along with more inclusive selection criteria in admission, including non-cognitive variables, course content must include texts and discussions where all students' cultural knowledge can be valued. An increasingly diverse faculty can bring alternative perspectives on student writing. For example, an instructor who learned English as a second language may be more aware of strategies that students may employ in that effort. Such was the case for Phat, whose first language was Vietnamese, and drew direct benefits from the fact that his First-Year Writing instructor also spoke English as a second language, even though their first languages were different. Phat reported that the instructor gave him



supplemental materials and instruction, and Phat's writing by the end of the first year demonstrates clear improvement as a result. The ability to recognize the difficulties of academic language acquisition may be better assessed by faculty who understand that experience.

In all courses, inclusion of some informal writing assignments on a syllabus, where students can convey their ideas in a low-stakes setting, allows instructors to see their students' insights and grade them on that basis. Finally, students benefit from writing assignments that allow the opportunity for revision. Revision allows students to address many of the problems they encountered with academic writing, from time management to clarification of instructor feedback. Assessment of writing that has been revised, rather than a single draft that does not reflect the learning process involved, is a more pedagogically sound measure.

Higher education faces increased pressure to assess learning outcomes, including more subjective aspects, such as academic writing (Middaugh, 2010). In designing assessment tools, the sociocultural nature of literacy must be recognized, and more comprehensive measurements must be used to capture the range of strengths that diverse students exhibit in their academic writing. This calls for more robust assessment practices. Such methods use various data sources to perform multiple assessments on a variety of criteria. CDA can be utilized as one form of assessment that captures other forms of capital that are not considered in traditional assessment, such as the academic language markers of the WPA Outcomes Statement used in this study. In addition, authentic assessment of student writing must include a variety of assignment types, such as the researched and narrative essays considered in this study. This is important because

student strengths often emerge first in less formal genres, as was often the case here. Portfolio based methods of writing assessment, especially those that allow students to have some choice over which pieces to submit, is in line with this authentic assessment.

Such comprehensive assessments are similar to the holistic bilingual approach used to assess the writing of emerging bilingual students in which writing samples in both English and the students' first language are analyzed in order to more fully capture the their strengths, and to appreciate the strategies students employ in both contexts (Soltero-González, Escamilla & Hopewell, 2011). These practices allow assessors "to observe how writing abilities in the two languages support each other and are mutually reinforcing" (Soltero-González et al., 2011, p.83). I argue that this not only applies to bilingual students, but also for first-generation college students who are in the process of acquiring academic language. Formal and informal writing samples can work in the same way, and by assessing both types a more comprehensive picture of assets may emerge.

Finally, in order to truly capture the process of academic language acquisition, more longitudinal research is needed. Considering students' academic language acquisition over longer periods of time, with a range of coursework and experiences will provide a more comprehensive view of this development.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis and Systemic Functional Linguistics.**

As students bring increasingly diverse language backgrounds to the college classroom, instructors and assessors need to understand writing in more complex ways. CDA and SFL provide strategies to do so, and both "set out to generate agency among students, teachers and others by giving them the tools to see how texts position them and generate the very relations of institutional power at work in classrooms" (Luke, 1995,

p.12). However, most faculty are unfamiliar with these concepts, both in their own understanding of language and in their pedagogy. Greater awareness and application of these methods will allow for a greater recognition of students' linguistic efforts, and can be used as an instructional tool. For example, CDA has been used in study skills courses as a way to identify academic conventions, their origins and purposes, their impact, as well as how students may appropriately challenge them and construct alternatives (Clark, 1992).

SFL can also be used to break texts down, and the assumptions that come with them, and helps students see language in new ways. I have used SFL in the poetry unit of my STB English course for the past three years, focusing on topicalization, what words appear at the beginning of a poetic line and why; graphology, the structure of the poem on the page; processes, verbs and changes; and lexical and referential chains, patterns of related words (Christie, 2008; Lukin, 2008). I find that some students have a particular affinity for this approach, including those who have no background in literary analysis. Other students struggle with yet another set of unfamiliar terms, and only use SFL when required on an exam or assignment. SFL places great emphasis on the *choices* that a writer makes in each rhetorical situation. Awareness of how other writers make these choices, and why they make them—either in a policy statement or a poem, is important for students to recognize. Such conscious attention to language, the choices that writers make when they are constructing a text makes student writers more aware of the choices they have in their own writing, and is worth more attention in the classroom.

**Additional academic best practices.** The university can also benefit from research that has proven best practices for first-generation, low-income college students.

Engle and Tinto (2008) insist that colleges must reach out to these students “early and often” (p.25) to establish meaningful supports. Although they find that learning communities can facilitate the academic transition, they may not be enough. Seidman’s (2012) model of student retention asserts that successful retention efforts include early identification of at-risk students, and interventions that are early, intensive, and continuous. Monitoring and collaboration among students, faculty and staff are necessary to address potential challenges early on (AASCU, 2005; Kuh et al, 2005; Pell Institute, 2007). Although the university in this study does have some mechanisms for collaboration in place, including a postcard check-in for faculty from the office that runs STB, this system is inadequate in light of students’ reluctance to express difficulty and seek help. This is particularly likely in large classes where faculty do not interact with students on an individual basis without students themselves taking the initiative. In this study, students who did seek faculty help were either enrolled in smaller classes or classes that required individual conferences. Such interactions can make faculty aware of student difficulty without requiring to students to take the daunting first step. Because smaller class sizes and faculty interactions are helpful to all first-year students, but are particularly helpful for first-generation and low-income students (Abrams et al, 1990; Karp & Logue, 2003) they are particularly valuable interventions. STB staff who advise these students should ensure that at least some of their first semester classes have these opportunities, and the university must work to create more options. Targeted assessment of these efforts will help determine which interventions are most effective (Gansemer-Topf, 2013).

Developmental learning communities that link basic writing courses with content courses have proven to be an particularly effective intervention with students with similar backgrounds (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). Because of the value of academic writing and the difficulty students experienced writing across the curriculum, courses that link content with writing would be particularly effective. The university is piloting several new options for the core curriculum in the 2015-2016 academic year that link two courses with related content and include the same cohort of students. Although these courses are not characterized as developmental, such initiatives, which create peer communities, more consistent interactions with a smaller number of faculty, and link writing and content would be particularly beneficial for STB students, particularly if a developmental writing or reading component was added. Advisors must encourage students to consider such options, as they may be unfamiliar, and seats in such courses should be set aside for students in the program in order for them to access their benefits. Within the classroom, described as the “cornerstone” of college success (Engle & Tinto, 2008), faculty can implement pedagogical strategies that have proven successful with all students, but particularly those in this study.

Classroom activities that encourage peer collaboration and problem-based learning (Braxton, et al., 2000) are more effective than passive, lecture-based courses that leave little room for the wealth of assets these students bring to the class. However, it is important to recognize that most faculty members will need professional development in these strategies, and with the particular challenges and strengths of these students. The new Center for Teaching Excellence is a logical place to begin, though a faculty member

with experience with and knowledge of the STB program and its students would be required to inform such trainings.

**Innovations from Composition Studies.** Some universities are attempting to apply K-12 Funds of Knowledge (F of K) theory and practices into college composition classrooms, but that is not the case at most institutions, including the site of this study. However, practitioners who are interested at drawing on alternate forms of cultural capital as a form of scaffolding for other academic skills should be aware of these pedagogical strategies. In fact, many composition faculty recognize that most college students will pass through their classrooms, and therefore assume a particular responsibility to understand and draw on the knowledge their students bring with them into the academic context. As one instructor puts it:

Their [students'] F of K are not necessarily similar to our own, and while they may not be entirely equipped to make sense of the academic space, they do bring skills and knowledge that can be tapped as important learning resources...it is imperative that we connect students' home places to the classroom, so that the classroom becomes contiguous with other places of comfort and becomes a place where students feel invited and authorized to speak. (Gallegos, 2013, p. 3)

Composition Studies offers several types of pedagogical practices that attempt to draw on students lived knowledge and better integrate it with academic writing development. These include the writing across the curriculum (WAC) strategies discussed earlier (Maimon, 2001; Russell, 2002; Villanueva, 2001), genre-based curriculum approaches (Devitt, 2009), Ecocomposition (Dobrin & Weisser, 2002), and more recently, the writing across communities approach (Guerra, 2008, 2012; Kells, 2007). Although these

strategies all have potential merits for the students in this study, there are several issues for implication that must be considered.

First, because the instructors at this university and in most college settings span a range of backgrounds from new Master's students in English Literature to seasoned adjunct faculty who have been teaching for many years, their knowledge of composition theory and practice is uneven at best. As discussed earlier, professional development workshops that introduce instructors to new research and pedagogy would be useful to disseminate this valuable knowledge. Right now, the exposure that students have to these practices is completely unpredictable, and depends on which one of the 100+ sections of freshman writing for which each student registers, a decision that is based more on timing and scheduling constraints than any awareness of course content. In fact, first-year writing sections do not even offer individual course descriptions, which would clarify the approach employed in a given class.

The second implication that must be considered is the limitations of these approaches in broader academic writing contexts. Though the Funds of Knowledge emphasis is invaluable in terms of drawing on the lived experiences and cultural communities of these students, it cannot be done at the expense of other aspects of academic writing that will be expected in other classrooms, or students will find themselves unprepared. Composition classes, such as the one that Ngoc and Juliana were in, which emphasize personal writing over academic analysis and research, leave these students at a disadvantage. Though both students wrote strong narratives that allowed them to bring lived knowledge into an academic setting, they were unable to integrate that into more formal analytical assignments. It is imperative that *both* lived knowledge

and academic conventions are valued in writing instruction in order for students to be successful.

**Research skills.** Students clearly need additional support in the classroom in order to realize the potential of their critical thinking skills (Relles & Tierney, 2013; Warchauer & Matuchniak, 2010). Many students struggled to articulate areas of interest into viable research questions and to find credible academic sources. Such challenges not only posed obstacles for students in pursuing their topics, but also presented problems for the successful completion of the assignment itself. For example, many students used lived knowledge as a source of evidence in their papers, but without research or citations, their work was not seen as adequately academic, and their grades suffered as a result. More direct instruction in scholarly conventions, and more time spent on exploring the library databases will help these students make that transition to academic credibility. Although all students participated in a library session as part of the summer bridge program, and often again in first-year writing, many still struggled to find relevant sources on their own topics. Even steps as basic as defining appropriate search terms could undermine an assignment. This may be particularly challenging in light of research that shows such students are at a technological disadvantage (Warchauer & Matuchniak, 2010) and struggle to utilize the library's extensive resources.

The university has an impressive staff of reference librarians already in place, but they must be more closely connected to students in order for students to feel comfortable asking specific questions and seeking more individualized help. This support may need to take the form of 30-60 min individual sessions to discuss their topic with a librarian, then try out different search terms with the librarian there to consult and evaluate the results.



Having someone present to troubleshoot, or help them figure out alternate searches would go a long way to developing research skills. The library has these resources available, but this population of students underutilizes them. I consulted the university libraries head of instructional support, and he offered to assign STB students to a group of librarians who would follow them for their four years of college, as is the practice for other cohorts of university scholars. In this model, five to six STB students are assigned to a single reference librarian for four years. The librarian reaches out to students twice per semester and notifies them of library workshops and other resources. The individualized attention and direct support of this model are helpful to STB students, but it is necessary to encourage students to participate in a more direct way. In this study, students passively avoided supports that were perceived as intimidating or unnecessary. It is possible that such behaviors would persist, even in a cohort model. Librarians must let the instructors of students' courses know that these individuals are participating in this program, and use collaboration, as suggested earlier, as a means to encourage students to participate. For example, an instructor could inform the librarian of an upcoming assignment, including research topics and guidelines, let the student know that that contact has been made, and that they are expected to follow up with their assigned librarian. As in other examples of university resources, these library supports are only helpful if students utilize them, and extra encouragement will be required to make sure they do so. Greater understanding of research and library materials will help students to bring their lived knowledge into an academic setting and support their academic success.

**Study skills.** In spite of their academic success in high school, it is clear that students also need to develop college level study skills in order to succeed in a

competitive environment where such skills are assumed. Seidman (2012) cited study skills in his retention model as a type of intervention that needed to be introduced early, so that students build on their existing skills and adjust to the academic demands of college. In particular, students in this study struggled with “time management,” and building in adequate time to plan out long-term assignments, which were unfamiliar to many of them. Some students benefitted from direct instruction of strategies such as note taking and outlining longer papers, but students had to be aware of and find room in their schedule for the university’s sole study skills course where such skills were taught. Another valuable feature of this course is that students are required to submit each step in the writing process as part of their grade, steps which even strong writers such as Luke admitted skipping when time was short, even though he knew they helped his writing. Requiring students to complete each step and submit it is a helpful initial support. However, many students were not aware of the course until second semester, after struggling throughout the first.

Although the summer bridge program includes two non-credit bearing courses that inform students about university resources, it is necessary to develop a study skills piece to those courses, before students begin the academic year. As faculty in the summer program, we have discussed strategies that would help students approach our particular courses, and a more comprehensive approach would serve students better. Such a course could be designed in conjunction with their academic courses, so that preparation for papers and exams was broken down in a more structured way. The idea of revamping the two non-credit bearing courses in the summer program to include study skills that are connected to the two summer academic courses was discussed last summer. Students

were frustrated at having to attend courses that were not earning credit, and there seems to be a clear need for more attention to study skills.

In addition, the university's shift to a credit based system (as opposed to the former three-credit course-based system) means that there are more opportunities for students to develop skills in a more low-stakes setting. Students could take one-credit courses alongside more challenging courses that would likely support their success. These courses can also be offered during school breaks when students are often on campus, and can be used to make up credit deficiencies, as well as improve GPAs. The English department is currently discussing the possibilities with the evening and summer session staff at the university. The hope is to offer two summer courses, as well as a winter break course, with varying numbers of credits. These courses would focus on skill building, such as critical reading and writing, and a current STB instructor would teach at least one course. Tuition remission for students is possible for these courses, and they would have a practical value while fostering the development of important academic skills.

**Personal support, academic benefits.** The university must appreciate the complexity that these students bring to personal and academic challenges. They often have great resilience and more experience with overcoming obstacles than more sheltered college students, but they may be more limited in their self-advocacy. Students in this study felt the need to go it alone, and suffer through challenges in silence. Unlike students who may feel comfortable asking for extra help from an instructor, extensions on assignments, and other accommodations, the students in this study were more likely to put the responsibility on themselves and avoid reaching out. Although their aspirational

capital and self-reliance is often an asset, it may become a barrier from getting needed support. In order to address this, faculty and administrators need to reach out to students directly, and build trusting relationships.

Challenges to Tinto's (1998) model of student engagement have criticized his focus on *behaviors* as an indication of engagement, such as joining student activities, rather than attitudes, and psychological responses (Hausmann, Ye, Schofield & Woods, 2009). Bean's (1980, 1985) models of student engagement included factors that affect socialization, including institutional fit, academic performance and goal commitment. As a result, updated models of student persistence have compared and synthesized both Tinto and Bean's models for a more integrated and comprehensive view of student persistence (Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora & Hengler, 1992). As a result, variables such as students' sense of belonging must be included in retention efforts, and this sense needs to be fostered through personal as well as academic supports.

Research shows that students such as those in this study are particularly sensitive to the impact of academic advising and orientation programs, and such experiences can have significant effects on persistence (Attinasi & Nora, 1992; Rendon & Nora, 1994; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1994). Continuity from the summer bridge program will help with this. The supportive adults that foster relationships with STBP students need not be faculty, but must be trusted resources that students can access during the academic year, even when their instructors may not be as approachable. Designated "first responders" (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p.26), who know the students well enough to recognize and address problems as they arise, are particularly important. Students can utilize these individuals as a first line of support, an initial contact who can then put them in contact

with more specific resources. Although the bridge program attempts to make such connections through assigning students academic advisors within the program staff, such connections need to be fostered from the initial point of entry throughout the critical first year (Cabrera, Miner & Milem, 2013).

In their interviews, students reiterated the idea that social and academic engagement is complimentary and reciprocal (Tinto, 1998). Although Tinto's work has been productively complicated by later researchers who call for more consideration of variables such as gender, ethnicity, income, parental involvement and institution type, his basic theory of student engagement can be applied with supplementation from later research (Metz, 2005). Recent research shows that summer bridge programs are only effective if they are connected to social and academic supports during the first year (Cabrera et al., 2013). If students have continued access to sources of personal support, there will be academic benefits, as students including Phat noted that personal support helped him develop "a better mentality" about approaching academics. This positive attitude and emotional support enabled students to feel less isolated during their first year and helped to mitigate feelings of self-doubt that may have derailed them academically. Pascarella & Terenzini (1980) found ongoing, quality interactions with faculty inside and outside of the classroom a key factor in student integration. In addition, personal connections can help students recognize areas of lived knowledge as viable areas of intellectual pursuit. If a faculty member or other academic support knows the student well enough to know something about their own experience, such as family immigration, educational background or community or cultural capital, they can encourage students to bring these interests into an academic context, and foster a sense of belonging on campus

(Hausmann et al, 2009). For example, Ngoc only wrote about her home city because her first-year writing teacher knew her from the summer bridge program and helped her to brainstorm the topic. Students may not feel comfortable bringing these potential topics into an academic setting without that personal connection and encouragement. Faculty can also show students how to understand and support their experiences with research. Conversely, even though questions that related to Erika's childhood experiences came up in her community service connected class, she did not feel comfortable bringing her knowledge into that setting. As a result, she not only felt more marginalized from the university community, but other students in the class were not able to benefit from her valuable perspective. The lived experience and critical perspective that these students bring to the academic setting is a vital source of knowledge, and will make academic discourse more democratic, but instructors and administrators must realize that such connections must be fostered through supportive relationships.

### **Opportunities to Utilize Alternate Cultural Capital**

**Familial capital.** An important finding in this study is that even students with traditional "disadvantages" possess alternate forms of cultural capital (Yosso, 2005). If cultural capital is typically seen as the high status signals of social and cultural selection processes (Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont & Lareau, 1988), then students in this study brought assets that reflect their own lived experience. Unfortunately, they are unable to leverage these assets in academic setting because they are not recognized as valuable. In order for these students to be more successful, and to make their inclusion on campus more meaningful, universities must create opportunities for these assets to be recognized and encouraged. It is clear that families provide an important source of support and identity

for students, though they do not always feel welcomed on campus (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). Phat reports that his Vietnamese speaking mother felt “proud but confused” at the admitted students day on campus because the activities were not completely accessible to her, for linguistic and cultural reasons. In addition to providing informational and outreach materials that are more inclusive, the university can build in other mechanisms for families to connect with each other and become more involved in their student’s life on campus. Research shows that outreach efforts to families can improve the transition and retention of first-generation college students (Bryan & Simmons, 2009).

The ASHE report on parental involvement in higher education (2008) cautioned universities against limiting their policies to the standards of middle and upper class parents (Lareau, 1987). Colleges and universities must extend their parental outreach programs to underserved populations, including those that reflect cultural, racial and linguistic diversity (Wartman & Savage, 2008). In keeping with this recommendation, liaisons from the university can be partnered with families to facilitate communication and serve as informational resources.

Currently, this responsibility is held by the university’s intercultural office, which also runs the STB program. Though the staff of this office is well suited to this work, as they meet the families at their initial point of entry to the university, and often share language and cultural backgrounds, there are limitations on their resources. For example, no one in the office spoke Vietnamese or Farsi, so there was no one to welcome or communicate with the families of three of the ten students in this study. Partnerships must be formed with individuals across the university who could serve as parent liaisons for families with other linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Although most of the research

that centers on parental involvement of low-income, first-generation college students focuses on parental outreach at the high school level in facilitating “college knowledge,” outreach programs that create communities among parents strengthened the cultural and social capital of their students in the college choice process (Fann, Jarsky, McClafferty & McDonough, 2009; Militello, Schweid & Carey, 2011). Such benefits would extend to the college transition by creating parent networks for students in the STB program, though more research needs to be done in this area. More inclusive and supportive networks for families will help students feel that there is less dissonance between home and school, and will enable families to better support their students by fostering this important form of alternate cultural capital.

**Aspirational and social capital.** All of the students in this study demonstrated qualities of perseverance, initiative and resilience that are collectively referred to as “grit” in the literature (Adams, 2012; Hoover, 2013). As colleges recognize that these qualities are necessary for success, non-cognitive measures are being developed to recognize and support them in students. The aspirational and social capital of the students in this study can be transferred to their academic success, but they need to be shown how to apply these skills in this context. Students can use their self-awareness and lived knowledge as a form of scaffolding for the new challenges they will undoubtedly face on campus. However, aspirational capital was a mixed blessing for students in this study. It enabled them to persevere in the face of obstacles, and often to be more resilient than more privileged students, yet it also made them more reluctant to seek help, and fostered a sense that they should “go it alone.” University personnel must recognize both aspects, and help students maximize the benefits of aspirational capital while preventing it from



becoming a barrier to potential supports. For example, developing a trusting relationship with students can allow faculty, administrators and other university practitioners the opportunity to know and draw on lived experience of the student as a source of strength. Recognition of past accomplishments and setbacks can be connected to student's current struggles, and placed in that context. Similarly, students need to be exposed to a variety of sources of support that build on established foundations. For example, a faith community had been vital to Biba following her mother's death and her transition to this country. She struggled to find a church that she could access from campus, and once she did, transportation was a barrier. When Biba described her struggles with self-doubt and lack of motivation during first semester, she had a hard time finding support even when she attempted to seek it out:

I found another church, but the struggle was real of trying to get there, because the bus in the morning, there was one bus, and the T isn't ready, so I'd be like, an hour late, and I wasn't going to do that every Sunday. And I feel bad, there was like, less motivation, God, that motivation was not there, and I was like, I'm sorry.

In spite of her real efforts to find and attend a supportive church, doing so alone proved an insurmountable challenge. Even more heartbreaking was that Biba also tried to visit university counseling services after a friend from STB told her that he had gone, which gave her the impetus to take advantage of the potential support, but was disappointed:

I remember last semester, at the end, or the beginning of this semester, I was really down. And I was talking to [another STB student] and he said, well, I went

to the therapy place about his [] thing. But I went to the door and the number, but it was locked, so I just left. So I've never been back.

Though I am not sure what happened when Biba's visited, the university counseling service did change location that year, which could have caused confusion, or Biba or her friend could have had the wrong room number. In any case, this simple misunderstanding prevented her from accessing the support she finally sought. Resources such as campus ministry, university counseling services, and other supports must be more accessible to these students, who have particular need for them. Even something as simple as a webpage with links to resources and updated contact information may be helpful, since Biba and other students noted information that they continued to draw on from STB during the academic year.

Social capital can be used to support aspirational capital, and help students persevere and succeed. It is noteworthy that Biba only sought out university counseling services when another STB peer had admitted that he had. These personal referrals may be the most important source of information and impetus to seek help, since most students who referenced seeking help did so after hearing about a resource or experience of an STB peer. Such connections must be fostered, through informal meetings where such conversations are encouraged, perhaps by a STB counselor or administrator, but they must also take place online, and in other settings where struggling students are more likely to access them. In order for students to draw on the ample resources of aspirational capital—Biba has survived far more difficult challenges than freshman year of college—supports need to be readily available and accessible students encouraged to utilize them, and social capital can be used to facilitate these critical interactions.

Technology can also be used to connect students with resources and supportive peers and mentors and to build social capital. Although such students do face a technological disadvantage in academic areas (Warchauer & Matuchniak, 2010), many do have access to and use social media. Readily available space where students can ask questions, learn about opportunities and resources, and build relationships, can be a valuable tool. A Facebook page that my STB English class used in the summer of 2013 and 2014 helped build a sense of connection among members, and also served as an informal space for clarifying questions about assignments and instructor expectations, which many students found lacking during the academic year. Technology can also help build peer relationships, especially with older students who completed the summer program in previous years. These students often have important knowledge and lived experiences to share, and can be more accessible to new students than faculty or administrators. Right now, the STB staff hosts a reunion once a year in order to connect students, but more frequent connections can be facilitated by technology. Philipson's observation that meeting old peers through social groups helped him decide on a major is just one example of how such capital can have academic benefits. Faculty mentoring that begins during the summer program can also be enhanced by greater use of technology. Such connections help students to form connections, and serve as an important source of social and navigational capital.

**Supporting linguistic capital.** Building linguistic capital was one of the key areas that this study found the university lacking in its support of students. Although many bilingual students had served as "language brokers" who translated for their parents and within their communities (Buriel, Perez, De Ment, Chavez & Moran, 1998; Morales

& Hanson, 2005), these skills were not recognized and developed in the classroom. Instead, ELL status is seen as a deficit, and students are faced with the difficult choice of struggling in a university writing course for native speakers, or taking the ELL version. Not only is this class seen as unnecessary and remedial for students who have lived and attended school in the U.S. for many years, the majority of the students enrolled in the ELL class are international students, often quite affluent, who have little to no English speaking ability. I have had several STB students encouraged to take the class by their instructors because of grammatical and syntactical errors in their writing report that they thought they were in the wrong classroom when they were alone with other students speaking to each other in fluent Mandarin. In past years, we have tried to place STB students who need ELL support together in the same section of the writing course, but even then, their skilled instructor admitted her concern that she is not meeting their needs in the mixed grouping of a “one size fits all” ELL classroom. In addition to not meeting their language development needs, placement in these courses may well exacerbate these students sense of marginalization within the college community. None of the students in this study enrolled in the ELL course because they felt there was a stigma, and chose to work their way through the course for native speakers instead. Perhaps most troubling is the fact that we are not recognizing the unique assets these students bring as language brokers, and not helping them to leverage that in their academic lives. Surely, we can do better.

Beginning next fall, we will create 1-2 sections of the ELL version of first-year writing for generation 1.5 students or students who are immigrants themselves, but have attended school in the U.S. This class will be taught by a faculty member who

understands their strengths as well as their challenges, and is prepared to work with both. Here, students will receive direct instruction on using their linguistic capital in an academic setting. Writing exercises will draw on their established knowledge of language and translational skills. The hope is that this course will offer several advantages over the current system. First, university recognition that their language backgrounds are an asset, not a deficit may have positive effect on student perception of the course and of themselves as students, rather than avoiding a course that seems remedial. Second, these students will find a supportive community of students who share their language strengths and struggles. It is important to note that not all of the bilingual, immigrant, and generation 1.5 students at the university participate in the summer bridge program, so this would be a way to connect these students to the same supports. Finally, by drawing on the sophisticated language skills this students have developed throughout their lives, this course will help students bring all of their assets to bear to their academic writing (Martínez, Orellana, Pacheco & Carbone, 2008; Orellana & Reynolds, 2008).

### **Implications for Writing Program Design**

Based on the experiences of these students, there are two key components that must be integral to all first-year writing programs:

- Students must have ongoing opportunities to work individually with an instructor or writing fellow on all formal academic writing assignments. Students needed that level of guidance to be successful, from shaping a workable topic to more targeted attention to editing. These personal relationships also have well documented benefits beyond the classroom. Students should have ample

opportunity to revise their work and writing should be viewed as a learning process.

- Faculty must broaden and complicate their understanding of academic writing to recognize an increasingly diverse set of students. This includes more robust assessment measures, such as CDA, as well as inclusive pedagogical methods that recognize alternate forms of cultural capital. Administrations must be prepared to support and encourage professional development that will foster such understanding.

Writing programs must recognize the capital that first-generation students bring, but also the very real difficulties of transitioning to college. Universities must take appropriate steps to guide students through this transition, and opportunities for students to leverage their assets along the way.

### **Future Directions for Research**

This study reinforces the need for writing studies scholarship that is replicable, data-driven, and able to be aggregated (Haswell, 2005). One place to begin is more consensus on writing assessment, including the WPA Outcomes Statement used in this study. The academic writing criteria drawn from its Outcomes Statement served as a heuristic in this study, as it was intended. However, the WPA itself is calling for more empirical evidence on how the criteria are used, and more local validation, as opposed to broad standardization (Kelly-Riley & Elliot, 2014; Condon, 2013). Such consensus would have benefitted my own use of the criteria in this study, and will allow for a great understanding of what interventions and pedagogical practices are most beneficial. This is particularly important in light of the increased pressure for assessment of learning

outcomes in higher education (Middaugh, 2010). As colleges become more multicultural, and include students from more diverse backgrounds, their use of language in educational settings will require more thoughtful and inclusive pedagogy and assessment (Byrnes, 2007). More empirical evidence of how academic language is acquired will help us generate those new policies. There is also a need for research on other experiences of academic integration in the first year, since reading comprehension and other factors no doubt impact other subject areas as well.

We must consider critically how the process of academic language acquisition and other required aspects of acculturation impact these students over the long term. Recent research has demonstrated that the struggle to acquire academic language can make students feel more isolated and alienated on campus (White, 2005). It is difficult to quantify the role that academic language acquisition plays in FGCS's academic decisions, including course of study, but it likely plays a significant one. Students' sense of detachment from their families and home communities, their sense of self-doubt and marginalization may also be tied to the requirements of linguistic assimilation. Further research is needed to fully understand these effects, and how they can be mitigated.

More research is also needed on how students can or have leveraged alternate cultural capital in academic contexts. It is clear that the "grit," leadership, critical thinking and cultural competencies that these students have hard earned in their path to college can be used to benefit them on campus. Research that examines the role of alternate forms of cultural capital in social and academic integration can help define strategies for both students and universities, and will help both to see FGCS students as bringing more than deficits to campus.

**Conclusions**

University programs must be revised to capture the remarkable assets that these students bring to campus and better address the challenges they continue to face. More direct instruction of advanced writing skills and academic conventions must be included in the transitional and first-year curriculum in order for their abilities to be validated in the higher education context. Students benefit most when these supports are connected to courses and assignments, and the university must work to bring such mechanisms into place. Students also need more access to personal supports, which have clear academic benefits. Ongoing exposure to both academic and personal supports are necessary, as students seem to lose their connection to resources once the summer bridge program has ended.

Engagement with written assignments was also a key to students' success. Students benefitted from not only the space to bring in writing topics that interested them and reflecting on their own experience, but also needed more support to transition those topics to an academic context. It is clear that supportive relationships with faculty and other university personnel make that shift more comfortable, in addition to knowledge of research and technological resources to make their own ideas and interests more academically credible.

Finally, beyond the real disadvantages described above, these students bring remarkable assets to our campuses. Recognition of alternate forms of capital will not only benefit the students themselves, but also help to make the university classrooms more meaningfully diverse, which will benefit all students. It is important to note that writing itself is a powerful tool for this purpose. It provides a voice for lived experience and



critical awareness in an academic context, and its value was even recognized by students who struggled to master it. Developing more effective and inclusive academic writing programs and policies is an important step in the overall democratization of higher education.

### **Appendix A**

#### **Informed Consent**

You are being invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Treseanne Ainsworth, a doctoral student in higher education at the Lynch School at Boston College. The research conducted in this study will be used in my dissertation. The purpose of the study is to understand more about the acquisition of academic language during the first year of college for OTE students. You have been chosen to participate in this study because you were a member of the OTE class of 2013, a population of particular interest in this research. Please ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in the study.

You will be asked to submit two writing samples from your first year of college, one from fall semester, and one from the spring. You will choose which papers to submit, and I ask that you submit an ungraded copy. Though I will need your names on each paper in order to connect them to each other, your name will not be included in the study. I may ask you to participate in two follow up interviews, and you can choose whether or not to participate. You will meet at a time and in a place that is convenient for you. During the interview, I will ask about academic experiences during your first year of college, particularly with regard to academic writing (writing for your classes). I anticipate that each interview will take one hour. During the interviews I will take notes, and with your permission, record our conversation.

The interviews will be confidential- I will take steps to disguise your identity so that your name cannot be linked with what you say. If I would like your responses to be included in the study, I will ask you to choose a pseudonym. The records of this study will be kept private. Any sort of public report will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. I anticipate that there is minimal risk involved in participating. You may benefit from participating through the opportunity to reflect upon your experiences during the first year of college. You may also ask me questions you have about your writing or academic writing in college. There is no cost to participate in the study.

For participating in the interviews, I will give you a 25.00 dollar gift certificate to the Boston College bookstore. You will receive the gift certificate after the interviews are complete.

If you have any questions about this study, you may contact me at 617-552-8485 or [ainswor@bc.edu](mailto:ainswor@bc.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact: Director, Office for Human Research Participant Protection, Boston College at (617) 552-4778, or [irb@bc.edu](mailto:irb@bc.edu)

I acknowledge that I have read this form and consent to participation in the study. I understand that I will get a copy of this consent form to keep.

**Appendix B**  
**Summer 2013 English Writing Sample**

The English placement exam is used as a writing sample to create the four sections of Introduction to Literary Studies, your OTE English class this summer. *The English classes are not sorted according to ability.* We hope to create classes that have a range of students with different strengths—some who are more outgoing and talkative, others who are more reflective, and analytical as well as creative thinkers. Please use this opportunity to give us a sense of who you are as a student of writing and literature. We look forward to working with you this summer.

Please read the attached poem and answer the following questions in your blue books.

**CHOOSE:**

1. The poet uses figurative (not literal or realistic) language throughout the poem. Choose one example and discuss how it contributes to the overall meaning of the poem.

**OR**

2. Why are stories personified at the end of the poem? What do their actions seem to imply?

**AND**

3. In whatever way is comfortable for you, please share a story that you “carry”. In light of the poem, how does that story relate to your own story as a person and as a student?

**The Story, Around the Corner**

is not turning the way you thought  
it would turn, gently, in a little spiral loop,  
the way a child draws the tail of a pig.  
What came out of your mouth,  
a riff of common talk.  
As a sudden weather shift on a beach,  
sky looming mountains of cloud  
in a way you cannot predict  
or guide, the story shuffles elements, darkens,  
takes its own side. And it is strange.  
Far more complicated than a few phrases  
pieced together around a kitchen table  
on a July morning in Dallas, say,  
a city you don't live in, where people  
might shop forever or throw a thousand stories  
away. You who carried or told a tiny bit of it  
aren't sure. Is this what we wanted?  
Stories wandering out,  
having their own free lives?  
Maybe they are planning something bad.  
A scrap or cell of talk you barely remember  
is growing into a weird body with many demands.  
One day soon it will stumble up the walk and knock,  
knock hard, and you will have to answer the door.

BY NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

## Appendix C

### Operationalized Definition of Academic Writing Criteria

1. Objectivity and awareness of appropriate response to a formal academic rhetorical situation.
2. Demonstration of knowledge of conventions such as structure, paragraphing, tone and mechanics.
3. Claims supported by evidence from the text or other primary sources.
4. Critical engagement with sources, integrating their own ideas with those of others.

(Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2001)

- 1. Objectivity and awareness of appropriate response to a formal academic rhetorical situation.**
  - Use of “I” or “me” pronouns
  - Slang or other informal language
  - Focus on the text
- 2. Demonstration of knowledge of conventions such as structure, paragraphing, tone and mechanics.**
  - Paragraph breaks
  - Some introductory material, content, conclusion.
  - Differentiation between distinct points
  - Formal academic tone
  - Obtrusive or persistent mechanical errors
- 3. Claims supported by evidence from the text or other primary sources.**
  - Students were instructed in the prompt to use evidence from the poem.
  - Is the evidence appropriate, well chosen and related to the student’s claim?
  - Do the claims display insight or analysis?
- 4. Critical engagement with sources, integrating their own ideas with those of others.**
  - Does the student seem to understand the meaning of the source?
  - Does the student interpret it fairly?
  - Does the source fit in the context of the student’s argument?
  - Does the source further the argument?

### Appendix D: Scored Writing Samples

#### Criminals or Victims?

What is the purpose of jail? Jails are used as a place for justice where people who commit crimes are punished for their actions. How long the criminals stay in jail is determined by the severity of the crime they commit. I believe [Tone shift/ less formal] the purpose of jail is to punish criminals but also to teach them how to reintegrate themselves back into their community and be certain they do not commit any more crimes. A mental illness is a medical condition that disrupts a person's thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others and daily functioning.<sup>4</sup> [citation format] People who suffer from a mental illness cannot tell the difference between right and wrong [evidence/generalization], causing them to do things that others think of as wrong. Because having a mental illness blurs the lines between what is right and wrong, people who suffer from a mental illness should be sent to a hospital instead of prison because they should be treated instead of punished.

One of the most common types of mental illness is schizophrenia. Schizophrenia is "a psychotic disorder characterized by loss of contact with the environment, by noticeable deterioration in the level of functioning in everyday life, and by disintegration of personality expressed as disorder of feeling, thought, perception and behavior."<sup>5</sup> [Citation format] Mentally ill people are not only people who need to be treated, but they too are victims. A person who suffers from schizophrenia is a victim of hallucinations in which they have no control over [evidence]. For example, in the famous Richard Chase case in 1979, Chase was a schizophrenic serial killer who

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=By\\_Illness](http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=By_Illness) [Academic sources?]

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/schizophrenia>

murdered six people therefore was sent to jail. He was given the death sentence after the jury rejected his defense of not guilty by reason of insanity. Instead of being hospitalized and treated for his illness, he was sent to jail where he committed suicide by overdosing on pills he had been saving up for weeks. This shows that sending a person who suffers from mental illness to a prison instead of a hospital will only harm them further instead of treating or helping them. [Too broad an influence to draw from a single example]

[Structure] Mental disorders are developed from the interaction of both genetics and the environment. Mental illnesses are sometimes passed down in families, like schizophrenia, which occurs in “10 percent of people who have a first relative with the disorder” instead of “1 percent in the general population”.<sup>6</sup> [direct quotation not needed here, can be summarized or paraphrased] People with family members that have been diagnosed with this mental disorder are more likely to develop that disorder in the future. [evidence] A person’s environment is a very important factor in how they develop as a person as well. Environmental factors such as stress or deaths may also trigger a disorder in a person as well. [evidence/citation] Further, experiences in early childhood involving sexual abuse may cause the victim to develop a mental disorder.[citation] Taking this into account, it is really important that people who are mentally ill be sent to a psychiatric hospital so that they are in a safe environment that will not trigger any past incidents.[this point is unclear, needs more evidence]

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/schizophrenia/index.shtml>

Psychiatric hospitals are used to treat people with severe mental illnesses like schizophrenia. They provide treatments such as diagnosis, suicide watch, individual and/or group therapy, etc.<sup>7</sup> Diagnosis helps the doctor identify the illness that the patient has in order to treat it efficiently. If a person with a mental illness is sent to jail and not a psychiatric hospital, they do not undergo any of the treatments a hospital has to offer. Therefore, they will not be treated in a way that can assist them in overcoming their disorder, but instead, they will be placed in a confined space forced to follow a set of rules.[citation, more evidence needed to support this assertion] Therapy helps the patients “explore thoughts, feelings, perceptions and/or relationships”<sup>8</sup> that led them to where they are now. By exploring and talking to others, they learn “new approaches to situations that triggered past crises.”<sup>9</sup> [citation not need for these points, necessarily, but needed for others] Therapy teaches them how to deal with the urges that arise from time to time. Sending mentally ill people to prison will not help them reflect on their actions and work on ways to prevent any future conflicts. [may be an oversimplification of the two options] It will only make them more ill because they are in a confined space, which deprives them of the opportunity to talk to someone who is an expert at dealing with mentally ill people.

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[http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=About\\_Treatments\\_and\\_Supports&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=150789](http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=About_Treatments_and_Supports&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=150789)

8

[http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=About\\_Treatments\\_and\\_Supports&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=150789](http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=About_Treatments_and_Supports&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=150789)

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[http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=About\\_Treatments\\_and\\_Supports&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=150789](http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=About_Treatments_and_Supports&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=150789)



Being in jail will not be beneficial to people with a mental illness because it can lead to depression, suicide or a severe mental illness. [evidence] Instead of helping them deal with their urges, such as killing animals or sexually abusing others, being in jail will only exasperate their illness. The mentally insane need to interact with others and not be confined in small spaces. They need to learn how to deal with their illness, but they are unable to do so if they are sent to jail because the staff are meant to deal with criminals not victims. As humans, the thought of being alone frightens us. Nobody wants to be alone whether he or she admits it or not. We want to feel like we belong somewhere. [this is a shift in tone, less formal we/us] The fact that they are mentally ill does not make them any less human and therefore they need to feel like they belong. In a psychiatric hospital, they will constantly interact and be surrounded by people who are there to help them advance in their journey to mental recovery.

Sending mentally ill people to jail does not guarantee restoration to health when their sentence is over. There is no way of knowing how long it will take for them to be treated. For example, if a person is sentenced to jail for twenty years and they have a mental illness, those 20 years in jail will not guarantee that they will be cured. [not using adequate evidence to support claims] Mental illnesses are treated psychologically because there is no set cure. It is a continuous process in which patients learn how to control themselves and their emotions. Each person is treated differently because each is individually different and need a specific treatment to his or her case. Sending them to prison does not allow them to get treatment that specifically suits them because they are being treated like every other person in the

cells. The only differentiating fact in prison is the amount of years that they are sentenced for. [again, may be oversimplifying because of inadequate evidence] Because you cannot predict how long it will take someone to no longer be a threat to society, mentally ill people should stay in hospitals until it is established that they will not commit a crime again.

[Structure] Prison guards are trained to deal with and put in order violent criminals. Prison guards are not trained to treat mentally ill people and therefore should not be doing so. If sent to jail, mentally ill people will receive the same treatment as a man or woman who committed various murders while being extremely conscious and knowing that it was wrong. Is this fair to them? No, because they are not criminals. [Tone] The mentally ill do not commit crimes because they wanted to but because they had no control over their actions. Treating them like criminals will not help them get rid of their illness. If they are sent to a hospital, they will be surrounded with doctors and psychiatrists specially trained to deal with mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, multiple personality disorder, bipolar, etc. In order to be treated by the right people, the mentally ill should be sent to a psychiatric hospital while criminals should be sent to jail. [Structure/repetition]

In comparison to Richard Chase, who was sent to jail although he was declared as schizophrenic, Andrea Yates was found not guilty for reason of insanity and was admitted to a state mental hospital. Andrea Yates is a Texas resident who drowned her five children in the bathtub in 2001.<sup>10</sup> She thought, “the devil was inside her” and

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<sup>10</sup>

<http://www.cnn.com/2007/US/law/12/11/court.archive.yates8/index.html?iref=allsearch>

her children would burn if she did not save them. Before she was found not guilty by reason of insanity, the jury had sentenced her to life in prison after found guilty. If she did not have a mental expert evaluate her mental state, she would have spent the rest of her life in jail with no treatment. Andrea Yates suffered from a mental illness but is now being treated at a mental ward. This shows that people who plea not guilty by reason of insanity need treatment, not years in jail. Hearing about this case made me question the bond between a mother and her kids because not only did she drown them, but also she did it in a specific order in which they all saw their siblings being drowned [Tone shift—1<sup>st</sup> person, question does not seem relevant]. It is a really scary thing to know that such illnesses can bring such evil out of a person, no matter how much they love the other.

Some may argue that people plea not guilty by reason of insanity in order to escape going to jail. They may actually trick people into believing they are mentally ill when in reality they are not. In a study by David Rosenhan, eight sane people gained entrance into many psychiatric institutions by pretending to “hear voices”. Based on this study, 92-95% of the people who participated in it were classified as being insane when they were perfectly fine. Although they said that they were hearing voices, they did not alter any other part of their life to fit this experiment. With that said, once they were admitted to the psychiatric hospital, they continued to act like they would in everyday life. This comes to show that it is fairly easy to pretend to be insane. [citation/use of sources/ oversimplification]

Identifying if a person has schizophrenia can be challenging because some symptoms can be mistaken for something else. Schizophrenia usually starts to

develop around adolescence, which has a few symptoms of it's own. During your teenage years, your groups of friends change, your sleeping schedule changes and so does your personality. [shift in tone to second person/ less formal] All of these changes are also the very first symptoms of developing schizophrenia, causing people to not know whether it is due to mental illness or adolescence. Due to this, it is not easy to tell if someone is schizophrenic or not, making it difficult to determine if someone is lying about having a mental illness or not. [weak inference from source/inadequate evidence]

Although people can pretend to be mentally ill and have the possibility to get away with it, anyone can fake to be something that they are not. [unclear] Criminals who are guilty can fake not being guilty just like any other person. They can lie and swear to God that they are innocent [tone] knowing very well that they committed the crime. In the case of Casey Anthony, she was found not guilty for the murder of her 2 year old child because most of the evidence was controversial. [citation/ inadequate evidence] The problem was that Casey showed two sides to the jury. Judge Belvin Berry said that there was “the public persona that she wanted the jury to see and there was a side that she showed when the jury wasn’t there.”<sup>11</sup> Taking this into account, it shows how someone can put on a fake persona in order to escape his or her responsibilities. [inference based on inadequate evidence] We should also take into account that the juries are the ones who ultimately make the decision if someone is guilty or not. Psychologists or psychiatrists are used as a source of “professional opinion” when dealing with mental illnesses but they are not the ones with the final

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<sup>11</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/06/casey-anthony-evidence-judge-belvin-perry-convict\\_n\\_3223356.html?utm\\_hp\\_ref=casey-anthony](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/06/casey-anthony-evidence-judge-belvin-perry-convict_n_3223356.html?utm_hp_ref=casey-anthony)

verdict. People not only lie about being mentally ill, but they also lie about not being guilty. **As people**, we must trust the legal system and trust that the professionals who diagnose the people in court are accurate in their diagnosis. If properly diagnosed with mental evaluations, people who have a mental illness can then proceed to be sent to a hospital and not jail.

Mental illnesses are something people often just categorize as “crazy” without knowing the background information to each disorder. They are disorders that can develop within anyone, due to certain experiences. Anyone can be a victim of schizophrenia or multiple personality disorder making it important to be aware of how they can affect your personality and behavior. **[evidence]** **Due to the reality that people with a mental illness are victims within their own body, it is best that they are treated as victims and are sent to a psychiatric hospital instead of prison.**

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## CWPA

1. 1 Shifts from 1<sup>st</sup>, to 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> person throughout. Formal tone is inconsistent.
2. 2- Structure makes some leaps between points, others are repetitious.
3. 1 Inadequate evidence throughout. Inferences are made without support.
4. 1+ Attempts to integrate sources with own ideas, but the connections are tenuous.

“Honey, I’m home!”:

### An Analysis of the Television Domestic Sitcom and its Cultural Impact

The situational comedy has become an enduring part of television history. From the early beginnings of television, the sitcom has ruled the primetime arena in a way most dramas have not been able to. America has notably enjoyed domestic sitcoms that revolve around the lives of families on a weekly basis. In this essay, several family sitcoms that first broadcasted from the 1950’s to the 1990’s will be analyzed to see how the format changed from its simple beginnings to a means of igniting social debate and change.

### Alice, Lucy, and June

Coming off of the Second Great War and heading into the scare that was to Cold War, America searched for solace in anything they could. With the radio slowly phasing out as a means of entertainment, Television found its place. News. Serials<sup>12</sup>. Sitcoms. They all filled the homes of Americans that wanted an escape. The sitcoms of this time, in particular painted the beautiful parts of America with white picket fences and perfect “All American Families.” The creators of the sitcoms would have argued that they were painting the 1950’s America. But in retrospect, they were painting the “1950’s America” that America wished it were. [effective engagement with sources/voice]

[Paragraph format] In the 1950’s, there were few that were as important as Jackie Gleason in the realm of television. Coming off of a successful variety show, The Jackie Gleason Show, Gleason had a fresh idea that went against all network and peers’ suggestions: a sitcom (Pioneers of Television [citation format]). Despite the warnings, Gleason went ahead with his idea and on October 1st, 1955, *The Honeymooners* was

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<sup>12</sup> Now called Soap Operas. Guiding Light was the longest running soap opera at 72 seasons on the air (Guinness Book of World Records).

born. With Gleason playing a working class bus driver and Audrey Meadows playing his strong-headed wife, the show graced American television screens on Saturday nights with a simple Brooklyn couple's antics (Cantor 28). Lasting only one season of 39 episodes<sup>13</sup> and receiving modest ratings at the end due to the rival *The Perry Como Show* (Leszczak 83), *The Honeymooners* made a lasting impact. Although not portraying a perfect family, the series showcased that a traditional couple, who was content being a family of two, was relatable to viewers. Masculinity exuded through Gleason's "One of these days, Alice, pow, right in the kisser"-s and femininity through Alice's housewife troubles and table talk with her gal pal Trixie [evidence]. In later years, the effects of the show were evident in that it spawned several variety specials and took part in forming what would become *The Flintstones* (*P.O.T.*). The show touched on very few social problems directly in its original run, but instead tried to highlight what the fifties were about: a perfect life that wrapped up nicely by the night's close.

No family may have represented the time of the 1950's better than The Cleavers.

Premiering October 4th, 1957, *Leave It To Beaver* revolved around the a simple family residing in the town of Mayfield (Brooks 37). June, Ward, Wally and, of course, Beaver delighted families of the 1950's with a picturesque suburban life. The series was somewhat ahead of it's time, showcasing alcoholism, divorce and a toilet for the first time on American Television (Brooks 38). However, the series is remembered for being one that made up the idyllic American-made family prototype. Ward would go off to work and come home to help solve any trouble Beaver and Wally got into. June would

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<sup>13</sup> The series was contracted for two seasons, but Gleason felt that if he were to extend past "the original 39", the show would be remembered as just another show that was on for too long (Pioneers of Television).



keep her hair perfect and clean any mess the boys made. [voice/engagement with sources]

Author Ray Richmond critiques June Cleaver's role in America's premiere nuclear

family

Were an atomic bomb to drop a block away, June would beam that smile, place her manicured hand on Beaver's shoulder and reassure, "Don't you worry, we'll still have our dinner right on schedule.

Masculinity and femininity when it comes to American ideals wasn't a hot button issue for the series, it simply was the series. The Cleavers were everything 1950's America wanted to see and everything they wished to be.

"Lucy, you've got some splainin to do!" Although never actually uttered on air (Landay),

Desi Arnaz's catchphrase signifies a historic time in Television history. If the Cleavers were America's first family of television, The Ricardos were the first couple. On a

Monday the 15th in October of 1951, Lucy and Ricky made their first appearance to

America in their new situational comedy "*I Love Lucy*" [inconsistent format] (Brooks 25).

The show's format was not new, but some of the subject matter showcased would be. In

the nineteen fifties, the idyllic family with a husband, wife and two kids formed before

the shows conception. The discussion of a woman's sexuality or them being pregnant was

a risqué thing for television to show (Landay 68)<sup>14</sup>. But Lucille Ball saw this as a wall

that needed to be broken. In the show's 1953 season, Lucille Ball and her character on

her sitcom gave birth to a son (Landy 74). The baby brought joys to Ball and Arnaz, but

also ushered in a new era of the show and the landscape of Television itself. The show

<sup>14</sup> Although *I Love Lucy* is remembered for breaking ground, it was actually not the first to broadcast a pregnancy, a show titled "*Mary Kay and Johnny*" did it before in 1947 (Landy 69).

would transform from a “Honeymooners”-isc couple based sitcom, to a family show that would set the ground for future shows like “Leave it to Beaver.” [structure] The show also proved that a sitcom is capable of breaking new barriers on television, showcasing what it really is like for the average American couple and all the while doing enough tricks and jokes to keep the laugh track going.

In the beginnings of the sitcoms, series were not aimed at causing social change or discourse. The vessel was seen as simply a form of entertainment. But because the television and anything broadcasted on it was new and unseen to Americans, or anyone for that matter, before, the entire institute of television caused social change.

{engagement with sources] History can prove that not all American families look like the Cleavers or Ricardos. However, the sitcoms of this era, domestic family sitcoms in particular, do serve as a visual monument to American ideals of the times.

### **A Different Kind of Family**

In the 70's and 80's, America remained tasked with the Cold War and entered a new physical war in Vietnam. On the television front, shows were fast changing from the perfect family and domestic ideals, to a new format that wanted to deal with progressive issues. Over on the Daytime Serials, Erica Kane was having one of the first legal abortions (Warner 119). On the Primetime dramas, Dynasty's Alexis and Krystle were some of the first to say a choice word for a female dog. [voice/tone shifts, though seems appropriate for the subject matter] And on the Sitcoms, we saw the family that once was the Cleavers change into all new types of families. Families of color, families headed by a single mother and a family that was made of people from several different families all graced our screens in what could be called The Golden Age of the Sitcom.

[engagement/voice]

In September of 1984, NBC rolled out what would not only be one of the highlights of a comedian's career, but would be "touted as having been watched by more people than any other situational comedy in the history of television" (Books 144) [paraphrase]. *The Cosby Show* became a cultural phenomenon that redefined what an American family was in the 1980's. After a long structuring process, Bill Cosby pitched a series about an up-scale Black family living their everyday lives (Brooks 145). Although the situational comedy is no stranger to the domestic sitcom, *The Cosby Show* marked the first time that a Black family, and Blacks in general, were represented as anything other than working class (Cantor 33)<sup>15</sup>Through the Huxtable family, *Cosby* was able to place a middle class Black family on television, without compromising their culture. For the first time, a Black family with things like "Natural Black Hair" and African American clothing, were on the air without being reduced to a sub-culture that used improper english and that was uneducated (Fuller 132). The series itself was a ratings darling<sup>16</sup>, but the cultural impact was far more important. The sitcom was now able to not only touch on social issues such as women's liberation and racism, it was able to do so without blatantly coming out behind something.[tone] Black characters were simply featured in their everyday lives and in turn proved that there are multiple representations of their race

<sup>15</sup> Julia (NBC, 1968) showcased a Black mother and son in an upscale neighborhood. Although this signified the first time a Black family was on television not in a working class sense, the series differed from *The Cosby Show* because other than two core characters, a great majority of the supporting cast were caucasian.

<sup>16</sup> The series garnered the highest ratings of all primetime shows for five consecutive season, from the 1985-90 (Fuller 38). Specifically in the 1985 season, *The Cosby Show's* ratings were higher than any other program in all demographics (Fuller 35). Of the top fifteen broadcasts, episodes of the series took 13 spots, only Super Bowl XX broadcasts, the game and the post show, beat *Cosby* (Fuller 36).

[engagement/analysis]. The Huxtables are remembered for their revered comedy genius, but the Black community can better remember them as a groundbreaking piece of work that caused social change as much as it made people laugh. [integration of sources with own analysis]

[Structure]

For ten seasons, 1988-98, Candice Bergen portrayed a fictional news anchor for the fictional CBS newsmagazine, FYI. *Murphy Brown*, titled after Bergen's character, originated as a sitcom revolved around a recovering alcoholic, single, woman working in a high paced job. Although, during the course of the series, *Murphy Brown* took a new turn that would change the way viewers see an American family. Murphy Brown, the character, learned in season four that she was expecting a child with her ex-husband (Richmond 150). Unwilling to reconcile with him, Brown decided to take on being a single mother. This storyline would later cause controversy. Dan Quayle, then sitting Vice President of the United States, had this to say about the sitcom's impact:

Bearing babies irresponsibly is simply wrong. Failing to support children one has fathered is wrong and we must be unequivocal about this. It doesn't help matters when primetime TV has Murphy Brown, a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly paid professional woman, mocking the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone and calling it just another lifestyle choice.

Because there was such a stir about a mother *choosing* to be a single mother, the sitcom quickly passed through the comedy television arena and into national politics. The show's relevance in it's later years saw a decline in viewers (Brooks, et al.), but the show's importance in forming what the sitcom is today is still evident. The show was a

step in the women's liberation that America had not yet seen in a multi-camera setup<sup>17</sup>. A family no longer "required" all parts to function. [voice] A mother was perfectly capable of balancing a career and other problems in her everyday life<sup>18</sup>, all the while making a functional family.

### {Structure/transition}

On September 14th, 1985 NBC debuted a new sitcom and on the same day seven years later, bid farewell to four women that changed television with their golden jokes (Brooks 157)<sup>19</sup>. Dorothy, Rose, Blanche, and Sophia were *The Golden Girls* for seven seasons and through those seasons the series proved that a family could be formed in many different ways. Coming off of *Maude*<sup>20</sup>, Bea Arthur (Dorothy) and Rue McClanahan (Blanche) entered *The Golden Girls* with prior experience. Betty White (Rose) did as well after co-starring on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*<sup>21</sup>. The only one that did not come off of a series was Estelle Getty (Sophia), but this did not prohibit the series or actors from winning numerous accolades<sup>22</sup> in their time as the makeshift "golden" family. The series came at a time when networks believed that America was not interested in a sitcom about an older generation. Creator Susan Harris fought this with the introduction of *The Golden Girls*.

Although seen as simply a top-rated sitcom at the time, the series proved to be a means of

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<sup>17</sup> The multi camera setup is a production style, reserved typically for sitcoms and daytime serials, in which three cameras are constantly filming a scene. Then in editing, they are made into a single episode. Desi Arnaz is often credited with creating this.

<sup>18</sup> *Murphy Brown* is also credited with raising breast cancer awareness after a breast cancer story arc (James).

<sup>19</sup> This was the last broadcast on NBC, however the finale aired on May 9th, 1992 (Brooks).

<sup>20</sup> *Maude* (CBS) was a successful 1970's sitcom also focused on progressive movements (Sharbutt). However, the sitcom dealt with less family related issues, therefore it is not mentioned.

<sup>21</sup> *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* dealt with women's liberation though the sitcom format (Glatzer 5). Although those in the office could be called a "office family" the author felt that living under the same roof was a crucial part to the definition of a "sitcom family."

<sup>22</sup> Arthur, McClanahan, White, and Getty all received Emmys during the series original run. Only two other series, *All In the Family* and *Will & Grace*, have had all principal actors win Emmys for their roles (Emmys).

liberation. Elizabeth A. Glatzer PhD expands on this idea:

During its primetime era, *The Golden Girls* was considered a relatively radical show. The fact that it had a female cast of single women was not commonplace and the topics of conversations and the explicitness of discussions were provocative for their time. Viewers were not yet accustomed to the allusions *The Golden Girls* made to a woman's right to sexual agency.

*The Golden Girls* signified a change in the sitcom that had not yet been seen before. Not only were young women able to be who they wanted to be, women of a certain age were able to change and be free as well.[engagement with sources] Whether the show actually brought change to how older women acted or it just highlighted an already true fact can be debated, but two things go undisputed. *The Golden Girls* brought the idea to American television sets that the definition of family extends past blood or marital relationships. Also, America was able to see a group (or family) of older women speak like they had a mind of their own. And this was all done with the use of a Saturday night sitcom (Associated Press).

This era of the sitcom saw change that television had never seen before. No longer the new invention that the first era ushered in, television and the situational comedy were able to expand beyond the confines of a "typical" domestic life. Now families were not cookie-cutter, they were dynamic. Now storylines were not simple domestic problems, but issues that caused political action. Writers and actors/comedians were now a part of a societal discourse. Television was for the first time, an agent of change in the American society. [voice/engagement with sources]

### **Conclusion**

When television is being made, several people are involved: The film crew, the actors, the network, etc. When television is broadcast, the game changes. Millions of viewers are able to see one thing at a one time. The life the actors give to the characters and the words that the writers feed to them are taken in and later resonated throughout the viewing culture. Because in history the sitcom has been the most successful primetime format, it has been able to connect with people in a way no other has. Serials and newscasts discuss the society in the same harsh way that we experience it by living. Sitcoms, however, are able to talk about the same issues, but coat them with enough sugar and smiles that our problems don't seem as scary as they really are.

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### FORMAT of WORKS CITED

#### CWPA

1. 3 Use of humor is appropriate, suits the topic. Focus remains on the text even when language is less formal
2. 3 Some transitions needed, paragraph indents, but overall structure is sound
3. 3 Solid use of evidence to support claims.
4. 3 Writer is engaged with source material, follows up and interprets critically. Demonstrates ownership of material.



**Appendix E**  
**CDA of Writing Samples**

Writing Sample	Quote	CDA Type/Comments
1 (Baseline)	" <u>I strived</u> to enroll at a <b>prestigious</b> university in order to help my family and leave the ' <b>ghetto</b> ' behind..."	Topicalization/Agency/ Interdependence/ Active verbs/Diction (connotations)
1 (Baseline)	" <u>No one</u> wants to be the <b>teacher's pet</b> "	Connotations/ Presupposition Cultural knowledge
1 (Baseline)	A reoccurring theme throughout the poem is <b>conquering fears</b> and <u>opening a door to unknown possibilities</u> .	Aspirational capital/Agency
1 (Baseline)	<u>The shop was a hit</u> , <b>my father made</b> breakfast and lunch, <b>my uncle helped</b> make the doughnuts, and my <b>grandmother made</b> her famous Portuguese pastries.	Topicalization/Active verbs/ Familial and Aspirational capital
1 (Baseline)	"The past doesn't <b>define you</b> & the future shouldn't be <b>defined for you</b> ."	Resistance/Agency/Register (2 <sup>nd</sup> person)/Modality (authority)
1 (Baseline)	The <u>questioning of free will</u> pervades her poem and <b>my story</b> for, <u>do we really wander out</u> "having our own free lives."	Subjectivity/Register
1 (Baseline)	Because of the wide array of my characters, <u>I like to think that they let me understand the views of other students and my own academic life in a better light</u> .	Agency/Register/Lived Experience
1 (Baseline)	" <u>I may not be rich</u> or have parents that can afford everything, I have <b>strong family values that to me</b> are most important."	Interdependence/Subjectivity/ Familial capital
1 (Baseline)	<b>As a person</b> , <u>you have to face the "stories wandering out"</u> and <u>do what will get you to where you want to be</u> .	Topicalization/Register/Agency/ Aspirational capital
1 (Baseline)	<b>I interpreted</b> the stories as	Subjectivity/lived experience

	possible lies getting out of control in the poem. <b>However</b> , while writing <b>my</b> story I <u>realize</u> stories can be truth as well.	
2 (summer research)	However, because of her gender, Jessica assumes a <b>different</b> Jewish <b>identity</b> than her male counterparts, or in a sense, <u>a lack of an identity at all</u> .	Resistance [to normative reading]/ Subjectivity
2 (summer research)	This sentence represents all the <b>anger</b> Shylock has buried <u>within him</u> , and is now able to <u>release it</u> in a setting where <u>many of those who have disrespected him</u> over the years will <b>finally</b> <u>have to listen to what he has to say</u> .	Agency/ tone/cultural knowledge/connotations/ Resistance
2 (summer research)	Portia and Bassanio <u>always mention money in each other's faces</u> ; it is the <b>ultimate reason</b> for their actions.	Tone/Presupposition/Modality/ Register
2 (summer research)	Notice also that Rosenshield mentions Christian revenge which is not mercy at all—in <b>fact</b> it is in <b>sharp contrast</b> to it.	Resistance/Subjectivity
2 (summer research)	The <b>power</b> within relationships goes back to <u>where the characters are</u> .	Topicalization/Subjectivity
2 (summer research)	If <b>we see</b> Antonio as a saint who helps his friends, and dies for them, <u>then we are seriously misguided</u> .	Active verbs/Modality/Register
2 (summer research)	But once her character is analyzed it is <b>obvious</b> that Portia does an <b>ill job</b> <u>representing the modern woman</u> and relies on the traits of the <b>stereotypical woman</b> to further develop her character	Modality/Connotations/ Presuppositions
2 (summer research)	In a <b>public group</b> , <b>we</b> <u>constantly try to prove that we are worthy</u> and do things that	Presuppositions/Register/ Subjectivity

	<u>make us feel accepted by others.</u>	
2 (summer research)	This trial grants him a <u>sense of control</u> and the <u>possibility to obtain justice</u> , something he <b>craves</b> especially considering the circumstances he is in.	Connotations/Subjectivity
2 (summer research)	There <b>prejudice</b> towards each other <u>does not allow them to realize the various similarities in the way they live their lives.</u> Both Shylock and Antonio, regardless of their religion, <b>strive</b> to become <b>more wealthy</b> individuals <u>in whatever way they knew best.</u>	Topicalization/ Connotations/Modality
3 (personal narrative)	I don't know who <b>I</b> am but that's the point of going away from home. <b>I</b> am here because this is where <b>I</b> <u>see myself for the next four years trying to put the pieces together for myself and to define who I am.</u>	Agency/ Register/Aspirational Capital
3 (personal narrative)	<b>My imagination</b> made up for what we lacked in life.	Topicalization/Connotations/ Agency
3 (personal narrative)	I found myself <b>wiping</b> my own <u>tears trying to make it home before my mother so she wouldn't see my face and ask any questions...</u> At such a young age I began to <b>push aside</b> my own issues for my older brother, because I had to <u>take care of him.</u>	Agency/Familial capital/Active verbs
3 (personal narrative)	Because nothing breeds a <u>sense of love for one another</u> as much as <b>struggling</b> together does	Aspirational and Familial capital/ Active verbs
3 (personal narrative)	In the simplest way, he said " <b>Papi se fue</b> " but I just couldn't get my head around it.	Topicalization/Linguistic capital/Subjectivity
3 (personal narrative)	Now, <u>understanding the system</u> , I know only that <u>it is going to get harder</u> from here on out, but I feel that I am and will be well-prepared for that	Navigational and Aspirational capital/Agency/Active verbs

	because <b>I work hard</b> to come here, and I will continue to work harder until I graduate.	
3 (personal narrative)	It isn't <b>popular</b> to change the world, and neither is it <b>easy</b> .	Connotation/Presupposition/Resistance
3 (personal narrative)	Lastly I am <b>very proud</b> of my <b>ability</b> to stay true to who I am this semester.	Agency/Modality
3 (personal narrative)	<b>I changed</b> the vision of my narrative to <u>how I bridged two languages</u> , English and Vietnamese, in my everyday life. <b>I spoke</b> about <u>my trials and tribulations</u> through the process and <u>how my mother played a major role</u> in the process.	Topicalization/Modality/ Linguistic and Familial capital
4 (AY research)	<b>Cosby</b> was able to place a middle class Black family on television, <u>without compromising their culture</u> . For the first time, a Black family with things like "Natural Black Hair" and African American clothing, were on the air without being <u>reduced to a sub-culture</u> that used <b>improper english</b> and that was <b>uneducated</b> .	Topicalization/Subjectivity/ Cultural knowledge/ Presupposition
4 (AY research)	In fact it is almost " <b>uncool</b> " to discuss academic topics in a social environment, such as at lunch or at a library.	Connotations/Presuppositions/ Resistance (to normative college experience)
4 (AY research)	<b>I believe</b> the purpose of jail is to punish criminals <u>but also to teach them how to reintegrate themselves back into their community</u> and be certain they do not commit any more crimes	Agency/Active verbs/Cultural knowledge
4 (AY research)	In post feministic America, women are entering the workforce <u>but are still limited</u> to higher positions due to the <b>overwhelming power</b> that men sustain.	Subjectivity/Connotations/ Presuppositions

4 (AY research)	All of these students <b>strive</b> to earn a <u>degree that will help them advance</u> in the work place, <b>however</b> <u>they cannot afford to miss work</u> in order to attend traditional colleges and universities.	Subjectivity/Active verbs/ Aspirational capital
4 (AY research)	If China is <u>adopting some of our values</u> or <u>taking the time to learn our culture</u> , whether it is <b>our language</b> or open market, why is it that we <b>dismiss their values</b> ?	Linguistic and Social capital/Register/Modality
4 (AY research)	The <b>cliché</b> credentials that college expect <u>are not the only requirements</u> are that create their college decisions.	Connotations/Tone/Lived experience/Modality
4 (AY research)	<b>In Peru</b> , <u>I was told</u> by one individual that PDA abounds because the “public is the only place where you can do stuff like that.”	Topicalization/Subjectivity
4 (AY research)	The <b>complexities</b> of this <b>system</b> <u>stand as a barrier</u> between families and the foster children. They <u>don’t allow themselves</u> to think as anything to be permanent.	Connotations/Lived experience/ Active verbs
4 (AY research)	To fully understand and participate in written communication, people <b>must know</b> that <u>language is both a practical and creative vehicle</u> to transmit ideas, feelings, dreams, and experience.	Modality/Register

**Appendix F**  
**Interview Protocol**

As you know, I am doing a study on the academic writing experiences of students. I am going to ask you a few questions about your academic experience this year.

1. Tell me a little about the writing assignments you've had in classes this year.

PROBES:

Can you describe those assignments? (researched, reflective, etc)  
What type of assignments did you prefer? Why?  
What type of assignments did you find most challenging?

3. When a professor assigned a paper, did s/he offer guidelines?

PROBES:

How specific were they? Were they helpful?  
Did you feel you knew how to write the paper the professor was expecting?

4. Did you get help in writing papers?

PROBES:

From whom? (the instructor, writing tutor, friends)  
Did this change (getting help or from whom) over the course of the year?

5. What do you see as your strengths and weaknesses as a writer?

6. I want to ask a few questions about the writing samples you sent me (I would be sure to comment positively on the samples here, to build comfort and to let them know I was familiar with the specifics).

7. What made you choose those papers?

8. Did you choose the topic for the paper, or was it assigned?

PROBES:

If it was a choice, what made you choose to write about that topic?  
How was that choice received by your instructor?

9. What did you enjoy most about writing that paper? What do you feel are its strengths?

10. What was difficult about it (follow up question as necessary)?

11. When you look back on it now, how do you see it? Why?

12. Question 12 would refer to specifics from the samples. I would bring copies with me for the students to refer to, and ask questions around why they had chosen specific language or details. I would try to use examples where I was unclear whether my own analysis was correct, or if the sample was interesting or unusual. These questions would serve as member checks of my initial analysis.



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