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Making the Grade: Academic Literacies and First-Generation College Students in a Highly Selective Liberal Arts College

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MAKING THE GRADE: ACADEMIC LITERACIES
AND FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS
IN A HIGHLY SELECTIVE LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE

BY

THERESA PERRI AMMIRATI

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN
ENGLISH

UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

2003

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY DISSERTATION

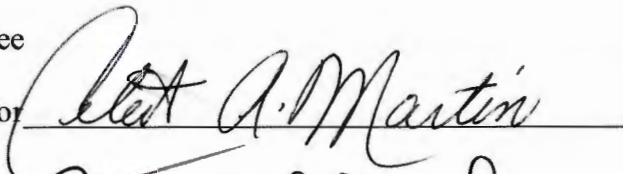
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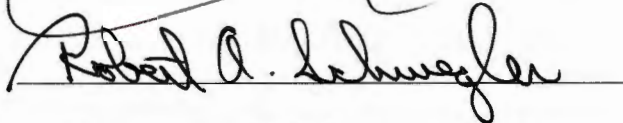
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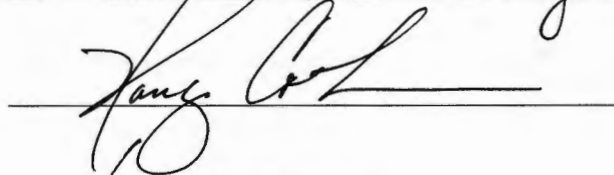
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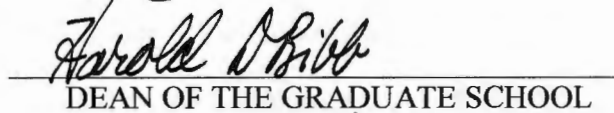
Major Professor











DEAN OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

2003

ABSTRACT

Previous research on first-generation college students has concentrated largely on students enrolled in community colleges or universities. This study examines first-generation students at a single, highly selective, four-year, liberal arts college, and uses an academic literacies approach to understand the relationship between first-generation status and written and oral literacies as illustrated in academic papers and classroom performance. Twelve first-generation college students were interviewed extensively about their early literacy experiences, family background, relationship to family and home community, high school preparation, selection of and transition into a highly selective college, and written and oral literacy experiences at that institution. Writing samples were collected throughout the semester from a subset of five students enrolled in writing-intensive courses, and those papers were examined closely and discussed at length with the student writers. Students were also observed in classroom situations. Participants in the study exhibited a range of perceptions about academic preparation, integration into the academic community and comfort with writing and class participation, with several striking similarities, particularly regarding early reading experiences, relationships with family, and attitudes toward the use of personal experience as a foundation for academic work. Suggestion for further research are proposed in order to provide more extensive information that will help to shape educational programs for first-generation students at such institutions.

Major Adviser: Celest Martin, Associate Professor of English

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This dissertation owes its life to many people. First, I must acknowledge and thank my parents, to whom this dissertation is dedicated. They hoped only that I would find a satisfying and productive life and gave me the freedom to decide what that life would be, along with the tools to achieve it. Their love and support were without limits and their guidance and wisdom have inspired me all of my life. Everything I have done or am is in some measure due to these extraordinary people.

I am grateful also to the staff and administration of Connecticut College, particularly Fran Hoffmann and Helen Regan who found a way to give me the time I needed to complete the dissertation. Beverly Kowal and Phil Ray went beyond the call of duty, meeting with students when I could not and providing encouragement over the long years of my graduate work. Jill Blodgett, a rare and wonderful assistant, does more than I can repay or thank her for, from fielding phone calls to figuring out how to prepare a Table of Contents to usually knowing what I need before I do. I wish also to acknowledge the many friends and colleagues, too numerous to mention by name, who have buoyed me through difficult days and provided me with information and direction, and whose questions and comments have helped me to refine my ideas.

It is obvious that I could not have done this work without the help and contributions of the twelve students whose words and experiences I drew upon in my research. They gave generously and unstintingly of their time and energy.

Their resilience, good humor and intelligence have been a continual inspiration and I look forward to their future successes almost as much as they do.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This study has its roots in both my own life and in the lives of students I have known during the course of almost forty years of teaching college English, most of them as a teacher of writing. Teachers of writing, compositionists, are often privy to more than their assignments seem to require. Whether the class is called basic composition, advanced expository writing, creative non-fiction, or some version of any of these, it is in writing classes that students often reveal themselves most, using writing tasks to tell their own stories. And the stories that have most intrigued me throughout the years have been those told by students for whom college was not an entitlement, but the site of daily struggle as they fought against parental desires, their own doubts and fears, the burden of too little money and too little support from friends and relatives, and the expectations of the academy, where there was little allowance for social and cultural constraints that influenced how they wrote and how they thought.

My first experiences with these students were at a small community college in Pennsylvania. One of the pictures in my memory is of Joe Cusak,¹ whose college career was an almost constant struggle against the opposition of his father, who had not himself gone to college and who could not understand or respect the ambitions of his son to become an underwater archaeologist rather than to work in the family business laying floors. I still see Joe sitting in my office, shyly admitting to me that he wanted to do nothing more with his life than dive among the wrecks of old ships to find out what secrets they still held but fearing that his father's opposition would

¹ All student names have been changed to protect their privacy.

ultimately prove too strong and that he would end up setting tile and never having the chance to explore his own dreams. I remember also Daisy Sanchez, Joe's girlfriend, who wanted desperately to become a musician, but who knew that majoring in music would be looked on as an indulgence by her seamstress mother, who saw college as the way to material success and to whom Daisy felt a strong sense of obligation for the years she had struggled to single-handedly rear her children. And I recall Margaret Owens, who came to college despite the recommendation of her high school guidance counselor that she should plan to work in a factory, and for whom every critical comment on a paper was a sign that the guidance counselor was probably right. And most clearly I see Sam O'Reilly, whom I taught a few years later at a community college in Connecticut soon after he returned from a tour of duty in Vietnam. I remember him as a brilliant writer whose desire to be the first in his family to get a college education and then become a famous novelist was interrupted by the war, and whose death from pneumonia at far too young an age was the indirect result of the drug addiction he had developed in Vietnam and the years of poverty before and after his military service.

Students like Joe and Daisy and Margaret and Sam were in the majority at the community colleges where I taught and they took some comfort from one another, sharing their stories and offering each to the other the support that was lacking from their family and non-college friends. Moreover, many of the teachers at such institutions knew that most of their students were first-generation, lacked polished writing skills, and usually were either unfamiliar with academic expectations or smarting from unsuccessful high school experiences and looking to the community

college as their last chance for a successful academic life. But such students existed as well, although in much smaller numbers, at the elite four-year college I taught at in New England somewhat later. I think, for example, of Darleen Boudreau, a white woman and first-generation college student from a poor section of New Haven, unable to spend her junior year abroad as more than half of her peers did because financial aid did not then travel and she could not afford either the tuition or the airfare that would get her abroad. Darleen bitterly recounted stories of dormmates who spoke of winter breaks skiing in Aspen or sunning on the beaches of Jamaica, while she wondered if she could afford the train fare that would get her back home to parents who weren't quite sure she should be at such a "ritzy" college, or, for that matter, at college at all. As one of the "best" students in her inner city high school, she had been accepted to the college even though her vocabulary and ability to write a sustained argument were painfully inadequate for the demands of the institution, and along with feeling a social misfit, she also came to doubt her intellectual ability, believing that in that area, too, she did not fit in.

I see Emma Strong, a Haitian student who had grown up in the housing projects of Brooklyn and whose cousin had been murdered in a drive-by shooting shortly before Emma entered her first year of college in a peaceful New England town. Emma had important gifts as a creative writer, but lacked some of the basic grammatical and punctuation skills that would allow her writing to be taken seriously, so that the story she wrote about her cousin that first year evoked tears from her creative writing teacher in almost the same measure that it evoked groans because of the many surface errors that interfered with the teacher's ability to read

the story easily. I still see the sad eyes of Elisabeth Vasquez, a “Newyorican,” who had been out of the Bronx only twice before she graduated from high school, and who ended up at college sitting alongside students whose summers were spent in the Hamptons, on the Cape, or in Maine, whose parents were lawyers and doctors. Sometimes without my summoning it, I can see the picture of Elisabeth’s face, her affect becoming almost blank as her classmates discussed the lives of the characters in *House on Mango Street* with sympathy and concern but with little idea of Elisabeth’s own Mango Street—the deep poverty from which she came, the reality of the drive-by shootings that occurred almost weekly in her inner city neighborhood, and the fears she felt for her mother and siblings who lived in that neighborhood every day. But her writing, ah, that was another matter entirely. It was there, in work she believed only I would see, that she came alive and wrote with a focused passion that made even an experienced and, I like to think, sensitive reader of novels look at the literature in new ways.

I empathized with these students, and others, because while the reality of my early life was not as difficult or as extreme as theirs, I knew what it was like to be different from my classmates, to have parents to whom college was almost literally unimaginable, to feel often like an impostor who was soon going to be told that I didn’t belong. But in many ways, I was luckier than they. To begin with, while my parents were poor and uneducated, they were people who believed that their daughters should have whatever opportunities were available to live good and happy lives, who believed that education was the key to that kind of life, and who would do whatever they could to help us achieve our own dreams rather than theirs. I was

also lucky that I grew up in Brooklyn, New York, at a time when the public colleges of New York City were not only academically excellent, but were cost-free except for a nominal student activities fee, so that my parents' financial circumstances would not keep me from receiving an excellent education. And finally, the love of reading and learning that my parents cultivated in my life, almost from instinct since they had no history to fall back on, gave me the ability to embrace the opportunities I had and to succeed at academic pursuits.

The family story goes that when my father learned that my mother was pregnant with me, their first child, he went to a bookstore and immediately purchased four complete sets of books: *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, *The Collected Works of Mark Twain* (in several volumes, leather bound and imprinted on the spine with the number of the volume in gilt), *Masterpieces of Western Literature*, and *The Collected Works of Charles Dickens*. My father was an immigrant who had come to the United States when he was seven. A mischievous boy, who was not a scholar in any sense, he'd tell my sisters and me stories about being in various kinds of trouble that would often culminate in paddling by his teachers or, when his parents learned about his problems, by my grandmother or grandfather. He continued his schooling until his first year of high school, when the Depression hit and he had to leave school in order to help support his family. The impulse that made him buy all those books did not come from his reading, since, by his own account, he'd read none of them and was never much of a reader as far as I can recall. Nor did he have an excess of money that he needed to spend, and he well understood the value of thrift. My father worked almost all his life as a laborer,

never earning very much beyond minimum wage. But he seemed to have some sense that if his children were to succeed, they would need to be educated and that their education would begin with reading. I remember sitting on the floor in front of the living-room bookcase at a very young age, reading a short story by Guy de Maupassant, running my fingers over the yellow and red bindings of the Mark Twain, admiring the silver lettering and black leather of the Dickens set, leafing through Gibbons' *Fall of the Roman Empire*. And in these memories I am a very young child, unable really to understand what I was reading, although able to sound out the long words, finding the books rich and magical in some way, and finally determining that someday I was going to read every book in the New Utrecht Branch of the Brooklyn Public Library, starting with the As and working my way all the way through the Zs (a goal, by the way, I gave up long ago).

Despite my parents' lack of education (my mother left school for reasons similar to my father's when she was in the eighth grade), and despite the relatively stringent financial circumstances of my family's life, and despite the fact that Italian-American girls in the nineteen-fifties and sixties were not encouraged to pursue higher education, it was always a given that my sisters and I would go to college if that was what we wanted (although I recall pointing out to my mother that she never said "if you go to college"; rather it was always "when you go..."). My mother used to say that having an education would mean that we would be able to support ourselves if necessary and that we would never have to work in a factory, as she did, or do manual labor, as my father did, to earn our livelihood. But more than that, both she and my father respected learning and saw it as a door to worlds they

would never enter, a door that they wanted to open for their children. And out of their love for us, or their own unfulfilled but rarely mentioned dreams, they were determined that we would have the education we wanted, despite criticism from friends and neighbors who thought that perhaps we were reaching beyond our station in life, or worse, wasting time, since, as they were fond of telling my parents, we “were only going to get married anyway and become over-educated dishwashers and diaper changers.”

I knew even as a high school student that my parents’ ambitions, which had, in fact, become mine, were odd among my peers. More typical was the experience of one of my friends who was told by her parents that she could not accept the scholarship she had received from an upstate college because “college was not a place for girls.” (She was quite bright as I recall and finally did end up being allowed to accept one of the three scholarships she had applied for despite her parents’ objections—the one that would enable her to attend secretarial college, where she would get an education more appropriate to the life her parents expected her to lead.) I was grateful that I did not have to fight my parents in order to go to school. I understood that their willingness to continue to support me so that I could attend college, even though I would have to earn my own spending money, was a rare gift in the world I inhabited. In that world, young women like me were expected to graduate from high school, work, and turn over to their parents a significant portion of their paychecks until they married, when they would have their own children and become full-time mothers and wives—unless their husbands could not earn enough to support the family on their own, in which case, they would

work as sales clerks or secretaries, a step up from the jobs their mothers had had as seamstresses or working on assembly lines.

And so, I went to college, as did my sisters. Since the Internet did not exist then, to do a college search meant asking friends and relatives what they would suggest or relying on a high school guidance counselor. My high school friends whose parents were educated and successful went on to private four year colleges, a few of which I had heard of. I knew, of course, that there were schools like Harvard and Yale and Columbia, all-three all-male at the time, but so far out of my experience that it never occurred to me to think of Radcliffe or Barnard, their all-female counterparts, as a possibility. My parents could not offer any suggestions, so I was pretty much on my own in terms of looking ahead. Our high school guidance counselors knew that the City schools would provide an excellent and almost free education, and that is where they advised us to apply.

The City colleges at that time had fairly rigorous admissions standards so that all of the students who were there, whatever their backgrounds, at least had had successful high school records and were expected to be well-prepared and highly capable. I was lucky that Brooklyn College, while having its fair share of students who came from backgrounds very unlike mine (I remember meeting the daughter of a dermatologist, and not even knowing what that was until she explained), was also home to a fairly large number of students whose parents, like mine, were factory workers, and laborers, or shoe salesmen and housewives who had not gone to college. Nonetheless, there were moments when I suffered enormous self-doubt, questioning whether my opinions had merit, wondering how people decided on a

major, knowing that although I was smart, there were gaps in my knowledge of life and academia that I could not see bridging easily.

Somehow I muddled through, although there was virtually no one to whom I could turn for advice—about courses to take or an eventual major or about talking to teachers or taking advantage of whatever resources existed. My parents were loving and supportive but had no experience even with high school, much less college. I was embarrassed to speak with teachers and display my ignorance of the rudiments of college life. My friends knew no more than I did. And, although I had a faculty adviser, I was called in to see her exactly twice in all my years at college and did not think to ask her for help. Fortunately I was a good writer and loved to read, and so I turned almost instinctively to English as a major. I knew how to work hard, so I was able to have a reasonably successful academic career. Nonetheless, there are still “might-have-beens” that flicker through my mind from time to time as I wonder what would have happened had I been a little more sophisticated about academic life.

Times have changed, for me and for students in general. The City Colleges of New York have now been organized into the City University of New York, and they charge a relatively modest but nonetheless real tuition. The Bachelor’s degree has taken the place of a high school diploma in terms of being a basic requirement for decent jobs, and community colleges provide opportunities for students whose high school experiences and grades do not allow them admission to a regular four-year school. At the same time, four-year, highly competitive schools, recognizing the need to add diversity to their institutions, have developed programs and policies that

attract students from a wide range of backgrounds. As I write this, Affirmative Action policies, although under siege, are still in effect at many post-secondary institutions, and educational researchers over the past twenty or thirty years have turned their attention to questions of student success and student attrition. And my interest in how students fare at college has been sharpened and developed through my years of teaching and college administration.

I now teach at a highly competitive, four-year, private college, where first-generation students are a decided minority. Although some of these students are white, many belong to racial and ethnic minorities; although a few of them are the children of business owners or white-collar workers, that is, a part of what could be considered the middle-class, others are the children of laborers, clerical workers, or even the unemployed. They have all met the rigorous admissions standards of the college, but some of them come from elite preparatory schools and others from inner city high schools; a very small number come from small towns, with the majority coming from large cities, mainly in New England. Despite their differences, what they have in common is the experience of being the first of their families to attend college. All of them lack a tradition of higher education or family they can turn to for advice about majors or course selection or help on their papers.

Other than race, the factors that distinguish them from their second- and third-generation classmates are invisible, and it is these invisible elements and their effects that I wish to examine with the hope that my examination will yield some insights that may prove helpful to the teachers and administrators such students will encounter as they enter these kinds of colleges. What follows is not a quantitative

study that will yield scientific results. Rather, I have chosen a modified case study approach in order to draw portraits of some of the students I know who are first-generation, and, for the most part, working-class students at a small, private, highly competitive liberal arts college in New England. I have interviewed these students extensively, and I have read their writing and sat in on their classes. I have attempted to show what their daily lives are like, academically and socially.

Academic literacy, the underlying concern of my study, is about more than the basic ability to read and write. It is about how students, particularly first-generation students, who often belong to the working-class and are ethnic and racial minorities as well, juggle the varied discourses of their lives. For these students,

The differences between academic and nonacademic life are defined mostly in terms of a struggle over ways of making meaning—with language practices, rhetorical traditions, worldviews, and ideologies. Compositionists work not just to help students develop acceptable academic discourse but also to persuade the academy to change in response to the students, translating insights about difference into an institutionally transformative pedagogy.²

My hope is that this study will strike a chord with other writing teachers that will not only help to increase their understanding of the particular and sometimes invisible issues that affect these students but will also help in the process of turning the alien world many first-generation students encounter when they enter college into a familiar and manageable place in which they can thrive.

² Mary Soliday, "Class Dismissed," *College English* 61, no. 6 (1999) : 732. (Hereafter cited in text as Soliday, "Class Dismissed.")

CHAPTER 2: THE PROBLEM

Rationale for the Study

I began this study of first-generation students at a highly selective, private, liberal arts college because I wished to tell the stories of some of the students I had worked with over the years—first-generation young men and women in an intellectual world far different from the one from which they had started. As a teacher of writing for most of my career, I have had the opportunity to see a side of students that I might have missed had I taught only literature classes. That is, I have often had the chance to get to know not only about their intellectual lives but about their personal backgrounds as well. The students I have taught in a variety of institutions come from all kinds of backgrounds. For many, particularly at the institution that is the setting of this study, college is the logical next step in a career of successful, well-supported academic moves that frequently begin with a nursery school carefully selected by their parents and continue through equally carefully selected elementary, middle and high schools. Having little question about their academic ability and their ability or even right to study and learn among other excellent students, and despite some of the usual transitional angst that occurs for many students as they enter college, these students rapidly make their adjustment to a new set of classrooms and a new set of learning tasks.

Other students, however, intelligent as they may be, have had a less certain road on their way to college. Some of these students have grown up in safe, middle-class neighborhoods, but many have had to do their high school homework to the accompaniment of drug deals going on beneath their apartment house windows, or

have been awakened by gunshots during the night before an exam. Some have been very lucky in having parents who, despite their own lack of education, have discovered ways to have their sons and daughters enrolled in special academic programs that would take them out of their neighborhoods and give them an opportunity for ever-increasing levels of education; others have been stars in neighborhood schools even though their academic preparation may have been affected by lack of equipment, of adequate school supplies, and of the stimulation that comes from other bright and ambitious students sharing the same classes and helping to provide the challenges that ensure the growth of intellect. And some have relied literally on the "kindness of strangers" and on their own drive and ambition to go in an entirely different direction from the one in which they started. When these students enter a college with rigorous admission standards, high tuition, and a certain air of privilege, their individual stories are often lost.

Some of them are noticeable because their race or ethnicity makes them obviously and at least superficially different from the majority; it is their race or ethnicity, then, that from an institutional perspective becomes the prime focus and only source of their difference as well as a possible source of any difficulty they may encounter in fitting into school and thriving there. Thus, despite the fact that almost all of the literature dealing with first-generation students and attrition shows that first-generation students have a higher rate of attrition than traditional students, there has been virtually no research on how they fare at highly rigorous, highly competitive colleges, where they are often recruited as a means of increasing diversity as well as for their own merits. Their status as first-generation college

students unused to an academic milieu, and the questions and concerns that may arise from their being, in a very real sense, strangers in a strange land, are often disregarded, especially in elite schools for which they appear and usually are academically fit and where they wear the same kinds of clothing and speak the same language as their traditional-student peers. I started this project believing that their stories were worth hearing, at the same time not knowing whether their being the first in their families to attend college, and an elite college at that, had in fact affected their lives and academic choices, or in what ways.

The Research Site

Selection of Site

Because there has been very little research on how these students fare at elite institutions, I chose to examine first-generation students at a highly selective college, specifically the one at which I am employed. As Dean of Freshmen since 1995, a member of the English Department since 1976, and founding director of the college's Writing Center in 1980 (a post I held for the following 15 years), I am familiar with the institution and with the students who attend it, individually and collectively, and this institution seemed well-suited to my purposes—small, academically well-ranked, known for its attention to individual students and for its faculty who, while pursuing their own scholarly interests, are primarily interested in teaching. Although more details follow about the study's participants and the particular methods used here, to understand the students who are involved in my research, it is necessary to have some knowledge of the context—that is, the school—in which these students pursue their education.

Description of Site

Although young by the standards of some of the schools it considers its peers, the college at which this study was conducted ranks among the most selective small, private, liberal arts institutions in the Northeast. Beginning its history as a women's college shortly after the turn of the 20th century, and financed by the citizens of New London, the town in which it is located, Connecticut College began to admit males in the late nineteen-sixties. While there has never been an equal number of men and women enrolled, there were years during the nineteen-eighties when percentages were as close as 51% (females) to 49% (males). Currently, in a student body of about 1900 students, Connecticut College has a ratio of approximately 60% females to 40% males, with a student-faculty ratio of about 12-1.³ Although never included in the top ten schools of its type, or even the top twenty, as a women's college it was often referred to as the "eighth sister," to both distinguish it from and show its relationship to the Seven Sisters – the all-female partners of Ivy League schools such as Harvard and Columbia. The decision to admit males occurred at a time when many women's colleges had to face difficult financial issues and the possibility that without turning to co-education they would not survive. Unlike some transitions to co-education, however, Connecticut College's was relatively calm. While some alumnae protested vigorously, on the whole, the college's graduates seemed to recognize the need for such a change and accepted it with little protest.

Just as the Seven Sisters to whom it is related, in the years when it was all-female, Connecticut College had a student body that consisted almost exclusively of

³ All figures provided by the Connecticut College Office of Admission.

middle-class and upper middle-class Caucasian women. These women came mostly from New England and the Northeast, and the majority expected college life to prepare them to take their place in the world as wives and mothers, generally doing unpaid charitable work, rather than as doctors, lawyers, professors and executives, the jobs their husbands would hold. Unlike its "sisters," Connecticut College had a very small endowment, which meant that its resources were somewhat limited, although its faculty throughout the nine decades of its existence has included at least a handful of scholars of international renown. Its campus is located in a former whaling city, but it is far enough from the downtown that it has been relatively isolated from the issues this city and all declining cities have had to face, so that the setting is bucolic and serene. And while there has always been a strong volunteer ethic among students that took them into town schools and social service agencies, it is only in the past ten or fifteen years that there has been a push to strengthen the bonds between town and gown and to have students see the town and townspeople as a part of the college community rather than from the perspective of Lords and Ladies Bountiful, dispensing charitable works among the city's poor.

When the school was all-female, the areas in which it was strongest were the humanities and the arts, with the sciences receiving the smallest share of the college's limited resources, along with the fewest majors. For many years, it was home to a major dance program that attracted national and international attention. As both a reflection of the times and the kind of school it originally was, the students it attracted rarely aspired to graduate or professional schools. In the years since the sixties, however, as a function of the economy, evolving roles for women,

and the changes in the school's overall population, that situation has changed. Additionally, the sciences have become much more important, and many minority, although not necessarily first-generation, students begin college by planning to be part of the pre-med program or to major in the sciences.

The move to coeducation occurred in the decades when social changes were pointing the way to a share of worldly opportunities for racial and ethnic minorities and working-class men and women; these opportunities included the possibility of higher education at prestigious colleges that were beginning to make room for nontraditional students. Recognizing the societal transformations that were occurring in the sixties, Connecticut College in 1966 began a Return to College (RTC) program for women over the age of 21 who had had one year or more of successful college study. Eventually men were also included, but as in the regular undergraduate program even after co-education, women were always in the majority. The RTCs, although originally admitted under a separate process, took all classes alongside traditional-age undergraduates and were the first significantly large group of non-traditional students at the college.

Student Demographics

In recent years, Connecticut College has hovered at around 26th place in the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings for national, private, highly selective, liberal arts colleges, occasionally placing in the top 25. It has an undergraduate student body of approximately 1900 students, of whom over 98% are enrolled as full-time residential students. While there are students from almost all 50 states and from 35 countries, the largest numbers of students come from the northeastern United States.

Approximately 4% of the student body is international. Although some of the international students are also the first in their families (or even in their villages) to attend college, for reasons to be explained later, no student who had not grown up in the United States was included in this study.

The perception of Connecticut College is sometimes that it is a school where mostly rich white students are enrolled, and, although the perception is not entirely correct, on the surface this seems to be the case. The student body is relatively homogeneous, racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically. Close to 87% of the domestic student body is Caucasian, less than 3% of the student body is Asian-American, 3% African American, and 4% Latino/a, and under 1% identifies as Native American. The remaining 1% of domestic students have not identified themselves as to racial or ethnic origin. Approximately one-third of Connecticut College's student body comes from private preparatory schools. Almost exactly half of the current student body attended public high schools, however, with the remainder of students coming from parochial or foreign schools. And according to Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) data about the current student body, collected from a nationally administered survey of first-year students (conducted each year and collated according to individual colleges), almost 60% of currently enrolled students report parental annual incomes of above \$100,000, with approximately 25% of these reporting parental incomes of above \$200,000.⁴ Interestingly, however, CIRP data for current students also show that about 10 % report their parents' income as less than \$30,000 per year, with about 4% reporting

⁴ Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium (HEDS), *Freshmen Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Peer Report*, Los Angeles CA: HEDS, 2000, 2001, 2002. (Hereafter cited in text as CIRP.)

family incomes below \$10,000 per year. According to the College's Office of Financial Aid, 43% of the students currently enrolled receive some form of financial aid, with more than 70% of those receiving at least three-quarters of their college costs in financial aid (which includes both loans and grants), and about 7% receiving full financial aid, thus having to make no contribution at all from their personal or family funds. One of the measures of a student's financial need is eligibility for a Pell Grant, a government-funded grant which does not have to be repaid, awarded only to students whose families are considered economically disadvantaged. At Connecticut College, 23% of the student body receive Pell Grants, indicating that almost a quarter of the students do not fall into the "rich kids" category and also indicating a large economic gap between the top 50% of the student body and the bottom 20%.⁵

Academic Background of Students

Approximately 50% of Connecticut College's students rank in the top 10% of their high school graduating class, with 80% in the top 20%, and their average SAT composite score generally ranges between 1270 and 1300, although since the late nineteen-nineties, in lieu of SAT I scores, which measure overall aptitude in English and Math, the college has allowed students to submit SAT II scores, which measure achievement in specific areas, and thus the composite average no longer necessarily accurately reflects overall student scores. All students are admitted under the same admissions standards: there are no remedial or special programs. But most of these students have high educational achievement in their family backgrounds. More than

⁵ All demographic and economic data supplied by the Connecticut College Office of Admission, Office of Records and Registration, and Office of Financial Aid.

82% of their fathers and 77% of their mothers possess at least a Bachelors degree, with 52% and 42%, respectively, holding a graduate degree. Only 9% of fathers and 8.5% of mothers were reported as holding only a high school diploma or less (CIRP 2000, 2001, 2002). Thus, first-generation students are clearly in the minority at Connecticut College, and that minority is very small.

Academic Programs

Connecticut College focuses strongly on international education and has several programs whereby students may study and work abroad. In addition to the traditional junior semester abroad programs at various schools and universities in foreign countries, Connecticut College conducts a “study-away, teach-away” (SATA) program whereby small numbers of students and one or more Connecticut College faculty study together for a semester in a developing nation. In addition, Connecticut College’s Center for International Study and the Liberal Arts (CISLA) is a competitive certification program that provides funded internships for students to work abroad in the summer preceding their senior year. Until the late 1990s, financial aid did not travel, which meant that only students who could afford to pay airfare and full tuition at foreign schools were able to study away. A faculty vote in 1996 changed this inequity so that students on financial aid would be allowed to travel abroad for one semester. In 2003, the College’s Study Away Committee voted to make study away blind to financial aid so that all students, regardless of their financial aid situation, are now allowed to study abroad for up to a full year. More than half (55%) of Connecticut College’s students participate in one or more study abroad programs. Along with the CISLA program, the college has three other

“Centers” through which students may gain certification: The Holleran Center for Community Action and Public Policy, which provides certification for students who do internships through PICA, the Program in Community Action; the Center for Arts and Technology, and the Center for Environmental Studies and Conservation Biology.

Elite Institutions and Educational Change

Traditional Enrollment

As statistics indicate, although it has made changes over the 90 years of its existence, Connecticut College serves a fairly privileged student body and through its admissions policies and other factors has been able to maintain a classification of “highly selective” in a time when many liberal arts colleges have found themselves having to make a variety of academic compromises in order to survive. And although it began its history as a women’s college, in many respects it is like the other highly selective and elite institutions it considers its peers. That is, although from their inception, public colleges and universities offered educational opportunities at reasonable cost to all who qualified, until the end of World War II, America’s elite colleges and universities, with a few notable exceptions,⁶ catered to the male children of the upper classes, with only Historically Black Colleges and women’s colleges providing significant educational opportunities for non-traditional students. Despite the exceptions noted, at almost all other U.S. postsecondary institutions in the twentieth century, “typical” students were those who were white

⁶ Dartmouth, for example, admitted African Americans as early as 1824; both Bowdoin and Amherst each had one black graduate in 1826; and in the mid-1800s Oberlin admitted black students on the same terms as whites. Tom Cowan and Jack Maguire, “History’s Milestones of African-American Higher Education,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 7 (1995) : 86.

and male, and usually from the middle and upper classes.⁷ Land grant colleges changed some of the prevailing attitudes toward who had the right to a college education, as Patricia Cross notes (*passim*). Those who supported this new kind of higher education “questioned the traditional role of tuition; and they had some unconventional ideas about the curricula that would serve the needs of a new clientele. The working man, they claimed should be able to send his children to college” (Cross 2). However, until the mid-twentieth century, with the exception of an occasional “scholarship boy” or girl, the all-male Ivies, their Seven Sister counterparts, and schools just below them on the prestige ladder were populated by a fairly homogeneous student body.

Non-Traditional Students

Further change in the face of education came with the end of the Second World War, when the G.I. Bill made it possible for returning veterans who might otherwise not have gone to college to obtain a higher education and thus started to open up college in general, and some prestigious colleges in particular, to non-traditional students. The ensuing decades, particularly the sixties and seventies, saw an even greater change in the population of postsecondary institutions. In 1954, the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education* declared that school segregation was inherently unequal; although this case was directly concerned with public education below the college level, its outcome had reverberations that would eventually influence higher education as well, particularly as those students directly affected by *Brown* grew up and became ready to continue their education. Other

⁷ K. Patricia Cross, *Beyond the Open Door: New Students to Higher Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1971). (Hereafter cited in text as Cross); Vincent Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

societal changes, such as those brought about by the civil rights and women's movements that burgeoned in the 1960s, helped to make it possible for men and women from low-income families and racial minorities to look toward college as a real possibility; the growth of community colleges within that same decade helped to turn those thoughts into reality for many students who would otherwise have ended their education with a high school diploma. As non-traditional students began to show up in large numbers in two-year colleges, and then later in four-year schools, there was a growing recognition among educators that it would be necessary to pay attention to how they differed from one another in their approach to higher education. In 1976, Leo Munday, writing in *The Journal of Higher Education*, decries the lack of such studies, saying that while there is information on the growing number of nontraditional students in higher education,

little is available about how the backgrounds of these students differ among themselves. . . . By and large. . . investigators have tended to treat nontraditional students as one group, though frequent references are made to black students, the one segment of nontraditional students about which some data are frequently available.⁸

Within the next decade, educational researchers turned their attention to the special ways in which gender, race, and ethnicity might have an impact on students' experience of higher education, particularly their ability to persist to a degree. The early 1980s saw a growth in studies about the experiences of African American, Latino, and women college students that examined how race, ethnicity, and gender created particular stressors or problems for such students in institutions that had

⁸ Leo Munday, "College Access for Nontraditional Students," *Journal of Higher Education* 47, no. 6 (1976) : 682.

formerly been and still were filled with students who were mostly white, mostly male, and mostly native speakers of English.

First-Generation Students

In most of this research, questions of race, ethnicity, and gender were the main concerns, with scant attention given specifically to how family background affected college attendance. Although the populations under study were often the first in their families to attend college, and came often (although not always) from families with low income and limited educational aspirations, the particular problems that might arise from any one or some combination of these characteristics did not until much more recently occupy researchers' concerns. In fact, the term "first-generation student" does not appear in the literature in any significant way until the 1980s, and then somewhat rarely in that way. Although the phrase is frequently used currently, its definition varies somewhat, depending on who is using it. For example, Billson and Terry, whose 1982 article "In Search of the Silken Purse" is repeatedly cited by later researchers, define first-generation students as "those whose parents have had no college or university experience. . . . [that is], the first generation in their families to continue education beyond high school," and point out that "A student is considered first generation even if a sibling has attended college."⁹ But they note that their definition differs "from that utilized by so-called TRIO programs sponsored by the U.S. Office of Education (Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Special Services for Disadvantaged students)," indicating that these programs apply to students who have only one parent who has not received a

⁹ Janet Mancini Billson and Margaret Brooks Terry, "In Search of the Silken Purse: Factors in Attrition among First-Generation College Students," *College and University* 58 (1982) : 58, n. 2. (Hereafter cited in text as Billson and Terry.)

college degree, rather than having no college-degree recipients in the previous generations of their family (Billson and Terry 58, n. 2). My major concern in this work was to examine students who lack a family background that will help them negotiate their way through higher education. Thus, although only one of the students in this project has an older sibling who attended college, this study uses Billson and Terry's definition, which excludes students who have at least one parent with a college degree but includes students who have siblings who have attended college.

Relationship Between First-Generation Status and Higher Education

Certainly, issues of race, ethnicity, and gender can be complicating factors in the lives of college students, depending on which college they attend, but when those factors are added to a student's being the first in his or her family to attend college, there is potential for even greater difficulty. As Ann Penrose notes, "It might be argued that parents who attended college only briefly are unlikely to have engaged in academic culture themselves to any great degree and thus are unlikely to have passed those values and mores on to their children."¹⁰ If Penrose is correct, one can assume that such students will have a certain amount of difficulty entering the new and foreign world of academia, with possible related effects on their academic success and their ability to persist to graduation, both issues of potential concern to college administrators and faculty. The research that deals with first-generation students is relatively meager, and, with a few exceptions (to be discussed in a later chapter), what research exists concentrates, on first-year, first-generation

¹⁰ Ann Penrose, "Academic Literacy Perceptions and Performance: Comparing First-Generation and Continuing Generation College Students," *Research in the Teaching of English* 36, no. 4 (2002): 448. (Hereafter cited in text as Penrose.)

students at community colleges or at large universities that have special programs for ill-prepared and disadvantaged students. Such research is often based on the assumption that first-generation students will be academically underprepared to undertake college life, that they will come from working-class families, that they will have to work at outside jobs while in school, and that they will be affected by the disjunctions between their life with family and friends at home and their life at college. These assumptions are worth examining not only for students at community colleges and schools with flexible admissions policies, but also for those who attend highly competitive colleges, where first-generation students will be an even more decided minority than at community colleges or large universities, away from home in an almost wholly residential school community, and potentially without the emotional, familial, social, and programmatic supports that will ease their journey through college life.

First-Generation Students and Academic Literacies

A variety of social, cultural, and intellectual issues that arise from students' first-generation status have a direct impact on how these students negotiate academic codes and "the borders between home, work, and classroom."¹¹ This study explores what happens to first-generation students when they attend a particular highly competitive four-year institution. For although these students are indistinguishable from their peers in terms of meeting college entrance requirements (that is, as noted earlier, all students must satisfy the same entrance standards; there are not special admissions requirements or programs for special groups), they may

¹¹ Martha Marinara, "When Working Class Students 'Do' the Academy: How We Negotiate with Alternative Literacies," *Journal of Basic Writing* 16, no. 2 (1997) : 4. (Hereafter cited in text as Marinara.)

face issues in their writing, reading, and oral literacies that are related to their first-generation, and therefore minority, status. These issues may revolve around the way they approach reading assignments and the way they understand and respond to writing and reading tasks. For example, the tone they adopt, the vocabulary they choose, and the authority with which they argue a thesis may be influenced by how confident they feel about their "right" to speak, and how comfortable they are about their language and prior knowledge. These latter issues can be grouped under the heading "academic literacies." Although I will deal more deeply with this topic later, briefly, academic literacy may be defined as not only the ability to read, write, and use language, but, more important, the ability to understand the connection between language and identity and the ability to handle simultaneously what Cheryl calls, "three distinct worlds of discourse: the *domain content world* of logically related truths. . . , the *narrated world* of everyday experience. . . , and the *rhetorical world* [emphasis Geisler's] of abstract authorial conversation."¹²

First-Generation Students and Academic Success

Although social and academic issues such as those cited above are from time to time at play for all students, I am particularly interested in discovering how they obtain in the case of students for whom higher education is a strange country and whose only road maps through that country come from their own observations and pathfinding, rather than from trusted guides like parents and relatives who have gone before them and can thus offer advice and direction as they negotiate their way. Engin Holmstrom's 1973 report on low-income (but not necessarily first-

¹² Cheryl Geisler, "Exploring Academic Literacy: An Experiment in Composing," *College Composition and Communication* 43, no. 1 (1992) : 44. (Hereafter cited in text as Geisler, "Exploring.")

generation) students finds that “low-income students who attend highly selective institutions do better than their counterparts who attend less selective institutions, and this holds true even when differences in ability and in the availability of financial aid are controlled for,”¹³ but there is relatively little known about first-generation students at private, elite colleges, such as the one where most of my teaching experience has taken place, the kinds of schools where student learning and growth are enhanced by:

small institutional size, a strong faculty emphasis on teaching and student development, a student body that attends college full-time and resides on-campus, a common general education emphasis on shared intellectual experience in the curriculum, and frequent interaction in- and outside the classroom between student and faculty and between students and their peers.¹⁴

In other words, these are schools with optimum conditions for student success.

But they are often also schools that are relatively homogeneous in their student body, usually expensive, and often attracting privileged students who are financially comfortable and who have been academically prepared by excellent high schools.

One question to be examined, then, is whether the conditions for success at these institutions are optimum for all students or mainly for those who come from traditional, mainstream backgrounds and can take full advantage of what these schools have to offer in a setting with which they have already had a kind of familiarity through their high school experiences.

¹³ Engin I. Holmstrom, “Low Income Students: Do They Differ from ‘Typical’ Undergraduates?” *ACE Research Reports*, 8, no. 5 (1973) : 20. (Hereafter cited in text as Holmstrom.)

¹⁴ Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini, “Studying College Students in the 21st Century: Meeting New Challenges,” *The Review of Higher Education* 21, no. 2 (1998) : 151-152. (Hereafter cited in text as Pascarella and Terenzini.)

First-Generation Students as Subjects of Research

As elite schools have attempted to increase the diversity of their student bodies, they have admitted students who do not fit the traditional profile of the majority of their undergraduates: these new students are first- rather than continuing-generation; they are often working-class; they often come from non-white, non-Anglo, non-European backgrounds; and English is often a second or other language. What many of these students have in common with their first-generation peers at other, less competitive, colleges are their non-traditional backgrounds. What differentiates them from those particular peers is that they have had strong high school records that have enabled their admission to a highly selective college, or they have been lucky enough to be channeled into high school programs that ready them for college life (for example, such programs as A Better Chance or Prep for Prep), so that they are presumably as well-prepared academically as their continuing-generation classmates. Some of them, in fact, have experienced preparatory school educations. But what are their experiences like? Do they exhibit the same characteristics as first-generation students at other schools? Do they react to college life in similar ways no matter which college or university they attend? How do they fit the kinds of profiles offered by student development theorists? For, although it has changed since its beginnings, student development theory until at least the 1980s seemed based on the premise that all college students were white males. As Moore and Upcraft point out, "until World War II, college was really for the elite, upperclass male. Only about 10 percent of high school graduates actually went on to

college.”¹⁵ Consequently, theories about how college students developed and behaved were shaped with that kind of college student as their focus.

The 1980s “brought serious challenges to existing student development theories, because those theories failed to fully explain the development of student subpopulations, such as women, racial and ethnic groups, older students, international students, homosexual and bisexual students, student athletes, honors students, and commuters” (Moore and Upcraft 11). Even so, however, although student development theories “specifically geared toward these groups proliferated” during that decade (Moore and Upcraft 11), first-generation students were not generally targeted as subjects of study until much more recently. Thus, researchers are only beginning to look at these students specifically and to understand them not only in comparison to traditional students but also in light of other minority groups at college, and few researchers have examined the experiences of such students at highly competitive colleges.

Some Guiding Questions

Because of the lack of research about first-generation students at elite colleges, there are many questions yet to be answered. For example, one might ask, do first-generation college students have the same kinds of problems and successes as more traditional students in these kinds of institutions? How do they negotiate life on a campus on which they may find themselves welcomed or alienated, discomfited or at ease, feeling up to the intellectual tasks they are asked to fulfill or wondering

¹⁵ Leila V. Moore and M. Lee Upcraft, “Theory in Student Affairs: Evolving Student Perspectives,” in *Evolving Theoretical Perspectives on Students*, ed. Leila V. Moore, New Directions for Student Services, no. 51 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992) : 7. (Hereafter cited in text as Moore and Upcraft.)

whether they would be more comfortable elsewhere? What obstacles to success litter their educational path? What strengths do they draw on to succeed? In other words, what happens to students who are at a school where they are a very small minority because of their background, socioeconomic class, and sometimes their race or ethnicity as well? Do they have doubts about their right to an expensive, exclusive education or do they just accept that education as their due? Are they subject to the same kinds of concerns as their first-generation peers at different kinds of schools? What influences their choice of major or course work?

For these students, perhaps more than most, the change from the world of home to the world of school may involve major questions of identity as they take on new ways of speaking, writing and thinking. As Roz Ivaniç points out,

Becoming more literate is in itself an issue of identity. People who feel more at home with spoken language as a way of communicating may have ambivalent feelings about the identities supported by written language. On the one hand, these are likely to be prestigious identities, and so it is in people's interests to develop and extend their literacies. On the other hand, they may be alien identities, and this will get in the way of engaging in the literate practices which support them.¹⁶

While first-generation students who have been admitted to highly selective colleges under regular admissions policies can be presumed to be literate, there are likely to be major differences in the literacy practices they will engage in at school and the literacy practices of home and particularly of family who have not attended college. And there may be some differences between their literacy practices and those of their traditional classmates. How do these differences affect them as students? As sons and daughters and friends?

¹⁶ Roz Ivaniç, *Writing and Identity* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1998) : 70. (Hereafter cited in text as Ivaniç.)

Mary Lea notes that “learning at [college] involves adapting to new ways of knowing: new ways of understanding, interpreting and organizing knowledge. Practices of academic literacy are central processes through which students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study.”¹⁷ What is the relationship for these students between academic literacy and their first-generation status? That is, how do they approach academic tasks such as reading and writing? Are they comfortable assuming the voice of the scholar? How do they approach matters of vocabulary, sentence structure, and style? With what kinds of writing are they most comfortable, and at what kinds do they feel they are least successful? What internal rules do they carry with them about how to write?

Significance of the Study

There are, then, many issues to consider and many reasons why such a study as the one that follows is needed as at least a preliminary step toward answering questions such as those posed above. College students, particularly in their early years, are subject to a variety of factors that affect their academic literacy practices. To begin with, the transition from high school to college for some of them makes new demands and calls for learning new ways of approaching writing tasks. For example, in high school they may have learned that grammatical and mechanical correctness would guarantee a reasonably good grade; in college they may find that a technically correct paper that lacks a strong thesis or appropriate support for general ideas will barely pass. They may be expected to focus more fully on critical thinking than they have had to do before and will almost certainly be required to

¹⁷ Mary Lea, “Academic Literacies and Learning in Higher Education: Constructing Knowledge through Texts and Experience,” *Studies in the Education of Adults* 30, no. 2 (1998) : 158. (Hereafter cited in text as Lea.)

work more independently than they had to in high school. They will often find that they have few opportunities to write the personal essay with which high school may have familiarized them and with which they are comfortable.

For first-generation college students, these ordinary transition issues are often exacerbated. For example, there may be a profound sense of inadequacy that arises from being of a social class different from that of the majority of students, or from difficulties with English as a second language, or from a nagging sense that their public high school did not fully prepare them for the academic life currently being undertaken. In particular, I am interested in what happens to first-generation college students at a highly selective liberal arts institution, where faculty routinely assume that all students share both high academic ability and high academic achievement. For many of these first-generation college students, negotiating academic life can be a difficult and lonely task. They often feel out of their element socially. And, equally important, especially if they come from public schools in disadvantaged areas, are their concerns about their academic preparation and academic ability.

Despite the fact that they have gained admission to a prestigious college, they often believe that there is a level of knowledge that their peers take for granted that they do not have. For example, they have to make decisions about selecting a major and appropriate courses to take, among other things, on their own, without parental guidance based on knowledge that comes from experience, or with parental pressure to choose courses that have practical applications or will lead them to financially profitable careers rather than courses which do not have a readily apparent connection to "real world" issues. Most important, who they are as whole persons

(including the persons who have been shaped by the culture of their home and community) has bearing on how they learn and respond to academic tasks, including the writing and reading tasks that make up a large part of their college life, and they may find that their unique experiences are not valued in the world of academe.

Limitations of the Study

The work that follows has several limitations: it is by no means exhaustive; nor is it meant to be definitive in any way. I am using subjects from a single, highly selective, private liberal arts college, and within that school I have interviewed only a small number of first-generation students in depth, talking to them about their general academic experiences, their literacy practices, and their attitudes toward school and home. The students were chosen at random from the small, available pool of first-generation students. That these students are still in residence at the college and have satisfactory academic records is an indication that whatever the problems, they have been successful, at least thus far, in dealing with them.

Although there is statistical data on first-generation students who left the college, either because they transferred or because they dropped out of school entirely for academic or personal reasons, neither I nor anyone else has attempted to interview these students to discover whether their first-generation status was a factor in their leaving school. Further, the sample is too small to come to any sorts of general conclusions. To do so would require a larger student sample as well as interviews with students at more than one such institution. In addition, I start with no hypotheses and with few assumptions. My intent is to examine whether for these individual students their first-generation status has any relation to the way they

experience life at this institution, and, equally important, to draw portraits of their academic and social experiences and their academic literacy skills, particularly their writing. I hope to show not only some of the problems, challenges, and triumphs that these first-generation students experience at an elite private institution but also to raise questions that can point the way to further research that may provide more definitive answers.

Summary

As noted earlier, there is only a small body of published literature devoted to the personal and literacy issues faced by first-generation students in general, and even less addressing those issues in the context of a highly selective four-year institution. Much of the research looks at first-generation students and basic writers as almost synonymous; many studies take place in large universities or in open-enrollment institutions.

To begin to examine whether being a first-generation student is related to one's academic and social experiences (often intertwined), I have chosen to interview a small group of first-generation students about their experiences at a highly selective private liberal arts college located in New England. My intent is to understand some of what their life is like at this school, and to look at such issues as how they made the choice to attend this kind of school, their high school backgrounds and preparation, the transition to college, their relationship with family and friends at home, and the academic choices they have made while at school. I look particularly at their writing, reading, and oral literacy practices to discover how they approach these important academic tasks, and I examine their general academic literacy skills,

using their own perceptions as well as school records and some comparative data to place their individual experiences in a larger framework. My work continues the kinds of studies done with small groups of students and focusing on their college life in general and their writing in particular, such as those conducted by Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, Donna Sewell, and Marilyn Sternglass, among others.¹⁸

First-generation students are certainly not traditional and have not yet become typical. But their admission to and continued presence in elite colleges in growing numbers merits some attention, particularly when many of these students are also students of color and from low-income families, operating in institutions in which any one of these factors may present them with challenges their majority peers do not face, and when the factors combined may elevate those challenges to barriers to their success. This study has several areas of significance: As highly competitive, highly selective colleges look to increase diversity of all kinds—racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic—without always examining the concerns and experiences nontraditional students may bring with them to their institutions, a study such as this one can raise important questions about ways to make the experiences of these students richer and more productive. It provides in-depth portraits of students at a particular school and can provide some basis for further research at that particular institution, which has already made a strong commitment to increasing the diversity of its student body. Moreover, this study provides a basis for more definitive multi-

¹⁸ Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, *Academic Literacies: The Public and Private Discourse of University Students* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann, 1991). (Hereafter cited in text as Chiseri-Strater); Donna N. Sewell, *Encountering Writing: The Literacies and Lives of First-Year Students*, (Doctoral Dissertation, The Florida State University, 1995, Dissertation Abstracts International, 56, 08A, 3037). (Hereafter cited in text as Sewell "Encountering Writing"); Marilyn Sternglass, *Time to Know Them: A Longitudinal Study of Writing and Learning at the College Level* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997). (Hereafter cited in text as Sternglass.)

institutional, multi-participant, or longitudinal studies. Such studies will ensure that as private, highly competitive colleges open their doors to non-traditional students, they do not do so only to close them before the students have had a chance to get more than a foot inside.

CHAPTER 3: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Research Areas

Were a review of the literature on first-generation students limited to that topic alone, it would be quite brief. Although the late 1980s and 1990s saw a number of studies that focused on students who were of the first generation in their family to attend college (most of which will be discussed below), prior to then, the literature dealing with first-generation students and their college experience is almost non-existent, and, in fact, as noted elsewhere, even the term “first-generation” was little used before the 1980s. Even within the past two decades the literature regarding these students is scant, as other researchers such as Pascarella and Terenzini, and Ting attest.¹⁹

Consequently, along with looking at those studies that focus primarily on first-generation students, I have also looked at studies that have examined groups within which first-generation students are likely to be found: students with low socioeconomic status and students of color. That is, although some first-generation students may come from white-collar or middle-class families, they are more likely to come from families whose income and whose jobs place them in the working class; similarly, although African American, Latino/a, and Asian American students are increasingly likely to come from families where their parents and even their grandparents may have achieved baccalaureate degrees, those students who are first-

¹⁹ Pascarella and Terenzini; Siu-Man “Raymond” Ting, “First-Year Grades and Academic Progress of College Students and First-Generation and Low-Income Families,” *The Journal of College Admissions* 158 (1998). (Hereafter cited in text as Ting.)

generation are more likely than not to come from families belonging to a minority racial group, as noted in a variety of studies.²⁰

Along with focusing on how first-generation students experience the academy, the intellectual tasks they undertake within it, and the social context in which they live and make decisions, academic and otherwise, it is useful to have some general notion of how students function, the bases on which they make important choices, and the elements of their personal experience that figure into the way they approach routine and not-so-routine academic tasks. For a long time, however, researchers and educators seemed to practice a kind of “new criticism” when talking about college students. Just as the literary critics of the mid-twentieth century believed that we could examine a novel or poem without considering the contexts in which it was produced, the author’s own history, or the society surrounding its production, many educational researchers seemed to take for granted that one could discuss student development without looking at the particulars of student lives. From almost the inception of student development theory until the 1980s, prominent theorists developed their ideas based on a generalized white, middle-to-high-income, male college student. For example, Arthur Chickering’s 1969 study, *Education and Identity*, an influential work that posits seven vectors of development

²⁰ See, for example, Patricia M. McDonough, *Choosing Colleges: How Social Class and Schools Structure Opportunity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997); Pascarella and Terenzini.; Richard C. Richardson, Jr. and Elizabeth F. Skinner, “Helping First-Generation Minority Students Achieve Degrees,” in *First-Generation Students: Confronting the Issues*, eds. L. Steven Zwerling and Howard B. London, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992). (Hereafter cited in text as Richardson and Skinner); Khanh Van T-Bui, “First-Generation College Students at a Four-Year University: Background Characteristics, Reasons for Pursuing Higher Education, and First-Year Experiences,” *College Student Journal* 36, no. 1, (2002). (Hereafter cited in text as T-Bui); Ting; Patrick T. Terenzini et al., “First-Generation College Students: Characteristics, Experiences, and Cognitive Development,” *Research in Higher Education* 37, no. 1 (1996). (Hereafter cited in text as Terenzini et al., “Characteristics.”)

for students — developing competence, autonomy, mature relationships, purpose, and integrity, managing emotions, and establishing identity — like the other research of the time, was based almost completely on studies done with white males.²¹ Another influential student development theorist, William Perry, who argued that students “moved in nine stages from a simplistic, categorical view of the world to a more relativistic, committed view” (Moore and Upcraft 8), admitted “that with few exceptions,” despite using both Harvard men and Radcliffe women for his longitudinal study, “only the interviews with Harvard men were used in validating the theory and illustrating it” (Evans et al. 129).

It wasn't until the 1980s that there began to be some recognition that college students come in a variety of shapes and sizes—white, African-American, Latino/a, working-class, wealthy, male and female, straight and gay, native speakers of English, and speakers of English as a second or other language—and that they might develop and behave in different ways depending on their gender or the socioeconomic, racial, or ethnic group to which they belong, to name just a few. Interviewed during the 1980s, Chickering noted that if he were doing his work at that point, he would revise his theory “to incorporate findings from recent research on gender, race, and national origin,” and, among other things, he would also “alter the definitions of several of the vectors to reflect changes in societal conditions” (Evans et al. 37).

²¹ Arthur W. Chickering, *Education and Identity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1969) : 8-19. See also Nancy J. Evans, Deanna S. Forney, and Florence Guido-DiBrito, *Student Development in College: Theory, Research and Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998). (Hereafter cited in text as Evans et al.); Moore and Upcraft.

Despite the acknowledgment of a changing society and the understanding that college is also populated by non-white, non-male, non-upper-socioeconomic-class human beings, Pascarella and Terenzini, prominent researchers on first-generation students, note that when they reviewed studies done in a twenty-year period (1968-1998) “on the impact of college on students, [they] confronted the sobering realization that the 2,600 or so studies . . . did not necessarily provide a complete or comprehensive portrait of the American undergraduate student population” (Pascarella and Terenzini 152). Further, they point out that “the extant body of research was not without substantial bias. With some notable exceptions, it was based largely on samples of ‘traditional,’ white undergraduate students ages 18-22 who attended four-year institutions full-time, who lived on campus, who didn’t work, and who had few, if any, family responsibilities” (Pascarella and Terenzini 152).

Pascarella and Terenzini’s findings are supported by those of Ting, who points out that, although there were more than 200 federally or state supported programs serving more than 400,000 first-generation, low-income or disabled students at the time of his 1994 study, “still relatively little [had] been written about academic and personal characteristics of first-generation and low-income students and how these characteristics may affect their success in college” (Ting 16).

One of the earlier studies that focuses on low-income students but does not mention first-generation students is Holmstrom’s 1973 American Council on Education (ACE) report, which finds no major differences between low-income and more financially well-off students. Holmstrom, in fact, says that “Aside from the

expected dissimilarities in their demographic and background characteristics, the low-income student does not differ dramatically from his more affluent classmates. He shares with them the same life goals, degree aspirations, activities and interests. .[and] overall, the likelihood of his attaining his degree in four years is reasonably close to that of his more privileged classmates” (Holmstrong 19-20).

But, despite the focus of the study, Holmstrong, in relying almost exclusively on statistical data, fails to examine fully what it means to be “reasonably close” to classmates in attaining a degree in four years, and the particular emotional and psychic costs associated with attainment of the degree. Moreover, Holmstrong’s study does not account for racial or gender factors, making almost the same assumptions that earlier researchers did when they blended all college students into a white male—the only difference here is that income is considered as a possible contributor to student success or failure. Since most first-generation students also have low socioeconomic status, Holmstrong’s failure to examine for any of these factors makes the study less than complete. He does note that “low income students who attend highly selective institutions do better than their counterparts who attend less selective institutions” in achieving the baccalaureate in four years (Holmstrong 20), thus raising the question of what needs the highly selective institution may fill for these students that other institutions do not.

Early Studies

The late nineteen-seventies and early eighties began to show a striking turn toward examining the until-then hidden factors that might affect college students’ lives. One of the first and perhaps most significant works to deal with first-

generation college students was Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*.²² Based on her experience with basic writers admitted to the New York City University system as part of the open enrollment policies instituted in the early 1970s, Shaughnessy's book continues to influence teachers of writing. Important not only for its analysis of patterns of error, the book also paints a powerful picture of what students face when they are unable to "control the dominant code of literacy in a society that generates more writing than any society in history" (Shaughnessy 13). Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words*, her recounting of a nine-year ethnographic study of language learning patterns among black and white public schoolchildren in the Carolinas after desegregation, was one of the earliest works to support the interconnection between home and school, arguing the need for breaking "the boundaries between classroom and community" in order to ensure the progress of both individual children and the communities they inhabit.²³ Mike Rose's 1989 work, *Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared*, concentrates not on elementary school, but on what happens to students from working-class, first-generation families as they move into college. The book documents not only his "own journey from the high school vocational track up through the latticework of the American university" but also the lives of other first-generation college students and the experiences they hold in common: "information poverty, the limited means of protecting children from family disaster

²² Mina P. Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). (Hereafter cited in text as Shaughnessy.)

²³ Shirley Brice Heath, *Ways with Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1983) : 369.

... the intellectual curiosity and literate enticements that remain hidden from the schools. . .the dislocations that come from crossing educational boundaries.”²⁴

Rose’s work shows both that these and other issues have a profound effect on how underprepared students experience the university and also the need for understanding how these issues influence students’ attainment of a successful academic life. It does not, however, deal with first-generation or working class students who have had the same kinds of academic preparation their more affluent, continuing-generation peers have had. For, along with focusing on the connection between academic and home life, what these pivotal works have in common is the paucity of the intellectual background and academic preparation of the students they examine.

Academic Preparation and Performance

The idea that first-generation students are also academically underprepared continues to be a feature of research. For example, Ting’s review of literature between 1970 and 1998 indicates that the literature on student assessment shows different types of academically high-risk students, including those who have been specially admitted, disadvantaged students, first-generation students and ethnic minorities. Ting points out that these students had lower SATs as well as lower high school class rankings than students who fall into traditional categories, and that at least some of these students belonged to more than one of the high-risk groups (Ting 15-16). Other researchers, too, point to the strong relationship between being a first-generation college student and also being at risk academically. In an early

²⁴ Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America’s Underprepared* (New York: The Free Press, 1989) : 8-9. (Hereafter cited in text as Rose.)

study, prompted by the changes in the college student population that occurred during the 1960s, H. Patricia Cross talks about what she defines as “New Students,” that is, students from low status socioeconomic backgrounds and low academic achievement, many of whom have parents who have not attended college. Cross says that “it is highly probable that a young person belonging to an ethnic minority also ranks low in socioeconomic status and in academic ability” as measured by standard tests and high school performance (Cross 6). She suggests that traditional education has ill-served these students and must be rethought as they enter colleges in increasingly greater numbers so that new programs and new curricula can be developed to better serve their needs.

Using data derived from interviews with graduates of ten public universities, a majority of whom were first-generation college students, Richardson and Skinner address key issues for institutions wishing to “provide optimal environments for the success of all first-generation college students” (Richardson and Skinner 29). African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans, they indicate, are more likely than their Caucasian peers to be first-generation students, and are thus affected more strongly by the same issues that affect persistence in college for all students. Minority students, they conclude, “need ladders with every rung in place in order to provide them with a fair opportunity for overcoming” such problems. These important “rungs include early intervention to strengthen preparation and improve educational planning, summer bridge programs, special orientation and registration, tailored financial aid programs, assessment and remediation, tutoring, learning

laboratories, mentoring, intrusive academic advising, and career development” (Richardson and Skinner 41).

In a slightly later study, R.J. Riehl²⁵ compared the academic preparation and performance of 2,190 first-generation, first-year students and other first-year students at Indiana State University, examining mean SAT scores, high school class ranking, high school grade point average, self-predicted and actual first-semester grades, degree aspirations, first-semester dropout rate, and first-year persistence. Riehl discovered that first-generation college students self-predicted lower first semester grades than continuing generation students, and, indeed, had lower first-semester grades, had lower degree aspirations, and lower persistence rates. Moreover, Riehl examined the connection between standardized tests and family income and educational attainment, finding a positive correlation between high SAT scores and high level of family income as well as to high level of parental education (Riehl 15). Thus first-generation students might be assumed generally to have lower SAT scores than continuing-generation students.

Attrition and Persistence

The academic and social issues first-generation students face increase the potential for their leaving college without a degree. Although few early studies focus on first-generation students, in 1982 Billson and Terry examined the differences between first-generation “persisters,” students who were then enrolled at the primarily residential four-year college where the study took place, and “leavers,” students who had left before graduating, to discover the primary factors leading to

²⁵ Richard J. Riehl, “The Academic Preparation, Aspirations, and First-Year Academic Performance of First-Generation Students,” *College and University* (Fall 1994). (Hereafter cited in text as Riehl.)

attrition among first-generation students. Among their findings were that first-generation students were more likely than others to leave without a degree, and that, although they often leave to take jobs rather than transferring to another institution, their reasons for leaving may be less related to financial problems than to feelings of alienation and isolation as well as academic problems. That is, according to Billson and Terry, a lack of social integration into college, and as a corollary, lack of satisfaction with school, a weak conviction that college is the “only or best route to college success,” and long hours of off-campus employment all contribute to higher attrition rates for first-generation students (Billson and Terry 74).

In 1975, Cope and Hannah²⁶ surveyed studies done from the 1950s through the 1970s, citing several that show a negative correlation between first-generation status and persistence. For example, they note that Astin’s 1964 study of National Merit Scholars “found that four indicators of socioeconomic level (mother’s education, father’s education, father’s occupation, and number of peers attending college) significantly correlated with dropping out for both sexes” (Cope and Hannah 17). They also cite Gurin, Newcombe, and Cope, whose 1968 study showed that the lower the educational level of parents, the higher the likelihood of their children dropping out of college.

Similarly, Tinto notes that those “of different race, ability, and social status origins differed markedly in the rate at which they left higher education within four years of entry without earning a college degree,” with Hispanics and Blacks leaving

²⁶ Robert G. Cope and William Hannah, *Revolving College Doors: The Causes and Consequences of Dropping Out, Stopping Out, and Transferring* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975). (Hereafter cited in text as Cope and Hannah.)

at much higher rates than Caucasians.²⁷ Tinto also reports that students “of lowest social status were approximately 60 percent more likely to leave than were persons of highest status” (Tinto 26). He suggests that such failure to persist may be attributed to a variety of factors, including discrimination and failure to integrate into the college environment socially and academically or to “feel central to the mainstream of institutional life” (Tinto 71). Although Tinto’s model “has been used as a conceptual model for persistence studies” for decades, Barbara Kraemer²⁸ points out that its validity had been questioned “because it was developed for a traditional white population.” She points, however, to “recent studies with nontraditional populations,” that support Tinto’s model, noting that these studies show that “[racial minority] students’ integration into the environment of the institution, both academically and socially, was critical for their persistence and their success in college (Nora, 1987, n1993; Nora and Rendón, 1990)” (Kraemer 164).

As Ann Penrose points out, although research on attrition has not looked specifically at first-generation students, “analyses of the effects of indirect indicators such as socioeconomic status – typically defined or assumed to be a function of parental education level—have consistently revealed inverse correlations between parental education and attrition”; she notes that “of those studies that examine attrition in the [first-generation] population directly, Billson and Terry (1982) and Riehl (1994) report higher rates among [first-generation] students”

²⁷ Vincent Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987) : 26. (Hereafter cited in text as Tinto.)

²⁸ Barbara Kraemer, “The Academic and Social Integration of Hispanic Students into College,” *The Review of Higher Education* 20, no. 2 (1997). (Hereafter cited in text as Kraemer.)

(Penrose 444). Penrose also notes that differences in persistence between first-generation and continuing-generation students increase after the first-year, suggesting that “it may well be the case that some students do not begin to feel out of place at the university until they attempt to participate in the exclusive knowledge communities of their major fields” (Penrose 456). This finding has obvious implications for institutions that tend to focus their retention efforts on first- and second-year students, without paying sufficient attention to the number of first-generation students who do not persist to a degree, dropping out in their junior or even senior year.

Only one study found no significant attrition difference between first-generation and traditional students. Using “four of the constructs” of Tinto’s persistence model —“goal commitment,” “institutional commitment,” “academic integration,” and “social integration”— Pratt and Skaggs examined first-generation students at the University of Maine.²⁹ They found that, apart from more reported doubts about the adequacy of their academic preparation and a “higher proportion of first generation students [limiting] their aspirations for higher education to an undergraduate degree” (Pratt and Skaggs 32), there were few or no differences between first-generation and traditional students in three of the four areas. The one element of Tinto’s model in which these students differed was institutional commitment, with more first-generation students than their traditional counterparts reporting the University of Maine as their first choice. Additionally, parents of traditional students reportedly placed more importance on the value of higher

²⁹ Phillip A. Pratt and Thomas Scraggs, “First-Generation College Students: Are They at Greater Risk for Attrition Than Their Peers?” *Research in Rural Education* 6, no. 2 (1989). (Hereafter cited in text as Pratt and Skaggs.)

education than did the parents of first-generation students. Another study using Tinto's model, this time at a highly selective university with a generally affluent student body, found that the less affluent students "may find it extremely difficult to find a group of peers with whom they can relate. This, in turn, might negatively influence their ability to become integrated into the social system of the university" and thus they might show greater attrition.³⁰ Once again, although these researchers do not specifically address the issue of first-generation students, such students are unlikely to number among the majority in a school where the student body is generally affluent.

Other Research Issues

For those students who do persist to a degree, the research focuses on a variety of topics. Increasingly over the last several decades, interest has centered on the general attributes that characterize first-generation students, including the likelihood that they are also, although not always, members of a racial or ethnic minority (Cross; Richardson and Skinner; T-Bui; Terenzini et al., "Characteristics") and of low socioeconomic status (Cross ; T-Bui ; Terenzini et al., "Characteristics"). Research has also shown that first-generation students also tend to have a first language other than English (T-Bui) and are more likely to be women than men (Penrose; T-Bui). There are concerns specific to each of these groups independent of membership in any other, particularly at predominantly white, elite institutions; thus, one can safely assume that a combination of factors can only heighten such concerns. I have already discussed the literature that deals with the higher rates of

³⁰ Jeffrey F. Milem and Joseph B. Berger, "A Modified Model of College Student Persistence: Exploring the Relationship between Astin's Theory of Involvement and Tinto's Theory of Student Departure," *Journal of College Student Development* 38, no. 4 (1997) : 398.

attrition among first-generation students and students who belong to racial and ethnic minorities. But even for first-generation students who persist to a degree, the road can be more difficult than it is for their more traditional peers. For example, Penrose notes that the general attributes of first-generation students (e.g., working-class, ethnic minority, among others) “often coincide with greater family and financial responsibilities, which can have a profound effect on students’ integration into the university community” (Penrose 442).

First-generation students’ lives tend to be more stressful as they worry about failing or about losing financial aid (York-Anderson and Bowman³¹; T-Bui); they understandably receive less academic support from their families, who have limited education and cannot help with academic decisions or answer questions about school work (London³²; York-Anderson and Bowman); they are more academically at risk than their traditional peers and consequently have to devote more time to studying in order to succeed, but, ironically, they report spending less time studying than their continuing-generation peers (Terenzini et al., “Characteristics”). They also enter college with less basic knowledge of what college will be like and less factual information about academic decisions they will have to make (York-Anderson and Bowman). Terenzini et al. note:

³¹ Dollean C. York-Anderson and Sharon L. Bowman, “Assessing the College Knowledge of First-Generation and Second-Generation College Students,” *Journal of College Student Development* 32 (1991). (Hereafter cited in text as York-Anderson and Bowman.)

³² Howard B. London, “Breaking Away: A Study of First-Generation College Students and Families,” *American Journal of Education* 97 (1989). (Hereafter cited in text as London, “Breaking Away.”) Howard B. London, “Transformations: Cultural Challenges Faced by First-Generation Students,” in *First-Generation Students: Confronting the Issues*, eds. L. Steven Zwerling and Howard B. London (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992). (Hereafter cited in text as London, *First-Generation*.)

First-generation students . . . reported receiving less encouragement from family to attend college [and] spent less time socializing with peers and talking with teachers while in high school. . . worked more hours per week off-campus . . . were less likely to perceive faculty members as concerned for student development and teaching. . . [and] were less likely [to receive] encouragement from friends to continue their enrollment. (Terenzini et al., "Characteristics," 8-10).

Recent studies that specifically account for the experiences of first-generation students provide data about their preparation and entrance into four-year colleges. One study, for example, finds that participation in a rigorous high school mathematics curriculum is a significant factor in enrollment in college and that students whose parents graduated from college are more likely to have participated in such a curriculum than those whose parents had not attended college. Moreover, even when first-generation students did take advanced mathematics, they were less likely than their traditional-student counterparts to enroll in college, since "students whose parents did not attend college are less likely than other classmates to enter the college pipeline and more likely to leave the pipeline at each step along the way."³³

Studies that look at the college preparation and enrollment of ethnic and racial minorities support this finding, with data analyses of the Integrated Post-secondary Education Data System (IPEDS) showing that although the 1990s saw significant increases in college enrollment for African American and Hispanic students (an increase of 42 percent and 161 percent, respectively), both African American and Hispanic students were underrepresented compared to their representation in the traditional college-age population when it came to receiving bachelor's degrees (7.8

³³ Susan P. Choy et al., "Transition to College: What Helps At-Risk Students and Students Whose Parents Did Not Attend College," in *Understanding the College Choice of Disadvantaged Students*, eds., Alberto F. Cabrera and Steven M. La Nasa, *New Directions for Institutional Research* 107 (2000) : 59. (Hereafter cited in text as Choy et al.)

percent and 6.3 percent, respectively) or even among undergraduates (11.2 percent and 10.1 percent respectively).³⁴ But data on college enrollment are also inconsistent. Some researchers have found that enrollment rates for African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian students were comparable, once “differences in background, ability, and educational aspirations” were controlled for (St. John & Noell 1989, cited in Perna 71). However, *The New York Times* reports that, according to data from the Pew Hispanic Center, “Only 16 percent of Latino high school graduates earn a four-year college degree by age 29, compared with 37 percent of non-Hispanic whites and 21 percent of African-Americans.”³⁵ Other findings show that financial aid offers make a difference so that once these are controlled for, African Americans are less likely than their Caucasian counterparts to enroll in college (Nolfi et al, 1978, cited in Perna 72). Other studies show that African American high school students are also less likely to go to highly selective postsecondary institutions (Hearn, 1984, cited in Perna 72). But yet other research contradicts these findings, showing that African Americans are, instead, more likely to enroll in college than are white students (Thomas, 1980; Catsiapis, 1987; Kane and Spizman, 1994; Perna 2000a; cited in Perna 72).

Influences of Home and Culture

Research shows that the relationship between the culture of home and the culture of school is one of the major issues facing first-generation students, but the

³⁴ Laura W. Perna, “Racial and Ethnic Group Differences in College Enrollment Decisions,” in *Understanding the College Choice of Disadvantaged Students*, eds. Alberto F. Cabrera and Steven M. La Nasa, *New Directions for Institutional Research* 107 (Fall 2000). (Hereafter cited in text as Perna.)

³⁵ Mireya Navarro, “For Hispanics, Language and Culture Barriers Can Further Complicate College,” *The New York Times*, 10 February 2003, A14.

very nature of scholarship diminishes a sense of the real difficulties first-generation students encounter in attempting to negotiate between the new lives they are living and the relationship—frequently complex and conflicted—with home. Richard Rodriguez's sometimes controversial autobiography, *Hunger for Memory*, provides a powerful picture of what this negotiation entails, highlighting some of the issues first-generation students may face as they move from one world to another, a move that often necessitates the developing of two personae, the public and the private.³⁶ His book is a story of success in his journey from barrio to prestigious university, but it is also a story of loss, in which familial affection cannot always bridge the distance that falls between a son and the parents who cannot enter his world.

Although Rodriguez met with academic success, he experienced many of the feelings of isolation and alienation that the research studies reveal. As the literature shows, many first-generation students do not escape academic difficulty. Geraldine K. Piorkowski, who directs counseling services at an urban university, offers “survivor guilt” as a possible explanation for the academic problems first-generation students frequently experience.³⁷ She cites students who discuss the stresses caused by being the only one in the neighborhood to go to college, or the frustration of being unable to persuade loved ones to take steps to better their own situations, or the unhappiness that results from family members perceiving that these students believe they are better than the rest of the family, and argues that “low-income, urban, first-generation university students who attempt to become more successful

³⁶ Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1983; original edition, Boston: David Godine, 1982). (Hereafter cited in text as Rodriguez.)

³⁷ Geraldine K. Piorkowski, “Survivor Guilt in the University Setting,” *The Personnel and Guidance Journal* 61, no. 10 (1983). (Hereafter cited in text as Piorkowski.)

than their families often have to grapple with frustration, isolation, and criticism from family members” (Piorkowski 620). She argues further that for these students the question that plagues survivors of war and other disasters, ““Why did I survive when they died?” “can be translated into ‘Why should I succeed when they failed?’ or ‘Why should I succeed when I didn’t help them enough so that they could succeed?’” (Piorkowski 620).

In his ethnographic study, “Breaking Away: A Study of First-Generation Students and Their Families,” Howard London points to the mixed experience of first-generation students as they attempt to secure a new position in society. London argues: “It is only when we see that mobility involves not just gain but loss—most of all the loss of a familiar past, including a past self—that we can begin to understand the attendant periods of confusion, conflict, isolation, and even anguish that first-generation students report” (London, “Breaking Away,”168).

Students of Color and ESL Students

The changing relationship with one’s family is one of the issues first-generation students confront when they enter college. If those students belong to an ethnic or racial minority group as well, the non-academic issues become even more complicated. John Ogbu, for example, examines how different kinds of minorities deal with conflicting loyalties and questions of abandoning the codes of one’s racial and ethnic life to satisfy the demands of the white majority.³⁸ Ogbu argues that there can be significant differences in academic performance between “immigrant minorities,” those who came to the United States willingly to seek a better life, and

³⁸ John U. Ogbu, “Minority Education in Comparative Perspective,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 59, no.1 (1990). (Hereafter cited in text as Ogbu.)

“involuntary minorities,” those who were brought into society involuntarily, through “slavery, conquest, or colonization” (Ogbu 46). He argues further that the two groups react differently to the ways in which they deal with the dominant culture. Whereas immigrant minorities see learning the dominant language and adopting certain cultural features as a necessary step toward achieving the goals for which they immigrated, involuntary minorities see such activities as threats to their cultural heritage: “This tendency to equate standard English, the school curriculum, and the standard behaviors of the school with White American culture has resulted in conscious or unconscious opposition to or in ambivalence toward the learning and using of these essential aspects of schooling on the part of America’s involuntary minorities” (Ogbu 53).

An earlier study examining Chicano and African American students at UCLA gives some support to Ogbu, pointing out that while “social class is important. . . there are very distinct differences between different ethnic and racial groups in how class interacts with schooling outcomes.”³⁹ According to this study, Chicano middle-class students exhibit higher academic performance than their middle-class African-American counterparts. This study also found that for Chicanos there was a positive correlation between father’s educational and social class background and academic performance. For African-American students, only their mother’s educational background was significant.

³⁹ Melvin L. Oliver, Consuelo J. Rodriguez, and Roslyn A. Mickelson, “Brown and Black in White: The Social Adjustment and Performance of Chicano and Black Students,” *The Urban Review* 17, no 1 (1985): 18. (Hereafter cited in text as Oliver et al.)

Similarities to and Differences from Traditional Peers

One study using a variety of instruments found that although first-generation students and continuing-generation students perceived themselves similarly in many areas, including job, scholastic, and athletic competence, students whose parents had attended college scored significantly higher in the areas of self-esteem, social acceptance, humor, and creativity.⁴⁰ T-Bui reports that students whose parents had no college experience were similar in reasons for attending college to both students whose both parents had graduated from college and students whose parents had college experience but had not graduated, but they felt less prepared for college than those students whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree, believed they knew less about the college environment than traditional students, and had to study harder than their traditional peers. However, first-generation and traditional students were found to be alike in making independent decisions related to college, making friends, and feeling accepted (T-Bui 9-10).

Although most of the other examined studies note strong and usually problematic differences between first-generation students and their traditional peers, Pascarella and Terenzini point to one of the positive aspects of being a first-generation student. They argue that in focusing

on the outcomes traditionally valued by an academic community . . . scholars of college impacts on students have been substantially less sensitive to the kinds of personal growth and maturing that may occur when students must meet work, family, and educational responsibilities simultaneously. The challenges confronting such students may lead to substantial growth along dimensions not typically considered in the existing body of research. (Pascarella and Terenzini 154-155)

⁴⁰Loretta Neal MacGregor et al., "Selected Personality Characteristics of First-Generation College Students," *College Student Journal* 25, no. 2 (1991) : 233.

Few studies, however, examine this aspect of the lives of first-generation students.

Academic Literacies

Although research indicates the importance of social, cultural, and family issues in the college success of first-generation students, college is, after all, about academic achievement. Thus the ability to handle the academic tasks required of them, particularly at highly selective institutions where there are few, if any, remedial programs, is crucial to the college persistence of first-generation students and to their eventually receiving a degree. Once we enter the domain of writing and reading, the literature's focus expands to include not only quantitative studies, such as the majority of those already cited, but also qualitative studies and the arguments that arise from all such work. Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, for example, argues that "if we are to invent a truly pluralistic society, we must envision a socially and politically situated view of language and the creation of texts—one that takes into account gender, race, class" and a variety of other issues.⁴¹ In other words, notions of literacy need to consider more than the ability to read and write at a particular level. In her longitudinal study of basic writers at the City College of the City University of New York, Sternglass argues that

The importance of gender, race, class and ideology in students' academic lives is not presented as a defense or an excuse for bringing personal knowledge and experience to bear on their responses to the academic demands. Rather, it becomes crucial to understand the context of the students' lives from which they are able to enter into the academic world. (Sternglass 62-63)

Academic literacy has been defined in various ways. One researcher says it is "not just about texts but also about actions around texts" (Ivaniç 62); another calls it

⁴¹ Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, "Discourse and Diversity: Experimental Writing within the Academy," *College Composition and Communication* 43, no. 3 (1992): 349. (Hereafter cited in text as Bridwell-Bowles.)

the ability to negotiate different and distinct kinds of discourse (Geisler, "Exploring," *passim*); Lea says that it involves "the social practices which surround the use of the written word" (Lea 158). Killingsworth suggests the importance not only of literacy, but of what Paolo Friere calls "'critical literacy.' . . . the ability to question what one reads and place it in the contexts of one's own lifeworld."⁴² Despite some specific differences, all agree that academic literacy connects the worlds of reading and writing with the world of lived experience.

As noted earlier, many early studies indicate that first-generation students are not sufficiently prepared to handle academic reading and writing as they enter college. Penrose, commenting on significantly lower verbal SAT scores among first-generation students, says that this factor "is consistent with theoretical predictions that these students, who are less likely to have been exposed to academic culture in the home, will be less familiar with academic discourse [than traditional students] when they enter college" (Penrose 455). However, she also notes that in her study, such a disadvantage did not appear to affect students' literacy performance, overall academic performance, or their ability to acquire the necessary writing skills for composition classes in the first year of school.

Nonetheless, certain requirements may be particularly difficult for first-generation students for whom high-level academic discourse is foreign territory, specifically the kind they may encounter at a highly competitive four-year college or university. Lea and Street argue, for example, that students may find their personal identities challenged by the requirements of different kinds of academic discourse,

⁴² M. Jimmie Killingsworth, "Product and Process, Literacy and Orality: An Essay on Composition and Culture," *College Composition and Communication* 44, no.1 (1993) : 35. (Hereafter cited in text as Killingsworth.)

particularly those requiring them to use impersonal and passive forms of writing, and Lu argues for the need for writing teachers to understand these issues (which for her extend to students who are not necessarily first-generation) and find ways to include in the classroom students whose experiences have been “marginalized by academic discourse.”⁴³ Courage, reviewing the arguments about literacy that extend from Mina Shaughnessy to Raymond Williams and Joseph Harris, suggests that “composition studies should regard the competing claims of students’ nonschool literacies and of academic literacy as poles within a dialectical opposition, each containing a partial truth defined by and defining the other.”⁴⁴

Social Class

Implicit in many of these discussions are issues that involve social class; in some articles, such as Linda Brodkey’s “On the Subjects of Class and Gender in ‘The Literacy Letters,’” Mary Soliday’s “Class Dismissed,” and Gary Tate’s “Thinking About Our Class,” these issues are made explicit.⁴⁵ Along with examining some of the tensions that arise when non-traditional students confront the demands of a discourse that has been defined and shaped in ways unrelated to their own lives and experiences, all three of these authors focus on the ways social class has been largely ignored in composition studies. Although none of these authors focuses specifically on first-generation students, their discussions of the writing issues faced by non-traditional students can apply to first-generation students as

⁴³ Min-Zhan Lu, “Writing as Repositioning,” *Journal of Education* 72, no. 1 (1990) : 20. (Hereafter cited in text as Lu.)

⁴⁴ Richard Courage, “The Interaction of Public and Private Literacies,” *College Composition and Communication* 44, no. 4 (1993) : 485.

⁴⁵ Linda Brodkey, “On the Subjects of Class and Gender in ‘The Literacy Letters,’” *College English* 51, no.2 (1989); Soliday, “Class Dismissed”; Gary Tate, “Class Talk: Thinking about Our Class,” *Journal of Basic Writing* 16 (1997).

well, particularly since at a highly selective college first-generation students often wear the triple crown of outsiders—class, race, and family background.

At such institutions—where writing is the foundation on which most of student academic success rests—Lea and Street's argument resonates, particularly when they suggest that the usual models for understanding student writing do not sufficiently examine how issues of identity, power and authority affect that writing and suggest that an academic literacies approach provides a better framework for understanding "the conflicted and contested nature of writing practices."⁴⁶

First-generation students at highly selective colleges and universities constitute a small number of the overall population of these institutions. Nevertheless, what they bring to a school in terms of different perspectives and an eagerness to learn and succeed may make them among the most valuable of the student body attending such an institution. It is my hope that this work and others will provide the body of literature with yet more information about how to help these students achieve their potential, thereby increasing the stature of not only themselves but the institutions that guide them on their way to academic success.

⁴⁶ Mary Lea and Brian Street, "Student Writing in Higher Education: An Academic Literacies Approach," *Studies in Higher Education* 23, no. 2 (1998): 157. (Hereafter cited in text as Lea and Street.)

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY AND STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

Methodology

This study uses modified ethnographic methodology to examine the lives of first-generation college students at a highly selective, private, liberal arts college located in New England. I chose to use this methodology for reasons that had to do both with the kind of information I wished to elicit and also with the aspect of this work that has to do with composition. As Howard London notes in his interview-based study of the issues that arise between first-generation college students and their families, “While not satisfying the protocols of survey research, case-study approaches such as this usually render richer detail. . . [affording] the opportunity to deepen our understanding of the psychological and social forces that mediate educational decisions” (London, “Breaking Away,” 146). That is, although a quantitative study may yield important information, in-depth narrative describing how a small number of students experience academic life can be equally valuable in providing a basis for further research and study.

Further, individual stories also can resonate in important ways with writing practitioners, one of the audiences for whom this work can be useful. Stephen North, in his book *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* points out the importance of “lore,” the body of knowledge held by practitioners, saying that lore

is driven, first, by a pragmatic logic: It is concerned with what has worked, is working, or might work in teaching, doing, or learning writing. Second, its structure is essentially experiential. That is, the traditions, practices, and beliefs of which it is constituted are best understood as being organized within an experience-based framework: I will create my version of lore out of what has worked or might work—either in my own experience or in that of others—and I

will understand and order it in terms of the circumstances under which it did so.⁴⁷

My hope is that this study will add to that body of lore, striking a chord with teachers who have worked with similar students in similar situations, and providing useful information about helping these students make the most of their college experience. Primary research techniques include semi-structured interviews, classroom visits, examination of student writing, written questionnaires, and collection and examination of student records, including transcripts and application folders. Although the study is qualitative, certain quantitative data, such as statistical information about current college students and the results of various studies, described in some detail elsewhere in this work, are used to clarify some of the issues and provide a framework for discussion.

Selection of Participants

My intent was to interview as many first-generation students as possible in order to get an overall picture of the sorts of experiences they encountered during their career at the college, and then to select a smaller number whose writing I would collect and who would participate in two or three more in-depth interviews. Participants in the study were solicited through campus mail and through a notice placed in the college's daily schedule of events. In both the campus mailing and the notice, the study was described briefly and students were asked to contact me if they were the first in their family to attend college, and were interested in being part of this research. (See Appendix 1 for sample letter.) Seventeen students responded initially, and upon their getting in touch with me these students were sent a more

⁴⁷ Stephen North, *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of Knowledge in an Emerging Field* (Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 1987) : 23.

detailed letter describing the study in some depth, including the amount of time that would be required for interviews. Of the initial seventeen, twelve agreed to participate in the study. A subset of students whose writing was collected and examined consisted of three members of the Class of 2005 (one male and two female) and two female members of the Class of 2004.

Excluded Students

First-generation foreign nationals who had not been educated in the United States in both elementary school and high school were not included in this study. Such students often face cultural, language, and academic issues that stem directly from their experiences with English as a second language and the change from a foreign to American school system. Moreover, because these students are not native speakers and writers of American English, their written work is likely to be atypical compared to the writing of first-generation American students. Thus, because it could be difficult to separate the issues these students face as international students from those they face as first-generation students, they are not represented here.

Interviewed Students

The subset of five students who met the requirements of the in-depth portion of the study (that is, they were first-generation, available throughout the year and involved in courses that would require significant writing) were asked to come back for further interviews periodically during the semester and were also asked to submit samples of their writing throughout the term. Three additional students who were not involved in writing courses this year, but whose interviews illustrated well some of the issues first-generation students face were interviewed two or more times

each. Of the overall group of twelve, four, including three males and one female, were interviewed only once. The interviews took place over the course of several months during the regular school year and were all conducted at the college. All interviews were taped and later transcribed in full.

Interview Methods

The interview questions were divided into five general areas: demographic information, descriptions of early and later literacy experiences, high school experiences, preparation for college, college experiences (for an expanded list of interview questions, see Appendix 2). Those students whose writing became part of the study were also asked to discuss specific papers, with particular emphasis on problematic areas, and were also asked to discuss their attitude toward the specific assignment.

Whereas the initial parts of the interviews were highly structured, some of them also became more free-ranging, with students taking the lead in the direction of the discussion, so that even though all interviews began with the same set of questions, the individual interviews went off in slightly different directions according to the student's own situation. Individual interviews ranged in length from forty-five minutes to more than an hour. Those students who became part of the in-depth study were also asked to collect and submit drafts and final copies of papers written as part of class assignments, including copies returned with comments from their teachers. Interviews conducted after the papers were collected included discussions of writing experiences with these papers.

All students were assured of confidentiality and were asked to sign releases allowing the interviews, their writing itself, and discussions about their writing to be quoted in this work. At the end of the school year, after grades had been submitted and with the permission of the students, I interviewed teachers about their reflections on the students' classroom performance.

Student Characteristics

Although I would have liked certain kinds of representation to provide a balance, because participants came from a limited pool to begin with, I could not screen for race, or ethnicity or socioeconomic status. I decided, however, that because I was not attempting to provide scientific data or to draw conclusions about the relationship between first-generation college students' academic experience and their race or ethnicity, the lack of balance would not be a serious issue. Nonetheless, one of the aims of this study is to point to directions for further research, and on a campus peopled largely by upper- and middle-class white students of European descent, issues of race and ethnicity can have major effects on how students of color and other minority students experience academic life. Consequently, the descriptions here indicate students' ethnic background and socioeconomic status as well as how they identify themselves racially. For example, of the eight females and four males in the study, one of the females and three of the males identify themselves as Caucasian and all but one of the others identify themselves by ethnic background. Coincidentally, the Caucasian female and two of the Caucasian males are Italian-American; the third Caucasian male is of French-Canadian descent, although both of his parents and all of his grandparents

were born in the United States; and the fourth male is Latino, with both of his parents having been born in Honduras. Of the seven remaining females two are of Haitian descent; one is Ecuadorian; another is African American; one has a Puerto Rican father and a French-Canadian-American mother; and the last, an Ecuadorian father and a Bolivian mother. All but one of the participants in the study were born in the United States and all are American citizens. One student was born in Puerto Rico but moved to Connecticut before she was two years old. Although three grew up as bilingual speakers of Spanish and English, all but one of the rest have English as a first language and learned a second language only in school. One of the female students of Haitian descent reports that although her grandmother and great-grandmother, with whom she and her mother live, spoke to her in Haitian Creole and French from when she was an infant, her mother spoke to her only in English and insisted that she speak English at home. Consequently, she grew up understanding both Haitian Creole and French, but spoke only English at home.

Academic History

In terms of their academic experience, seven of the participants come from public high schools, including two special public schools in New York City, one a charter school and one a school for the performing arts. Of the five who attended private high schools, two of the males attended different private preparatory boarding schools in New Hampshire, one of the males a parochial school in Connecticut, and one a private preparatory day school in Rhode Island; one of the females attended a private preparatory day school in New York. Two of the male students are in the Class of 2003, five students, all female, are in the Class of 2004,

and four females and one male are in the Class of 2005. There are no students included from the Class of 2006. Academic majors include Latin American Studies, English, Dance, Sociology-Based Human Relations, Zoology, Hispanic Studies, Psychology, American Studies and Economics. The current GPAs for these students range from 2.3 to 3.8. Two of the students had verbal SAT scores above the college average of 650, with one at 660 and the other at 710, but of the remaining five students who reported their SAT verbal score, one fell below 500 at 470, and the others scored between 500 and 590. All Math SAT scores fell below the college average of 640, with two students scoring above 600, and two scoring below 450.

Participation in College Programs and Activities

Although one of the emphases at Connecticut College is its Centers and the certificate programs contained there, only two of the students in the study have participated in a certification program. Two members of the Class of 2004, both female, are enrolled in the PICA program in the Holloran Center for Community Action and Public Policy. Although one student in the study does not have a sufficient average to meet the basic GPA requirements for entry into a certification program, the others chose not to apply, citing varied reasons such as “I did not want to be pigeonholed,” “I have a personal and complicated stance against the intermingling of academic pursuits and community service,” and “I wanted to put all my time and concentration into my major—zoology.” Similarly, although more than half of the regular student body studies abroad for one or more semesters, only four of these students have studied abroad or plan to study abroad in their junior

year, again for varied reasons, including feeling they could not afford time away from the major, not wanting to be so far from home, and simply not being interested in studying abroad. All of these students are involved in some sort of co-curricular activity ranging from athletics to volunteer programs to the multicultural center to student government, and in that they are similar to their traditional peers at the college, most of whom participate in community service programs, athletics, or student government.

CHAPTER 5: THE STUDY

Rationale

That first-generation students might be worthy of study is a notion that has occupied researchers for only the past few decades, and even so, has occupied only a relatively few of them. As briefly discussed earlier, the GI Bill, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Women's Movement were among the reasons for the rise of community colleges and open-door policies at four-year institutions, and hence the admission of non-traditional students to higher education. Eventually, and particularly in the past two or three decades, these non-traditional students—students of color, older men and women, and first-generation students of all colors, ages, social classes, and both sexes—began to make their way in increasing numbers into private, elite, four-year liberal arts institutions.

And yet, almost all studies that concentrate on student persistence show that first-generation students have a higher rate of attrition than traditional students (Billson and Terry; Riehl; Warburton).⁴⁸ Given this finding alone, it would seem useful to pay more attention to the particular issues first generation students face. But while the literature on some of these non-traditional students has grown, few of the studies focus exclusively on first generation students, whatever their racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic status, and even fewer focus on those students at highly selective institutions. One of the purposes of this study, therefore, is to start to close

⁴⁸ Edward C. Warburton, Rosio Bugarin, and Anne-Marie Nunez, *Bridging the Gap: Academic Preparation and Postsecondary Success of First-Generation Students*, NCES 2001-153 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Studies, 2001). Only two of the studies I found (Pratt and Skaggs; Holmstrom) offer contradictions to this finding. These studies have been discussed earlier in this paper.

the gap in the literature by concentrating on the experiences of a small number of first-generation students at such an institution, noting along the way how they compare with students whose experiences have been reported elsewhere.

As the earlier review of the literature indicates, some studies focus on particular characteristics of first-generation students that may influence attrition or the academic achievement of even those students who graduate (Cross; MacGregor; Pratt and Skaggs; Riehl; T. Bui). Yet others look at complicated family dynamics that sometimes affect students' lives in college (London "Breaking Away,"; London "Transformations"; Rodriguez; Rose). Some focus on the particular emotional and academic challenges that first-generation students must confront (Merullo⁴⁹; Piorkowski; Rodriguez; Rose), and others examine the academic preparation and performance of first-generation students (Ting; York-Anderson and Bowman), sometimes with a particular emphasis on race or ethnicity (Miller⁵⁰; Richardson and Skinner). Of these, only London and Merullo look specifically at first-generation students at highly selective four-year colleges, and Merullo's is an opinion piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, rather than an academic study. Bowen and Bok's influential *The Shape of the River* deals with students of color at elite colleges and universities, but its focus is on affirmative action policies and it examines issues

⁴⁹ Roland Merullo, "The Challenge of First-Generation College Students," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, (14 June 2002) : B10-11.

⁵⁰ Carol A. Miller, "Better Than What People Told Me I Was: What Students of Color Tell Us about the Multicultural Composition Classroom," in *Writing in Multicultural Settings*, eds. Carol Severino, Juan Guerra, and Johnella Butler (New York: The Modern Language Association, 1997).

for first-generation students only coincidentally, and then largely in terms of socioeconomic status.⁵¹

Academic Literacies and Students' Lives

While this study is primarily concerned with how first-generation students at a highly selective college experience academic literacies overall, and their writing especially, I am mindful of the scholarly and academic voices that argue that academic experience is not a discrete category and that academic life is profoundly influenced by the entire context of a student's life, including family background, economics, race and gender. Like Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, I am interested in hearing students "talk about what it means to be initiated into the culture of a university, what it means to *them* [emphasis Chiseri-Strater's] to learn the discourse of a particular discipline, what their interpretation is for literacy" (Chiseri-Strater xvi). And I agree with Min-Zhan Lu, who argues that student writers have access to a wide range of discourses, from both within the academy and outside and that these discourses often compete. But rather than hindering their learning, the friction between competing discourses can allow them to "see how the concerns, feelings, and beliefs which are central to their non-academic activities are relevant to their personal and social existence and, therefore, relevant to how they think and write within the academy" (Lu 19).

This study, then, rests partially on the idea that students' lives are of a piece and that the background and experiences that shaped them prior to their entrance into college will continue to influence them after they matriculate. This is not to say

⁵¹ William G. Bowen and Derek Bok, *The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

that their having grown up in an atmosphere that may have lacked academic or intellectual richness is necessarily a barrier to successful academic work and critical thinking. But, as Marilyn Sternglass points out, it is important to understand that “background knowledge does not diminish the analytical perspective the students present in their critiques of existing conditions and view points. Rather, their lived-through experiences enhance their ability to assess the frequently unquestioned assumptions of the larger society” (Sternglass 60).

Moreover, as Soliday argues, “if cultural difference is defined chiefly as a struggle over making meaning, then the conflicts that we know many nontraditional students experience within the academy will revolve primarily around students’ ability to position themselves in ways that don’t violate their own cultural integrity” (Soliday, “Class Dismissed,” 733).

It is in writing classes that students often begin to develop the tools that will help them connect the pieces of their experience and to learn how to use language in the task of helping them to remain true to the world of their past while achieving the success they desire in the world they have entered. The profiles that follow explore not only the academic experiences of the students who participated in the study, but also to some degree where they came from and how they moved from where they were to where they are.

As noted earlier, although the Office of Admission at Connecticut College does not currently keep records indicating who are the first-generation students, information gathered from application folders and the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) reports for the classes of 2003, 2004 and 2005 indicate

that approximately 120 upperclass students at the college (about eight percent of the total number of students for those three classes) are first-generation students. After putting out a call for volunteers to participate in my study, my original intent was to do brief interviews with all the students who responded and then to do follow-up, in-depth interviews with a much smaller number, whose semester's writing I would collect and examine.

Because of the nature of my work and the potential for conflict of interest, I did not choose to meet with first-year students, but I hoped that I would have a sampling across the other three classes of students at different stages of their college careers, and that these students would provide different perspectives on the various issues first-generation students might find themselves facing during their undergraduate academic lives. I was uncertain how much time busy students would be willing to allot to my project, or how much of their lives and concerns they would be willing to reveal. Thus, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that the participants were enthusiastic, talkative, and willing to share openly much of themselves and their work. These attitudes were not only crucial to this project but also testify to the desire of these students to make their lives known. Their enthusiasm and the stories they had to tell caused me to modify my original plan, and I conducted follow-up interviews even with students who were not involved in academic writing in the semester in which the interviews were taking place so that their experiences with college life could more deeply inform this study. But because I wished to focus on academic literacy, with a particular emphasis on student writing, I chose a subset comprising only students whose courses would

involve significant writing during the spring semester. Thus this study is to some degree about all twelve of the students I interviewed, with close examination of the writing of a smaller group of five, whose written work I followed intensively.

Student Profiles

Given below is a general description of all participants, followed by examination of some of the major issues that affect the lives and academic success of first-generation students. The remainder of the study discusses academic literacies, *per se*, with particular focus on the writing of the subset of five students who did significant writing in their coursework during the semester.

Who They Are

Nick Langlois, Maria Rojas, Anna DiPalma, Cherisse Valens, Lara Mercado, Rachel Vasquez, Xavier Ortega, Anissa Lewis, Cassandra Hewes, Mike Fiori, Linda Diaz, and Bill Capaldi:⁵² each of these students agreed to share her or his stories with me so that I could more fully understand how first-generation students negotiated the rigors of academia—including adjusting to a particular kind of social atmosphere as well as meeting the exacting standards of a highly selective college. The first five named also agreed to share and discuss their writing and to allow me to interview their teachers once the semester was finished.

Although at one time I was first-year dean to all of the students in my study, I knew only four in more than a cursory way. Spending time with the twelve students over the duration of this project allowed me to better get to know the students I had already worked with in some capacity or another and those I had met only in brief office visits, and also allowed me to understand more fully how the circumstances

⁵² All names have been changed to protect the privacy of individual students.

of their home and family backgrounds connected to their academic lives, and their academic literacies particularly. In her ethnographic study of first-year students, Donna Sewell discusses the connection between the different literacies of students and the relation of those literacies to academic achievement, pointing out the importance of influences outside strictly academic areas, for example, relationships with family and teachers (Sewell "Encountering Writing"). The idea of student literacies, written and oral, academic and otherwise, became fleshed out as through the course of the interviews I saw how students at different stages of their academic lives and different levels of maturity used their out-of-school experiences to help them concretize abstract theory, deepen their writing, and make class discussions meaningful. For some, there was a direct connection between their choice of academic major and their emotional and intellectual responses to the circumstances of class, race, ethnicity, and family background. For others, who they are and where they came from operate in less direct ways but always with some effect on how they approach life at a rigorous college and strive to meet its challenges.

The twelve students spoke with different voices—some confident, some hesitant, some with just the faintest trace of their first or other language, and some with the rhythms and lilts of other countries, those of their parents and grandparents. Some seemed to have given the matter of being a first-generation student a good deal of thought; others were more concerned about race or social class. But throughout the interviews, despite their individual differences and experiences of college, they raised some common themes and voiced some common concerns: worries about fitting in, worries about finances, worries about being "good enough,"

and, conversely, pride in what they had accomplished and how far they had come from where they began—often in poverty, from dangerous neighborhoods, and with difficult home situations. This study will touch on both the individual differences and the common concerns. Here, then, is a brief introduction to the individual students whose words and lives shape this study:

Nick Langlois

Nick is the first in his family to graduate from high school and to take a different path from most of the males in his extended French-Canadian-American family, who work in construction as day-laborers. But despite his working-class origins, Nick, one of the five sophomores in the group, could easily have stepped out of the pages of a J.Crew catalog. About 5'10," he favors crew-neck sweaters and khakis, and in the winter a Burberry scarf protects him from the New England winds. An aspiring poet, he is a lover of language who speaks rapidly, usually with words tumbling out so fast over one another that interesting malapropisms tumble out as well ("*you need to aloin yourself with society*"; "*the bridge is synonymous on both sides*"). He says that when he was in high school, he often suffered from "word envy," particularly when speakers came to the campus. "*But my vocabulary has gotten better and now I feel like I could take part in a discussion of the lecture, rather than just sitting there and thinking, 'wow!'*"

An outstanding hockey player in elementary and middle school, he found his athletic abilities to be instrumental in his being admitted to an exclusive prep school, funded partially by scholarship but with some portion of his tuition coming from his parents and some from summer jobs in landscaping and construction. Although he

came to the college hoping to play hockey, “*personality differences*” between him and the coach who recruited him kept him on the bench, and he ultimately decided to leave the team. He plays Lacrosse and intramural sports, instead, and is part of a student-organized poetry group (“*a lot of sports was my father, living vicariously through me, but academics have always been mine, about me*”). Although he is comfortable talking about his origins, he admits to “*a streak of elitism that drifted into [him] in high school,*” and that he tries to control:

It's definitely from going to prep school and from there to here, and it's something that I definitely guard against. Sometimes I'll find myself saying something and —wait a second— that's way off base. So because I'm conscious of it, it hasn't really taken hold of me, but at times it comes over me. You know what I mean?

Thoughtful and self-aware, he displays a ready and often self-mocking humor.

When I tell him, for instance, that his papers speak with the voice of someone who knows what he's talking about, he laughs and replies, “*yeah—which stinks if you show that you don't.*” His tone, his dress, and his words reflect someone who is still in late adolescence, trying to decide how to blend the various parts of his personality: the prep school boy who speaks easily of Oxford for his study away and potential graduate school choice and the rough and ready “Joe Regular,” as he calls it, who understands a world of economic hardship and achievement that comes from hard physical work.

Maria Rojas

Maria was born to Haitian-American parents but never lived with her father. Instead, she grew up with her mother and her Haitian grandmother and great-grandmother, both of whom spoke only Haitian Creole, although Maria's mother

would allow her to speak only English at home. An intense, focused student, she speaks so rapidly, I worry that even the tape recorder will not be able to keep up with her words. But it is clear as she speaks that she has thought carefully about the circumstances of her life and the value of her education. Even as a young child, Maria lived in two worlds: the world of home—a housing project in Brooklyn—and the world of private kindergarten, parochial elementary schools, and a private high school. Maria's life growing up in the housing project was carefully overseen by her mother, who protected her from the dangers of an urban neighborhood where drugs and crime were a common occurrence on the street. Maria says,

My mother didn't allow me out when I was growing up. I wasn't allowed on the patio or down the block. People say, "oh, I have to come in when the streetlights come on," but I wasn't allowed to be out. My mother was always with me. I wasn't allowed to wear nail polish, I wasn't allowed to show my stomach when I went outside. My mother worked a night job just so she could be with me when I came home from school, to take me ice skating, to take me somewhere.

Her mother applied equal attention to Maria's schooling. Although her job as a station supervisor for the New York City Transit Authority was not highly paid, Maria says, *"My mom chose private school since she did get beat up when she was in public school, so she had a really negative experience [and] the public schools in my neighborhood were really bad."* Her mother had tried to enroll Maria into programs like "Prep for Prep" or private school when she was in fifth grade, but Maria was not accepted, and so her mother sent her to parochial elementary and middle schools. But although the deposit had been placed and uniforms bought for the Catholic high school where her mother had gone, Maria says, *"when my mother found out from [my prep school] that I had been accepted, I went there."*

Maria entered college planning to major in economics, a choice that troubled her, but one that she thought she needed to make:

People who were praised in my family or who my family really talked about a lot were people who had really good jobs or business type jobs, not blue collar like the rest of the people in my family. So even though I was interested in something like sociology, back then, I thought if you majored in sociology you'd be a social worker and I knew that money was important to my family—not because people were wealthy, just because since everybody didn't have money, you know, we hoped that each generation would be able to kind of like help the older ones out. I mostly did it because I thought that was something that would be good for my family, but not really for me.

Her freshman and sophomore years were, however, marked by her growing unhappiness with this choice, and finally she went through a crisis that culminated in her failing one course, withdrawing from three others, and considering leaving school. At the end of that semester, she changed her major. She says of that time, *“I think not having good grades really shattered my self-esteem, you know, like, I really, just—anything I wrote, any test that I took, anything that I was interested in studying—I just didn't feel like I had that confidence—the right to belong.”* But at the end of her junior year, Maria moves and speaks with the purpose of someone who knows what she wants to accomplish in the world, and knows that she can reach her goals, and she has little patience with those who do not take academics seriously—*“Too much time [here] is spent on foolishness”*— or who criticize her for reaching above herself by *“talking white.”* She says, *“I feel very comfortable with who I am. I don't feel that I don't know how to talk. I don't know how to say it, but if somebody can't contribute to my life, I just can't worry about what they have to say.”*

Anna DiPalma

Anna's great passion is to be a professional dancer and has been since she started dance lessons in grade school:

I always knew I wanted to be a dancer. I knew from the time I was in like fourth or fifth grade that I wanted to go to LaGuardia [a performing arts public high school in New York] and be a dancer, which I wasn't. I was a singer there, and I think I wanted to go to Julliard. But I always knew that I wanted to go to college and that I wanted to be a dancer.

Her Italian-American heritage is evident in her olive-skin and dark eyes. She is small, but her energy and presence make her seem larger than she is, so that it is a shock to see her on campus and realize she is less than five feet tall. With her long brown hair tied back, the flat shoes she usually wears, and the way she stands and sits, her years of dance training are obvious to even an untrained eye such as mine. Her father, a postal worker, and her mother, who coordinates hospice care in a nursing home, have supported her in her ambition, but her father, particularly, urged her to have something to fall back on for a career— *“just in case I'm injured, just in case I don't make it as a dancer”*—and that spurred her decision to apply to liberal arts colleges with dance programs rather than a conservatory.

She sometimes displays a self-confidence that borders on arrogance and that helps her to proclaim her presence in and out of class. *“I know I'm pretty assertive,”* she says with a laugh:

And you have to be in New York – pretty assertive. Especially since I went to school in Manhattan. I commuted everyday. I really don't know what it's like to live anywhere else so I'm not sure if my behavior comes from that. Maybe it's because I went to school with so many kids that you had to be assertive and loud if you wanted to get noticed. And I did want to get noticed and get attention.

She says that here she is often the only person who talks in some of her

classes, carrying on a dialogue with her professors. And she is critical of both the professor and her fellow students in a particular class in psychology:

The way the information is presented to us, it's really slow and elementary. It's just like walking us through everything and it seems to me pretty unnecessary. I mean we could just read something and do it, but the teacher has to, like, beg people to give her answers. I mean everyone just sits there? And so I get a lot of people in that class who really hate me or really like me, because I give her all the answers. I get so frustrated because it's like we're just wasting time. It's the most frustrating class ever. And I laugh. . . I look around and like, come on, do something!

At the same time, she says her English teachers intimidate her and she hesitates to speak to them about her work, or to ask questions about areas in which they are critical. In most other places, she speaks and moves rapidly—and unapologetically:

Even when I don't have to get anywhere in a hurry, and I'm walking down the street, I get very frustrated when the person in front of me isn't moving. I'm the first one there. They have the dance club here and they organize trips to different places, like New York. Last year, the girl who was president of the dance club, she was just, trying to read the subway map, and I said, "don't bother reading, just follow me."

Cherisse Valens

Born to an Ecuadorian father and a Bolivian mother, Cherisse nonetheless grew up with English as her first and primary language—although she has spoken Spanish fluently for many years—and her light skin and blue eyes distinguish her from many of her darker skinned Latina peers. Like her fellow Latina, Rachel, who also has an Ecuadorian background, she says she used to be “*one of the not-so-outspoken students. I think that's changed now, but what I found in the beginning is that we would read something and I just wouldn't have anything to say about it, I wouldn't have questions and I wouldn't have comments.*”

Her parents having divorced when she was in high school, Cherisse lives with her mother in a middle- to upper-middle-class neighborhood in Westchester County, not too far out of New York City, while her father, who is in the early stages of Alzheimer's Disease, lives in Florida. Cherisse says that he is also manic-depressive, and that his increasingly erratic behavior led to her parents' divorce, as well as her estrangement from her father. Since her first trip to Bolivia with her mother, when she was in second grade, she has continued to travel both with her mother and independently, and her mother has encouraged her to explore. Speaking about her decision not to study abroad while in college, she says,

I went to London this summer to take a course and I enjoyed that, I had a good time, and I've been to Spain before. Spain was where I was considering, but after thinking about it, I felt more uncomfortable than excited. It's a shame to waste the opportunity, but I've been to Bolivia a bunch of times, I've been to Mexico, I've been to Spain, I've been to London, and I just thought for myself, I was thinking about London, and it's Europe, basically, and after doing it for the summer, I can decide whether I want to spend a semester abroad, and it's just not the right time. It was definitely a struggle with my mom though, because she really wanted me to go.

She has a strong interest in pursuing journalism as a career, but the college does not offer any courses in either journalism or communications, another of her interests. She came here despite the lack of journalism courses because "*once I saw the college I fell in love with it and knew I wanted to be here.*" Because she wanted to continue to improve her Spanish, she originally thought she would declare Hispanic studies as her major, "*But after two semesters of Hispanic studies I noticed that there weren't really a lot of Hispanic Studies courses that were offered that were interesting to me. A lot of them were dealing with the way-back history of Spain, like the 16th and 17th century, which is interesting, but,*" she says, laughing,

“for me, once I heard it once I kind of like didn’t want to hear it again.” She then turned to:

the Latin American Studies major which allowed you to take courses in any department pertaining to Latin America and that was interesting to me because I didn’t just want to take Spanish classes in Spanish about Spain. I wanted to take sociology, I wanted to take anthropology, I wanted to take history.

Rachel Vasquez

Rachel, a member of the Class of 2004, shares her Ecuadorian background with Cherisse, but they are little alike in other ways. Rachel entered the college from the working-class Queens neighborhood where she lived with her Ecuadorian parents, a stay-at-home mother and a father who manages laundry facilities for a New York City health club. She did not speak any English until she entered elementary school and lived until high school in a very small and sheltered community. *“My parents were very traditional and very strict. I wasn’t allowed to go out at all when I was in school, so I spent a lot of time reading,”* she says.

Until coming to a residential college from a small charter high school in New York City, she had never spent a night away from home or her family, nor had she ever lived in a predominantly white environment, and although she is as light-skinned as any of the Caucasian students in the group, she does not think of herself as white, but considers herself a student of color. Entering the college was a major transition for her, and, even as a junior, she has mixed feelings about the school: *“I like the academics, she says, “and I think socially I’ve made some really good friends. Part of the reason I never transferred, more than the academics, is my friends.”* She speaks openly about her life each time we meet, but it takes her some time, I think, to become comfortable talking with me, a relative stranger, and until I

saw her at a social gathering at the college's multicultural house, I thought of her as deeply serious, shy and reserved. There, however, in a place where she was obviously comfortable and at home, I saw her talking, speaking volubly and laughing readily. I wondered how she functions in class, where, again, her classmates are predominantly white, and the answer is that her behavior in class is much more restrained than it is among her friends:

I speak up a little bit more than when I first got here, but it's still not what I do. I tend to be a quiet person, but there are times in class when I want to say something and I won't say anything. I just can't bring myself to say it, and when I'm called upon, I'll turn red. It's affected my grades, because in some classes, participation is required, and I still can't speak up.

Her father, who wanted her to attend college but initially had misgivings about her coming to this college, is less worried, she says, now that she is a junior.

Among other reasons for his reluctance to see her leave home, she says, is that

I think he thought I wouldn't finish because there's a kind of like a cultural expectation. He thought that by the time I was 18, I was going to be getting married or something. Because he's seen it happen with everyone else in my family. I have a cousin right now who's 19 and she's getting married, so she dropped out of high school. He kind of expected the same thing would happen to me.

She fumbles for words as she tries to describe the disappointment she thinks he would have felt had she followed that expected path: *"I mean he couldn't, he couldn't—I've never asked him, but I feel he wouldn't have, he couldn't do anything but support me. But he really wanted me to go to college."*

In fact, when they speak about her plans to become a teacher now, and her desire eventually to get her Masters degree, he urges her to go on for her Ph.D.

"Why couldn't you do that?" he has asked her. *"You shouldn't just stop. If there's something you want to do, you shouldn't just stop."*

Lara Mercado

Of all the participants in this study, Lara has a background most unlike that of the typical Connecticut College student, and even unlike that of most of her first-generation peers in the study. The daughter of a French-Canadian-American mother and a Puerto Rican father, who left the family when she was three years old, she has had little stability in her life. A ward of the state since she was ten years old, when she and her younger sister were removed from their mother's care and placed in a series of foster homes, she has been making independent decisions about her life for most of that time. Her mother has been a drug-abuser, on welfare and in jail, and Lara is determined that she will not repeat any of the mistakes she has seen in her family.

My grandmother was emotionally very hard, and my mom and my aunt, my mom's sister— dropping out of school, getting pregnant, just being promiscuous, having a lot of problems. They were on drugs, they lost their kids, with this guy, with that guy, no stability, you know. They have no idea what education is like. They don't have an idea what's going on in the real world. I know as a teacher I'm not going to be rich, but I want to be comfortable and not have to worry about money or struggle with it. I want to stop this trend in my family of the same thing happening in each generation, you know, starting from my great-grandmother.

I met Lara first when she was a freshman who came frequently to my office to discuss transferring to a school closer to home. I was struck then by the combination of fierce independence and vulnerability. She had left her last foster home to move in with a paternal aunt whom she had only begun to know well and who offered her a safe home and emotional support. But despite evident anger at her mother, she worried about her and about her sister, who had chosen to go back to her mother's home, and she wondered if transferring to a school closer to home

would make her less torn. I did not know at the time that she had worked extra off-campus hours in order to buy herself a car so that she could go home every weekend. She has continued to struggle with home issues, and she has also wondered about her place at the college, and whether she belongs here:

I was kind of like in disbelief that I was actually here because, like, I just saw that a lot of people were really wealthy. I mean, I just can't believe that some people were driving around the cars that they were driving. Because I thought my car was nice, but you know and then I look around and I'm like, what? BMW? What, Volvo, Saab? And you're how old, 17? 18? But I was still—when I came here I didn't believe that I was ever going to graduate. I just thought I was going to be here because that's what you do. I didn't believe I was going to graduate until actually this year.

Lara is a Hispanic Studies major who plans to teach Spanish in high school. Although her heritage is partly Puerto Rican, because she never lived with her father, she grew up speaking English exclusively. She identifies with her Puerto Rican background, but she sees herself as “*half-white, too, kind of stuck in the middle of both sides.*” Unlike many of her Latina peers, she has never participated in events at the multicultural center or become very involved in diversity issues. This year, however, enrolled in a “Foundations of Education” class taught by a politically active teacher, she has become more politicized, more aware of the issues of minority life that have affected her, and has welcomed the opportunity to connect her life with her classroom work. In many ways the experiences she has had in this class and the writing she has done there exemplify academic literacy and thus will be discussed in greater detail in a later section of the paper.

Mike Fiori

Mike grew up in a small town in Rhode Island with his mother and younger brother and lived for a long time with his grandparents as well. Although his first

and primary language is English, he learned to speak Italian from his grandfather. He has not seen his father, he says, since he was four years old, nor has his family had contact with his father since then. His mother works at the bookstore in a local high school. Like several of the other students in this group, Mike attended public schools until high school, but then he went to a small private day school where he had an excellent academic record, including courses that counted toward the International Baccalaureate. Unlike some of the students in this group, who found the transition to college difficult, Mike found the college a "good fit" for him, a place where he felt "really comfortable," except in Organic Chemistry, which he found "really tough" and dropped, and English, in which he rarely participated, "I don't know why, I just have nothing to say." When we met, he was entirely optimistic and upbeat, with only positive things to say about the college, his life experience, and his future: "My future plans are probably med school and end up being a surgeon." A declared zoology major, he says he became interested in science in his freshman year of high school, where he took an anatomy course and "was the best student. I ended up with like a 98 average. I learned that I have this photographic memory for bone structures or something, so I can just rattle off the bones. It was pretty easy for me."

He has been extremely active on campus, perhaps too much involved. His primary social and activity avenue is at Unity House, the multicultural center, where, he says, he "broke the barrier" and became the first Caucasian who served as a mentor to incoming students of color. He says, "I argued with [the Unity director] and said, 'there's no reason why I can't be sensitive to the kinds of issues

other people are sensitive to.' So he let me do it." His other activities have included being a tour guide for Admissions, an executive board member of four of the student organizations connected with Unity House, a dorm governor, a student adviser, the admissions overnight house coordinator, co-chair of a group active for the rights of gay students, and a volunteer. He also tutors in Italian.

But just as many first-generation students who have higher rates of attrition than traditional students, Mike will not be back on campus next year because of his extremely low grades. Although he had an overall GPA of just below a 3.00 in his first year, in his sophomore year he dropped two courses, failed one, received no grade in another, and a "D" in another. Placed on probation the first semester, after achieving an average of "D+," Mike failed to improve his grades over the second semester and was directed to withdraw for a year. Although I later learned that he did not hand in his English paper, and thus failed the course, his writing plans seemed well underway when we spoke: *"Actually tonight I plan on making the outline, like finalizing everything and coming down to a thesis."*

Whether because he did not wish to admit to me that life wasn't as rosy as he had suggested, or because he truly did not know he was in academic trouble, or because, like many students I have known, he simply hoped everything would turn out well if he didn't think too much about it, he gave no hint when we met during the last week of school that he was in serious academic trouble. I later discovered that Mike's grades had less to do with the quality of his overall academic work than with his not having submitted much of the work required for his classes.

Bill Capaldi

Bill, one of the two members of the Class of 2003 in the group, is a quiet student, who takes some time to think before he begins to speak, and whose natural reserve seems at odds with his campus leadership. He has served in student government, has been on the student advisory board for his major, psychology, was selected the National Psychology Honor Society, Psi Chi, was chosen to serve as a student representative on the college president's Commission on Pluralism, is actively involved as a volunteer in New London, and is active in the Roman Catholic community on campus.

Although his family moved to Texas just at the end of his freshman year, he, like Linda, grew up in Bridgeport, Connecticut, where he attended parochial schools until he began high school at a parochial prep school, a few towns away. His parents sent him to Catholic school he says, "*because they really wanted to see me, um, excel. I think that they didn't have the opportunities to go to school, not to mention that the system in Bridgeport wasn't so great, so that sort of was the impetus.*" The youngest in a family of three, with two sisters considerably older than he, he is the only one, he says, who had the drive to go to college. His father, born in Italy, did not complete grade school, and is a general helper at a computer parts manufacturing company, his mother dropped out of high school to marry and is a housewife, and neither of his two older sisters, both hairdressers, went beyond high school. He says that his ties to his family were a major factor in his choosing Connecticut College, a school relatively close to home, and that although he was confident about his academic abilities,

After learning that my parents were moving to Texas, it wasn't only an academic concern. It was, you know, how am I going to cope with being 1650 miles away. My sisters are in Texas as well, the whole family. I had no concerns about the college. I just had the confidence that I could do well here.

Relationships with parents and siblings often change when one starts college simply because the process of maturing means that the student becomes a different person than when he or she lived at home. For first-generation students, there are often other reasons as well, as Bill indicates:

Once I started here and started getting the kind of education my parents and sisters don't have, there was really an effect on my life at home. I, I think that was also an effect, a byproduct of the move too, but I don't know. My mom thought that I had changed a lot, and attributed it to some things that I don't think were true and that was somewhat problematic, but I think she saw it as threatening, as my being pulled away because of this education that she wanted me to get, but I was, you know, I was, um, sort of becoming like snobby about it, so...but it's worked out now.

But although his tone indicates that this is hard for him to say, despite the pain to his parents, he has come to believe that the separation was important for him:

Ideally, I know that my parents would rather have me in Texas, you know, just to be honest, being there at school, and most days I actually feel good about being here and not being there, because I don't think that I would have developed like as well, so I think I probably, I mean I consider them like a big motivation and I love them, but I still think that this separation was good for me to develop more to what I think my potential was.

Anissa Lewis

Anissa, the only African American student in the group, is also the only truly local student. Having grown up in New London, she was familiar with the school, and had attended programs on campus in her childhood, and because it would allow her to be close to her eight brothers and sisters and still have her own life, and because as a local student she also was eligible to have half her tuition waived, this college seemed to be the best choice for her. She had no contact with her father

until she was in the 10th grade, and has had only sporadic contact since, so he was not a factor in her decision to attend college nor a direct influence on her life. Born when her mother was fifteen, she is the eldest of nine siblings. Although she and her mother are close, her mother has not always lived with her, and in fact, has been in prison for the last year, serving a five-to-seven year term. Her strongest influences seem to be her grandparents with whom she has lived throughout her life. She says that because she was “*always focused as a student,*” all of them, mother and grandparents, “*always assumed that [she] would go to college.*” Seventh in a graduating class of 105, she attended the local public high school.

Like many college students, she changed her plans for a major once she began taking courses. She had originally planned to major in biochemistry as a prelude to medical school, but, she says,

When I decided to take organic and microbio, I just realized that they were not, I was not enjoying it. Not even the challenge. I can take a challenge if I'm enjoying what I'm learning, and enjoying attending class, but I wasn't, so I needed to find something that I wanted to do more.

She adds,

My big thing was I wanted to be a doctor, because I wanted to find a cure for AIDS. My aunt died from AIDS and anything, I just wanted, I guess I wanted to reach out from that, and I said, this is not working for me, and I needed to find something else, now I've come to the conclusion I can still do something related to AIDS and it doesn't have to be medical.

She is now, like her best friend Maria, majoring in sociology-based human relations, and her plan is to go to law school. She is a part of the PICA program, working with Maria on developing an after-school program for disadvantaged New London students. Currently, as part of the project she is doing for PICA, she lives

on her own in an apartment in a public housing project. From time to time one of her siblings stays with her.

Anissa is generally serious, but as she speaks about things that really matter to her, her face becomes animated and her many braids bob around her expressive face. She says that she was unsure of herself as a freshman, but as the semesters have gone by, she has changed:

I think that over time I became more confident in what I was saying. Some classes it's —there are issues that maybe pertain to race and you don't want to—if you're the only one in the class of color, then people think that you're speaking for everyone in your race, so you'd just rather not say anything. But it doesn't really stop me. I usually say, "this is my personal opinion. Like I don't speak for everyone of my race, but this is how I feel about this certain issue," or whatever, just so that they know.

Cassandra Hewes

Cassandra lived with her Haitian mother in Brooklyn, New York until she began eighth grade, when she was sent to live with a sister so that she could go to better public schools than she was likely to attend in her Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood. Unlike some of her more intense peers, Cassandra smiles easily and speaks freely, tending to repeat words for emphasis, with a hint of Caribbean rhythms in her phrasing as she talks. For example, when asked about her mother's attitude toward her attending college, she responds by saying, "*My mother's attitude toward my attending college was highly supportive, highly, highly, highly. She started talking to me about college since I was born I think.*"

In Boston she attended a local public high school that she says the locals called "*Haitian High*," because so many of the students had Haitian background. She believes that the school did not prepare her very well for college, and the admissions

office tended to agree, noting in her admission folder that "her academic preparation is iffy, but we think she has significant potential." And she has lived up to her potential. Although her first three semesters saw her average only slightly above a "B," for the last three semesters, her grades have been in the "B+" range, and the multidisciplinary nature of American Studies, her major, suits her lively and varied interests. A volunteer in the public schools, she has also served as a mentor to incoming freshmen of color, and coordinated the program in her junior year; she has served on executive boards for organizations connected with Unity, the multicultural house, sings in the Gospel Choir, and will be a housefellow (the college's version of a Residential Assistant) in her senior year.

Although she entered school planning to be a teacher, daily tutoring at a local elementary school made her realize

that I really don't want to be in the classroom, that's not where I want to be, and I realized that I love the after-school aspect of schooling, I guess, and the summer programs of schooling. They run the programs after school and they work with the parents, and I realized I would love to be a supervisor or a staff member or something like that. So that's what I've been looking into more. Because after-school programs helped shape my life a lot.

Like some of the others in this study, she benefited from her mother's desire to protect her from the exigencies of a bad neighborhood:

My being safe was a big thing for my mother, so she was big on not leaving me at home. Any kind of after-school program, I was in it, and it helped me creatively. I was able to do music, work on my voice, because I also sing, and I remember doing weird things, just like, origami, I remember I was like "wow!" And I just want to do the same things.

Cassandra remains close to her large family of siblings and cousins, none of whom have gone to college, but she says that going home can be pressure-filled and her words hold some faint echoes of the experiences Richard Rodriguez describes in

Hunger of Memory, when, among other things, he talks of the “bewildering silence” (Rodriguez 5) that falls between him and his parents. As she tries to explain, her normal fluency disappears:

It's harder because going back home people have expectations of you and they think you know a lot and you really don't know that much and they, I think people just expect things like I'm not normal, like I'm super-intelligent and like I'm going, and I'm interacting with all these different people...It's not really the way they think it is. They just have this warped image of college and I represent that to them when I go home so it's just kind of different. It's hard to explain myself. I find myself, you know, I shy away from the questions or I just, I it's just, it's hard for me to explain to them what's really happening or my experiences here—especially my mom because she doesn't really understand like what I go through with every day, like you know, what it's like to study till three o'clock in the morning every day. It definitely creates some kind of a distance. So when we try to have a conversation about it, it just doesn't feel right, it doesn't level off, and I feel like they just don't understand a part of me so I just kind of shy away.

Linda Diaz

Linda, the youngest of six, grew up living in Bridgeport, Connecticut, with her siblings and her disabled mother. The only one of the study group to have been born outside of the country, she came to the United States from Puerto Rico when she was about a year-and-a-half old, with Spanish, the language she still speaks at home, as her first language. Although she was valedictorian of her public high school class and the recipient of a science scholarship, she describes herself as a slow reader and “*not very smart*.” Her lack of confidence is evident in the hesitant way she speaks, perched on the edge of my office couch, usually looking down at the floor, looking there particularly when she speaks of her lack of ability, and her reluctance to participate in classroom discussions:

For one thing, I really don't like being the center of attention, and, you know, when you ask a question, everybody just sits there and stares at you, and I really don't like that. But also, there's the whole sense of it being a very

stupid question. Because I've heard people, you know, saying a very dumb question and everybody just looks at them, and the teacher is like "weh-ull, it's because of this." There's always that fear of being wrong or being, maybe you're not as smart as people think you are.

Nonetheless, despite some difficulties with organic chemistry, her science grades have generally been in the "B" to "B+" range.

Although, as is discussed later, she chose this college mostly because of its location, its science department was particularly appealing to her. She had done well in science and math in high school and had been inspired by her science teacher, whose knowledge of zoology raised her own ambitions: *"I want to be just like him. I want to know all the animals."* Her acceptance to Connecticut College was a surprise to her, and, although she chose to come here, she worried about fitting in at a school for which she felt unsuited on several levels. In her high school, she says, *"The population was mostly minorities. It was Hispanic and American, but very few 'American Americans.'"* At Conn she knew that, conversely, she would be one of the very few Hispanics, and that issue, along with her worries about her intelligence, have continued to make her feel as if she does not really belong. Although she participates in Unity House activities, and is a "Big Sister" to an incoming freshman, her friends are only minority students and she does not participate in on-campus programs or events that are not Unity-connected. *"I just stay quiet,"* she says. *"I usually don't talk with many people."*

Xavier Nuñez

Xavier is the second member of the Class of 2003 in the group. From the Bronx, New York, he grew up with his Honduran parents. His mother, who retired recently, was a home health care attendant; his father, also retired, worked as a

maintenance man. His sister, who went to community college, is fourteen years older than he, and lived in Honduras when he was born and for many years after, so, he says, *“At my house I considered myself an only child.”* Although his first language was Spanish, he grew up bilingual and his deep voice and carefully articulated words are without any noticeable accent. He says that he started thinking about college early:

Since I was about ten I’ve always wanted to own my own business, and then go into politics, and I used to watch a lot of TV so I used to think that I was going to be “all I could be” and enroll in the army and they were going to pay, and then I got this wise idea that I was going to play football and they were going to pay—you know, I’d get a scholarship—and then I realized that I wasn’t that great an athlete. But I always knew that I would go to college.

Just as with other students in this group, Xavier was protected from the dangers of an inner-city neighborhood by his parents who, he says, *“would not let me go outside and play,”* but who found community programs that would allow him to meet other children without having to play on the street. *“But mostly,”* he says, *“a lot of talking was to myself.”* Both his love of talking (*“I love to talk—that’s how I learn”*) and his entrepreneurial spirit have helped him to direct his own course in life. Although he went to a local public elementary school, and then to an out-of-district public junior high school for which he had to take an entrance test, he was given a scholarship to a small private high school in New Hampshire. He describes his route to this school by saying,

What happened was that in my eighth grade year the Boys Club of New York, which is a privately funded organization in the city, came to my school asking for ten of the top boys and I was one of them. And I found out that the Boys Club of New York has a history of sending a couple of hundred kids to boarding schools every year and so I joined the Boys Club in the fall of my eighth grade year and they were the ones who recommended me.

Yet although, he says, "I wanted to go. I was itching to go," he is ambivalent about his experience there:

It definitely gave me access to a lot of opportunities I wouldn't have had had I stayed in New York City. I wouldn't have gone to a bad high school, but it would have been different from a prep school in New England. From a social point of view, sometimes I wish I had had one or two years of public school, rather, school in New York City, just so I'd have that connection socially in the Bronx. From an academic point of view, I still feel that, although it was a quality education, I think I would have been challenged more had I stayed in New York City, because in retrospect, when I asked for the challenging courses they [the prep school] challenged me on that. They didn't think I could handle it, because they have a history at that school of black males not performing too well.

Even though he was not allowed to take AP courses or the calculus that would have helped him with his eventual major, economics, like Bill and Nick, he thinks that the prep school experience prepared him for "the social atmosphere on campus." But apart from race and class issues, what was most surprising to him was how little he thought his fellow students cared about their future direction. He says,

It was just a matter of smart people not really caring about their academic work, which was difficult for me to understand, because I've always cared about what I'd be doing with myself. I've always had to, I guess. What I'm trying to say is I guess, that a lot of individuals that I know of, who are smart or have, you know, some kind of brain, come from privileged backgrounds where I assume they never had to worry too much about their futures. But I can't afford to just hang out. And a lot of my freshman buddies when I was a freshman, they were kind of surprised by how career-oriented I was because I already had three summer internships behind me and I knew what I wanted to do.

A popular student with an easy laugh and the ability to move smoothly among groups of all students, he has served as a Housefellow and a student adviser, and has been active in student government. Well aware of the racial and economic differences that separate him from the majority of students at the college, he has

nonetheless, he says, "had a lot of fun on campus. I didn't necessarily let the campus dictate how I would handle myself."

Issues Affecting First-Generation Students

Comparison with Traditional Students

The preceding profiles give some sense of who these students are individually. But as a group, how do they compare to the majority of first-generation students who have been studied elsewhere? Richardson and Skinner and Penrose point out that students of color are more likely than their Caucasian peers to be first-generation students and thus are likely to be affected more strongly by the same issues that influence persistence in college for all students. In addition to making a link between first-generation status and race, several studies link first-generation students with low socioeconomic status (Cross; Penrose; T. Bui; Terenzini et al., "Characteristics"). T. Bui, whose study was conducted at a major California university, for example, notes that "first-generation college students were more likely to be ethnic minority students, to come from a lower socioeconomic background [and] to speak a language other than English at home" (T-Bui 6). And Penrose, using data collected from a 1994 survey and a 1997 survey of entering freshmen at a large southern university, points out that "in both the 1994 and the 1997 samples [first-generation] students were proportionally overrepresented in the lowest parental income categories on the survey and were more likely to qualify for financial aid" (Penrose 449). As some other studies (e.g., Dean;⁵³ Ogbu; Oliver et

⁵³ Terry Dean, "Multicultural Classrooms, Monocultural Teachers," *College Composition and Communication* 40, no.1 (1989).

al.; Richardson and Skinner; Ting; Tracy and Sedlacek⁵⁴), and less scholarly work as well,⁵⁵ also point out, all of these issues—minority status, financial status, and English as a second language, particularly at a predominantly white, upper middle-class college—can have ramifications that affect academic life and other aspects of college success,

Race and Ethnicity

Although the sample here is too small a group from which to draw conclusions, information about first-generation students at Connecticut College tends to concur with these previous findings. More than half of the students in this study, like the great majority of first-generation students at the college, are students of color, and, except for two—Anissa and Maria—all of the students of color in this study are the children of at least one parent who emigrated from outside North America. All participants but Linda were born in the continental United States; and all but two grew up as bilingual speakers— of English and Creole, Spanish, French, or Italian.

Socioeconomic Status

Similar to the other characteristics the students in this group share with first-generation students who have been the subjects of previous studies, almost all of the

⁵⁴ Terence J. Tracy and William E. Sedlacek, "The Relationship of Non-Cognitive Variables to Academic Success: A Longitudinal Comparison by Race," *Journal of College Student Personnel* 26 (1985).

⁵⁵ See, for example, Julia Lara's (1992) article, "Reflections: Bridging Cultures," in *First-Generation Students: Confronting the Issues*, eds. L. Steven Zwerling and Howard B. London (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992) : 65-70, in which she writes about her experiences as a first-generation African-Latina student first at a community college and then at an elite four-year college, to which she transferred. First-generation, urban, a woman, black, and Hispanic—she found that all of these attributes contributed in different ways to academic problems and a sense of isolation and alienation. And a recent *New York Times* article, cited earlier, talks about the difficulties faced by Hispanic students as they attempt to complete a four-year college education (Navarro, 2003).

participants in this study come from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. Rachel's mother is unemployed, and her father is the manager of a laundry for a New York health club. Xavier's parents are retired, his father as a former maintenance man and his mother as a former home health care attendant for the elderly. Bill's mother is unemployed and his father is a general helper at a computer parts manufacturer. Bill says, however, that

Times were [once] a lot worse, like my dad lost his job and there were some real serious issues like getting heat in the house, and those were more scary than anything I can think about now. So I guess, I mean what happens is, you go back and you compare those times and, comparatively, this is nothing. So, yes, they were poor, yes, we're still poor now, but I guess I don't feel as bad about it as I did when I was younger.

Financial Concerns

And all of the students have economic concerns, some of those concerns having the potential to impinge on their academic success. Although Anna's father is a postal worker and her mother works in a nursing home, she is probably the most financially comfortable of the students in the group. She says, however, that the financial implications of her admission to Conn upset her father, who was worried about affording school: *"He was pretty depressed because he realized he had worked hard his entire life and couldn't afford to pay my tuition."* But at the same time, because the financial aid formula indicated that he could afford to pay more than he felt he should have to pay, he was bitter. *"He was, like, 'why did I work so hard every day and work overtime, and they just took it? I might as well not have worked overtime.'"*

Nick's parents dropped out of high school to marry, but in the early years of their marriage, before Nick's father went to jail for embezzling union funds, they

had some financial success and steadily improving jobs. Nick's mother is an office manager for a large home improvement store, "*a position mostly held by people with college degrees,*" and his father, who works in construction, had risen to business agent for his union and finally treasurer. Nick says that the embezzlement was caused by his father's gambling problem and after "*he was convicted for wire fraud, he spent a couple of years in jail,*" from which he returned shortly after Nick entered college. Nonetheless, although for economic reasons and the turmoil caused by his father's imprisonment, "*we haven't always been happy,*" says Nick, "*but we've always been close.*" Nick receives some financial aid, but at least part of his tuition and all of his spending money come from the money he earns at high-paying summer construction jobs, labor that has little relevance to his major in English. "So," he says, "*I've lost the luxury of doing 'resumé' jobs because of the economic situation back home.*"

Although Lara has a strong financial aid package that includes support from the State of Connecticut and several local scholarships, she still finds it difficult to meet her expenses and works twenty hours a week off-campus in a chain restaurant close to her home near Hartford, Connecticut. In a conversation that illustrates some of the difficulties she has to deal with as she juggles family feelings, financial issues and academic responsibilities, she says,

I'm dealing with a lot of different things, you know, like, finances are hard and my family doesn't have money, and there are different problems here and there. I mean, despite all of it, they're my family and I love them, and it's always in the back of my mind. Sometimes I need to go home to take care of it, which I don't think is a good thing, but I feel like I have to. It's not even to take care of it. It's just being there and making sure everything is all right.

All students hold work-study jobs as part of their financial aid package. Some, like Anissa, Xavier, Maria, and Lara, have worked at off-campus jobs as well.

Linda's award of a scholarship offered by the college to potential science majors who are also minority students was a deciding factor in her attending:

They [the science department where the award is based] mostly talked about their research on campus and that you could join in and that if you did research in the summer, you'd get \$3,000 and I was like, 'whoa!' I've done that every summer. The first semester they pay for your science books. It really saved me a lot of money. That's why I'm still here [at the college] right now. Even though I have scholarships and grants paying for all the classes, there's still books.

None of the students who live with their mother receives financial support from their fathers or has a close relationship with them. Anissa's father played no part in her life until after she graduated from high school, and they have had only sporadic contact since, so although he did attend college and later became a minister, I continued to consider her a first-generation student. Similarly, Mike "thinks" that his father is or was a lawyer, but he has had no contact with him since he was a very young child. Like Anissa and Lara, Maria lost contact with her father, who went to aeronautics school and is an airplane mechanic, while she was in grade school, and reconnected with him only recently. She says: "*when I was much younger [my father] would come over a lot, and he would bring extra workbooks for me and penmanship books and stuff like that, but we grew really distant and it wasn't until when I graduated from high school that we started to talk again.*"

None of the other parents has more than a high school education, and neither Bill's father nor Linda's mother went to school after sixth grade, with Cherisse's father having only "some" middle school. Despite, or perhaps because of, their own

truncated education, most of the parents were highly supportive of their children's decision to attend college, with some students reporting that they can remember their parents talking about a future college education for them even when they were quite young. A more detailed discussion of parental attitudes toward college education follows later.

Early Literacy Experiences

Students' ability to thrive academically in a rigorous college is deeply and perhaps obviously connected to their ability to read and write. A "Writing Across the Curriculum" (WAC) program at Connecticut College, instituted almost a decade ago, has fostered the inclusion of writing even in classes not designated as those satisfying the writing requirement. And the liberal arts curriculum means that reading not only textbooks and technical materials but a broad range of texts is integral to academic life for all students. None of the literature I read—whether focusing on first-generation issues, student development issues, or academic literacy issues—examined questions of early experiences with literacy.

I, however, was interested in not only the immediate literacy experiences of students in my project, those which they might have developed in high school and college, but also the beginnings of their reading habits and reading ability, both at home and in their early grades. Were their homes filled with books? Did they have the same experiences as many of their peers of being read to as youngsters? Did reading come easily to them? Was it a painful process? I have known many families in which parents without college degrees were enthusiastic readers and fostered a similar love of reading in their children despite their own lack of formal

education. And I have been in households where it was hard to find even a magazine or newspaper, let alone a shelf of books. What, I wondered, were the early experiences of these students, of whom the expectations at college are that they know how to read well and closely, how to examine critically the texts they read, and how to speak and write articulately about them.

Very few of the students report extensive acquaintance with books before beginning school, and few of them report reading for pleasure during the school year. In Lara's early, tumultuous, life there were hardly any books: "*Most of the people watched TV or played video games*"; almost certainly, her mother never read to her as a child. Similarly, Anissa has no memories of reading or being read to as a young child.

Cassandra says,

I didn't start really [even looking at books] until starting preschool. There weren't that many books around the house, and then when I started preschool, my mom decided to buy encyclopedias, and that was a big thing. I couldn't read those, so they just kind of sat there until I could. I would definitely go through the pictures, and she would look at the pictures with me, so that was our major books in our house.

Mike says of his childhood that his mother "*read little stories to me, but I didn't have a lot of books growing up, not really. I don't remember favorite books. I was kind of like into comic books when I was little, but I don't remember any specific books. As I grew older, I liked fantasy books.*" He adds, "*I don't have enough time to really read for pleasure now. I mean, I try to read, but I never finish.*"

Similarly, Xavier says,

I never really read books a lot when I was growing up—randomly, but we didn't have books a lot in my house. My mother doesn't speak English to this

day. And my father, all he was concerned about was making sure the rent was paid and putting food on the table. Mostly I watched a lot of TV.

And Bill reports, *“my household definitely didn’t have a lot of books in it when I was growing up. I was read to as a child, but I don’t have, like, bookshelves and bookcases like most people I know here do.”*

As can be inferred from the reports of these students, first-generation students can experience early literacy in a variety of ways. In “The Politics of Difference: Toward a Pedagogy of Reciprocity,” for example, Mary Soliday says that many of the students she teaches at an urban, public university “tell stories of how literacy is at the center of their memories of home life, stressing continuities between home and school rather than discontinuities and conflicts,”⁵⁶ and, certainly some of the students in this project had a love of reading instilled in them at home and at a very early age. Even though Rachel, for example, remembers only one book that her mother read to her (*“It was a book on morals kind of, and she used to read it all the time when I was little”*), she nonetheless recalls reading for pleasure regularly throughout her childhood. She says,

There weren’t really lots of books in my house when I was growing up, but my parents encouraged me to read. Every Saturday, I’d go to the library and take out books. Then when I started school, I loved to read. I always read as a student in elementary school, because my parents were very strict with me so they never let me go out. So I would time myself. I’d go to the library, and get a book, and I would time myself, saying, “I’ll read this in an hour.”

Typical of many college students, first-generation or not, she says, *“I don’t do a lot of reading when I’m in school, not during the semester. I would want to, but*

⁵⁶ Mary Soliday, “The Politics of Difference: Toward a Pedagogy of Reciprocity,” in *Writing in Multicultural Settings*, eds. Carol Severino, Juan C. Guerra, and Johnella E. Butler (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1997): 269. (Hereafter cited in text as Soliday, “Politics.”)

there's no time to be reading for pleasure because I could always be reading for a class."

As Rachel does, Cherisse remembers happy experiences as a young reader:

There were definitely a lot of books in my house, and my mom made it a point, too, that reading was very important. She wouldn't always buy me toys I wanted, but in a bookstore, any book I wanted, she would get. And I would always go to the library and take out and read a few books over and over. I never saw my dad reading anything but the Bible, but my mom—I mean even to this day, there are piles of books everywhere.

Nick reports that he has no memories of his father ever reading a book. But his mother, he says, was always a reader, and he was read to a lot when he was young, "*mostly 'life-lesson' books, like Nobody Likes Someone Who's Greedy, and Nobody Likes a Liar. But I was a slow reader,*" he recalls, "*so it wasn't until the seventh grade that I really started reading on my own.*"

As Rachel, Cherisse, and Nick do, Maria recalls that she

always had books. My mother read to me every night from, like, the first day I was born. And I would read everywhere. I would be walking in a store with my mother, and I would read. I'd sit on a train, and I'd read. I'd finish a book every other day. We wound up giving books away to my cousins because I had so many [books] .

And just as these students do, Linda remembers "*a lot of children's books*" in her house as she was growing up: "*I still have a whole bunch of them. And every now and then I would read them.*" But Linda is also the only one of the group reporting serious reading difficulties.

I know I always had trouble with reading. In the third grade they put me in the ESOL[English as a Second or Other Language] class because I could never get my work done in time and I got some kind of punishment for not getting my work done, so they put me in a special class.

Reading problems persisted throughout school: "*I could never read fast*

enough,” she says, looking down at the floor, “and if I tried to read faster, I would understand even less, and those reading-and-answering questions were the hardest thing for me; I could never do those.” She reports reading for pleasure “only four or five books in high school,” and then amends that by saying, “Actually, I think that’s too many. I think I only read three.” Even in college “I hardly do any of the book readings. I just stick to the notes and try to take really good notes in class. I don’t like reading.”

CHAPTER 6: GETTING TO COLLEGE

High School Preparation

As shall be discussed later, academic preparation for college, including the rigor of the high school and the kind of curriculum students take, has some effect on college success (Choy; Penrose; Riehl; Rose; T-Bui; York-Anderson and Bowman). Although all students were relatively satisfied with the preparation they received in high school, particularly in writing, as shall be discussed later, the degree of satisfaction varied. Except for Bill and Maria, who had parochial elementary school education, all students attended public elementary schools. Their secondary schooling, however, varies. Six of the students—Anissa, Maria, Cassandra, Cherisse, Lara, and Linda— attended neighborhood public high schools. Two students were able to take advantage of the part of the New York City public school system that includes special high schools: Rachel, attended The Renaissance School, a relatively new public charter school, and Anna attended LaGuardia High School, a special public school for the performing arts, both schools were outside of their home neighborhoods. Bill attended a parochial preparatory day school, and Xavier, Nick, and Mike attended prep schools, with Xavier and Nick boarding at their schools.

Parental Influence

The process of choosing a college can be complicated for any student, but for first-generation students, the difficulties are often magnified. To begin with, as several researchers note, there is a positive correlation between parental education

and parental expectations of college attendance by their children. For example, York-Anderson and Bowman cite a number of studies that showed that “the level of parents’ education had significant positive effects on parents’ educational level expectation for students” (York-Anderson and Bowman 117), noting also that “It is likely that parents who have experienced the educational process are in much better position to pass information about their college experiences on to their children, whereas the parents of first-generation college students simply do not have similarly supportive information to pass on to them” (York-Anderson and Bowman 120).

Thus there are students like Xavier, Cassandra, and Anissa, who report that their families had little influence on their college search. Xavier, for example, says,

My parents never had much of an impact [on my college choice]. They only had a sixth grade education, and they worked low-wage jobs. I’m not insulting them, but that’s the way it is. Their understanding of education is somewhat different [from mine]. They’re just glad that I’m not on the street or in jail. I’m in college, fine, it’s great news; they celebrate it. But I don’t think they’re necessarily privy to how much of a difference there is between Connecticut College and Manhattan Borough Community College. All they care is, “well, you’re out of the city.”

And Cassandra says that in her mother’s Haitian culture, although having an education gives one status because there is the possibility of a good job, *‘I think she was not really knowing where I was going at first. It was just part of this big process that took a lot of time, and she really didn’t care what college I went to, really. She just wanted to make sure that I was happy where I was going.’*

She also reports with some humor that when her mother did visit the college campus, she said, *“it was the nicest place she’d ever seen, it was perfect.”* But when Cassandra asked on what she based her opinion, *“she was just, like, I just feel it. I just feel like this is a good place to be.”* Bill, like the others, felt that his “parents

honestly did not know the difference between what schools were good and what schools weren't so good. So they sort of allowed me to choose my schools and had no influence on that." Lara's mother had no involvement at all in the college process because, says Lara, *"when I went to college my mother didn't know that I was going because I was in a foster home. But when I did reunite with her she was very impressed that I was going because I'm, you know, the first person in my family ever to go to college, or even graduate high school."*

And Anissa says that as soon as she knew what college was, she wanted to go, but her grandparents *"weren't much involved in the whole process of my picking schools. All my grandmother knew was that Conn College was this elite, very good school. I think they thought 'she's the best, so she deserves the best.'"*

As Anissa's remarks indicate, the lack of involvement in choosing a particular school did not mean a lack of parents' ambition for their children to attend college. Maria says that her mother carefully guided her school career, sending her first to parochial school for elementary schooling and then to a private prep school.

Moreover, she says,

College was always a goal. A lot of people in my neighborhood, most of them don't go to college, or they'll go to a community college and wind up dropping out after the first semester and never going back. And through that I always went to private school and then to Berkeley Carroll, which was college prep. So I was always around, through my after-school activities, people who were kind of upper class, and college was always what they would do. It was never really an option. It was like, you're going to college, so don't mess up, don't get pregnant, don't drop out. A lot of things like that.

Similarly, Cherisse's parents raised expectations in her from early on that she would go to college, although in her case (perhaps because of her father's own battles with mental illness), the expectations were more complicated:

My dad always said that he wanted me to go to college, always, but I feel that he had a kind of twisted view of it just because—like, he wanted me to go to college and study the brain. I'm not a science person at all, but regardless of what grades I brought home, he would just be like, no, you have to go to college, you have to study science, study the brain, study the brain.

Her mother, on the other hand, said,

“You're definitely going to go to college, but you choose where you want to go.” Connecticut College was definitely out of our range moneywise, but my mom was always the one who said, “you know what, if you want to go to the most expensive college, and I can swing it, I will do that for you.”

Nick and Bill, however, report that although their parents are proud of their accomplishments, there was no parental pressure to attend college, nor even a good deal of overt encouragement. Nick says that no one talked about college as he was growing up, although after he entered prep school, he felt as though college was the next logical step. And Bill says that his parents were proud of him because he was a good student, but that he felt they'd have been equally happy if he had made a different choice, as his sisters did. Only Mike, whose mother works in a high school bookstore and thus might have a bit more knowledge of the college-choosing process than some of the parents of the other first-generation students, says that his mother was heavily involved in his college choice: *“My mother was very excited about my coming to Conn. When I was applying to schools, she was, like, ‘we have to visit every school. We have to make sure it's the right school.’”*

Parental Ambivalence

For many first-generation students as they enter college and even beyond, as Terenzini et al. point out, there is a complicating factor: whereas for traditional students college, is the expectation—“the next logical, expected, and desired stage

in the passage toward personal and occupational achievement”⁵⁷—for first generation students “going to college constitute[s] a *major disjunction* [emphasis Terenzini et al.’s] in their life course,” a break in family tradition, necessitating academic, social, and cultural adjustments (Terenzini et al., “Transition,” 63). Thus, even though the majority of students here report that they received emotional support for the general *idea* of college, when it came down to the actual moment of choosing a school, they encountered some ambivalence.

Sometimes, especially for those who had not gone to boarding school and those from out-of-state, that ambivalence centered on the idea of the college’s location, and at other times on finances. Mike says, “[*My mother*] was really concerned about the costs here, when she saw it was \$35,000. It was the highest of all the schools we looked at.”

Rachel says that, while “ever since I can remember, [*my mom*] has been dreaming that I would pursue my education and become somebody, and my father was supportive in more subtle ways,” they were hesitant about her coming to Connecticut College. She adds:

My family is very old-fashioned, very traditional, and because I’m the girl in the family, just having me go away was—I had never gone anywhere without them. They said, why didn’t I just stay in New York and go to college there instead of coming to Connecticut? Ultimately, my father said, “I don’t really want you to go, but if that’s what you want to do, then I can’t hold you back.”

Although Anna says that “*basically my parents’ input was that they weren’t going to encourage me to go anywhere very far from home, because of transportation costs and they didn’t want me to be taking planes to and from*

⁵⁷ Patrick T. Terenzini et al., “The Transition to College: Diverse Students, Diverse Stories,” *Research in Higher Education* 35, no. 1 (1994): 62. (Hereafter cited in text as Terenzini et al., “Transition.”)

school,” her family had even greater concerns about her attending this particular college, because of both cost, as discussed earlier, and location, even though it is only a few hours’ drive away from her home in Queens, New York. Terenzini et al. (“Transition”) suggest that the disjunction caused by a first-generation student’s attending college can trigger a variety of conflicts in families, and, as Anna’s remarks indicate, her mother’s objections to the college were not based on location alone:

My mom didn’t want me to come here in the first place. She thought it was silly of me to leave New York [if I wanted to be a dancer]. My mom really wanted me to go to Fordham, but I didn’t get into the dance program. I think she also resents this school because it’s so expensive. And I know that when she wanted to go to college before she had me, my father said they didn’t have enough money if they also wanted to support a family. So my mom still feels like, you know, if he wants to [support his] family, why can he afford to pay for my tuition?

The Process of Choosing a College

It might be useful to consider here some of the ways that the normal stresses of moving toward college have been exacerbated for the students in this study. While parental ambitions for their children can be a mixed blessing—the right amount provides support and security, but too much pressure can add serious stress to young people’s lives—these students were largely on their own in determining the next step, and such independence, while welcome, adds yet another kind of difficulty. Except for one or two of them, even the decision to attend college was solely their own to make. Once having made that decision, as shall be discussed below, they were not able to seek advice from parents or, in most cases, other relatives who had been through the process of selecting a school. They needed to make that search more independently than most of their peers, who had family experiences of college

to help guide the way. And finally, having made a choice of a particular school, many of them found themselves having to deal with their parents' objections and concerns—both subtle and overt—over the financial implications of their choice, over the distance from home, over the changes that might occur in them as they moved into an entirely different milieu.

None of these issues is restricted to first-generation students alone, or to either elite or less competitive schools, but as many researchers (e.g., London "Breaking Away"; Ogbu; Piorkowski) point out, and as will be later illustrated by the students in this study, coping with the stresses of home while coping with the demands of a rigorous and unfamiliar intellectual environment—particularly an environment where such students and their problems are in the minority—can have significant effects on the ways first-generation students approach their academic lives and can have the potential to affect their day-to-day academic experiences as they pursue a life so different from that of their parents.

When one speaks with these students it is impossible not to compare their experience of choosing a college with that of their traditional peers, particularly at an elite school. For many traditional students, college choice begins when their parents enter them in nursery school, and even before, and private college counselors supplement the advice proffered by high school advisers. For most of these first-generation students, the process of college selection takes place with little help and often haphazardly.

As discussed earlier, previous researchers have concentrated on the various issues that affect first-generation and other non-traditional students as they enter the

world of higher education, but except for noting the expected lack of practical and financial help from parents, virtually none of the research has looked at the actual process first-generation students engaged in when choosing a college. As the interviews show, the participants in this study describe their parents as generally supporting them in their desires to attend college, and in some cases actually urging them to change traditional family patterns, but few were actively involved in the actual process of researching and choosing a school for their children to attend.

Choosing a Highly Selective Institution

What motivated the particular students in my study to come to this specific school? Quality of faculty, ability to do research with faculty, the international focus of the college and the various special features, like CISLA and the other centers, are all considered indicators of the school's intellectual value, and are all the substance of viewbooks and other materials this college uses in the hopes that it will attract the kinds of academically strong students the college is eager to enroll. How important are these elements to first-generation students? The answer for these particular students seems to be "not very."

For several of these students, location was very important, although a few of them did pay attention to faculty-student ratio and size of the student body. Bill, for example, says that he chose the college because he wanted to stay close to home, although, ironically, his father's new job necessitated a move to Texas during Bill's first year. He says that when he did some research on schools in the area, he "*saw that [Connecticut College] was small and had a nice faculty rating, and a good volunteer program, so it just made sense to apply here.*" Anissa, as a local student

of promise, was recruited by the college, and because she liked it (although she was not specific about what she particularly liked), wanted to be close to home, and received a good financial package, she decided to come here. Nick's "sportsminded" father had stressed athletics, and when Nick was "informally" recruited by the hockey coach, this school seemed a good choice. As a boarding school student, he was familiar with living away from home, so location was not a prime issue, but he did want to be relatively close to his family and to his girlfriend, who lives in his hometown.

For Xavier, finances were a major factor. Originally he did not want to come to Conn because he thought it would be too much like his prep school. He had hoped to go to Morehouse College, a Historically Black College, to which he was accepted in what he thought was early decision but turned out to be early action. *"But they wanted me to take out about \$18,000 in college loans, and I couldn't afford it."* When, a few months later, his college counselor mentioned that Connecticut College was interested in increasing their population of students of color, he decided to include it in his list of schools. *"In the end,"* he says, *"Conn gave me the best financial package, and I convinced myself that it was the best opportunity."*

Anna, too, had other schools in mind, but her parents would not allow her to apply to schools more than a few hours drive from home, and she chose Conn partially because of its location and partially because it was the only school she applied to that admitted her to the dance program:

Choosing colleges was basically all me doing research on the internet, and then I had a meeting with the college adviser at school, which was basically, one adviser for 700 students. I always knew I wanted to be a dancer, so I applied to [several schools with good dance programs], but I didn't get in. Or

I got into the college, but not into the dance program. I was wait-listed at two schools and then I didn't get in, so Conn looked like the best choice. I didn't want to go to a city college.

Non-Family Influence

For most of the other students, mentors, college counselors, and teachers were to varying degrees an influence on their college choice. For example, although she got some help from her high school guidance counselor, who suggested that she apply to Conn because of the Biology program, Linda made her decision pretty much on her own, with location, once again, as a deciding factor. She says, "*I really didn't want to go to the University of Bridgeport, but I figured I wouldn't get in [to Conn], so I applied to other colleges in Maine that I was told had good science departments. But then I decided that Maine was too far away. So I really hoped I'd get in here.*"

Maria's choice of the college was influenced by her high school college counselors, who provided more help than either Linda's or Anna's. Unlike Anna, whose public school had one counselor for more than 500 students, or Linda, whose guidance counselor served close to 300 students, at Maria's prep school, with a graduating class of about 30, students got a good deal of personal attention. "*In your junior year, everybody received a list of about 20 schools that the counselor thought your grades and personality would match, and Conn was on my list. I also had a friend who had gone here. I came to visit and I really liked it. I felt like it was a place where I would feel really comfortable.*" And unlike Xavier, who was worried that this school would be too much like his prep school, Maria liked the

school because *"it reminded me of [my prep school], and I wanted [that kind] of environment."*

In three instances, the mentor/counselors were people who had intimate knowledge of the college, as well as knowledge of the student. For example, Cassandra had been part of a high school after-school program run by an alumna of the college, who rapidly became a mentor to her. For Cassandra, the choice was fairly simple. She says with her characteristic enthusiasm: *"I had all these other schools in mind, because I didn't think I'd be able to get into a school like Conn. And my mentor said we should just go and take a visit. I didn't know if I wanted to go, but she said we should definitely visit, and we did and I loved it, loved it, loved it."*

Rachel says that her college counselor, who was also one of her teachers and the son of a faculty member at the college, *"really urged me to come here. He thought this would be a good fit for me."* She was reluctant to apply for several reasons: she had never been away from her parents before, not even for brief vacations, and was worried about being away from home (indeed, homesickness was a serious problem for her in her freshman year to the degree that it interfered, she thinks, with her academic work); she was worried about her writing ability and felt that the charter high school had not prepared her for the difficult work of a demanding college, and she worried about fitting in at a school that was much less diverse racially than either her high school or her Queens neighborhood.

She describes her counselor's persistence despite her doubts:

He said, "I know you don't feel you can compete with these students because of the way your high school experience has been. But I'm going to

show you that you can. I'm going to make you sit in this classroom and tell me how you feel afterwards, whether you feel that you could have answered some of the questions, granted that you haven't done any of the reading and that you don't even know what the topics are." I remember, I sat there and I thought, you know, this isn't that bad. I think I could do this. So then I applied. And when I got the same financial aid package from here as from [a New York college], I figured going away is a different kind of experience, being exposed to other things, and it's just better to be exposed to something new instead of just experiencing the same things you've always done.

Lara, too, in her selection of the college relied on the influence of a mentor—**like** Cassandra's, a Connecticut College alumna. Although several of the various foster parents she had had over the years encouraged her to pursue her studies, she and the foster mother in whose home she lived in during high school did not get along very well, and they did not talk about Lara's future. Her caseworker at the Department of Children and Families (DCF) was supposed to serve as a counselor, but, says, Lara, *"she kept telling me to go to UCONN and I didn't really want a big school. I also wanted a more competitive school, and I also wanted a private school. I did some research in my guidance counselor's office and I went on college tours. I knew I didn't want a party school."*

In her senior year of high school, Lara was selected to be part of a state program run in conjunction with the University of Connecticut School of Social work, wherein graduate students would each pair with one of ten college-bound DCF students in the state. Judith, a Latina who had faced some of the same culture-based difficulties in her life as Lara had, was fortuitously matched with Lara and introduced her to Connecticut College, which she thought would be the right place for her. Lara applied and was accepted, but she says, *"I think one of the biggest reasons I'm at Connecticut College was that I got a scholarship. I got a huge grant*

from the school, and with outside scholarships, I'm not paying anything." As noted earlier, and as may be sensed from some of what she says, she remains ambivalent about the school, and her concerns about not being as close to home as she would like (although she lives only about an hour's drive away) have helped to make her sometimes less satisfied with her choice than she hoped she would be.

Because they are a small sample, and because I do not have comparative data about how traditional students choose a college, it is difficult to know if the process by which these students selected Connecticut College is any better or worse than the process by which traditional students select their place of higher education. But, as noted earlier, my experience is that at the best preparatory schools, students are carefully matched with colleges that are likely to select them, as happened with Maria, and that families of many of the most affluent students employ other resources, such as private counselors, as their children approach college. It is clear, however, that the majority of students in this sample relied largely on their own instincts to choose a school, and that financial considerations as well as being close to home were among the most important factors in their decision to come here. How they fared once they arrived is the subject of the rest of this study.

Making the Transition

Although Penrose says that both quantitative data and case study research "suggest that [first-generation] students do not bring . . . insecurities with them to college [and that] they do not begin to doubt themselves until after they arrive" (Penrose 457), the participants in this study came to Connecticut College with varying degrees of confidence and trepidation. Some, like Bill and Anna, had

strong faith in their intellectual abilities and believed that they could meet whatever challenges the college presented to them. Others, like Linda, Rachel, and Cassandra, were worried about their high school preparation and their own intelligence, and were more than a little surprised that they were admitted. Some, like Xavier and Nick, were used to living away from home, negotiating with roommates, and sharing space with strangers. Others were worried about how they would live among strangers. Rachel and Anna had not only never lived away from home, but also had to deal actively with their parents' objections to their being away.

Risk Factors

Many students, traditional and first-generation alike, arrive at college worried about the transition they are about to make. As dean of freshmen, I usually tell them that the Office of Admission is infallible. "If you have been accepted here," I say, "you belong. It is only your willingness to work hard that will matter." I know that what I am telling them is not entirely true, but I also know that my words are even less true for first-generation students than they are for those whose families have a tradition of college attendance.

As noted previously, first-generation students are at higher risk for attrition than their traditional peers, and both academic achievement and involvement in the life of the college, as might be expected, have an impact on whether they stay or drop out or transfer. Tinto, for example, whose research is the basis for many later studies, examines the general causes of attrition for all students in order to determine how to encourage retention. He notes, "An institution's capacity to retain

students is directly related to its ability to reach out and make contact with students and integrate them into the social and intellectual fabric of institutional life” (Tinto 180). Elsewhere, he points out that any student who is in a minority on campus, whether for racial, ethnic, economic, or other reasons, can be subject to feelings of isolation and inadequacy and that the academic and social problems all students may face are more severe for students in the minority than they are for students in the majority. That is, minority students,

especially . . . those from disadvantaged backgrounds . . . tend to face greater problems both in meeting the academic demands of college work and in finding a suitable niche in the social and intellectual life of the college than does the typical majority student. Academic difficulties, incongruence, and isolation seem to be more severe for them than they are for students generally. (Tinto 72).

And Richardson and Skinner who, unlike Tinto, do focus primarily on first-generation students, point out that “first-generation students frequently described their first exposure to the campus as a shock that took them years to overcome. Many minority students were also unprepared for the racial or ethnic isolation—even alienation—they would experience in predominantly Anglo institutions” (Richardson and Skinner 32).

The interviews I conducted reveal that being in the minority at the college—not only as first-generation students, but also, for many, as racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic minorities—informs both these students’ out-of-classroom experiences and also their academic life. Indeed, there is a connection between the different parts of their lives, so that lunchroom discussions, their lived experience at school, and their home culture, are all likely to affect how they approach academic

assignments, particularly in classes in the humanities and social sciences, but even to some degree in their other work. As Sternglass argues,

The importance of gender, race, class and ideology in students' academic lives is not presented as a defense or an excuse for bringing personal knowledge and experience to bear on their responses to the academic demands. Rather, it becomes crucial to understand the context of the students' lives from which they are able to enter into the academic world. (Sternglass 62-63)

Thus, it is necessary to pay some attention to how the students in this study have adjusted to the college, academically and otherwise. Have they experienced the isolation and alienation that Tinto, Richardson and Skinner, and others suggest is a frequent experience for minority students? If so, how have they coped? Have they been able to find a niche, or have they simply done their school work, staying at the college because they cannot afford to go elsewhere? Have their academic lives been successful?

On the surface, these students seem to contradict the prior research: for the most part, they have remained at the college and have done well academically. That is, although for some the academic road has been a little bumpy (to be discussed later in more detail), of the twelve students who began this study, only one has been in sufficient academic trouble to be directed to withdraw. But even that sophomore had a good first year and is expected to return in a year to complete the rest of his education. Thus it may seem that prior research on attrition of first-generation students would have limited value, if any value at all, for this study.⁵⁸ Certainly, the

⁵⁸ Although this is not to suggest that it would not be useful to do an attrition study at the college focusing on first-generation students. Recent statistics from the graduating classes of the last four years indicate that students of color have a graduation rate of about 10% lower than that of Caucasian students. Since many of the first-generation students are also students of color, it stands to reason that first-generation students will be a part of the non-graduating cohort. As far as I know, however, those statistics do not include students who transferred and may have graduated elsewhere. This is an important topic for further research.

attrition literature says very little about how academic preparation figures into college success, beyond indicating that first-generation students generally have lower SAT scores than traditional students (Penrose; Riehl; Ting). Despite its limited use, however, research on attrition can provide some information on problems unique to first-generation students that can make their remaining at college problematical, or at least keep them from being as successful as their potential would allow.

Some of the difficulties the participants in this study have faced, and in some cases still face, may be part of the normal adjustment all students must make to a new environment with new demands. Some problems, however, as their interviews suggest, appear to come from their being at this particular kind of school. Thus, the first part of this section of the study focuses on the academic preparation and academic expectations with which these students entered school, and the latter part on their lives since they arrived.

Academic Readiness and Expectations

As with most small highly selective colleges, admission officers at this college read each student's application individually, and generally no single factor is used as a predictor of success. The Office of Admission looks at rank in class (where available), letters of recommendation, strength of the student's curriculum, and overall GPA, among other things, in deciding on whether an applicant is likely to be successful. Although SAT I scores (which measure verbal and mathematical aptitude) are optional, students are still required to submit scores from three SAT II examinations (which measure achievement in the test area). As many other colleges

of its type (highly selective four-year, private), Connecticut College stopped requiring SAT I scores several years ago, finding them to be inadequate predictors of academic success.

Academic Preparation

Of the twelve participants in the study, only seven submitted SAT I scores, and, in concurrence with the literature, six of these scores are below the 1340 mean SAT I composite score at the college. And, indeed, for those in the study, SAT scores have not been predictors of academic success. A review of the students' transcripts shows that six of the seven who submitted SAT I scores have overall averages of 3.0 or above and two of them show averages of at least 3.8; of the other five, all but one has at least a 2.8 overall GPA. While these latter grades are not high, they are well above the 2.0 average required as a minimum for satisfactory academic standing at the college.

But despite their current accomplishments, and despite differences in the kinds of schools they attended, several of the students felt that their high schools had been deficient in one way or another in preparing them for what they would face at college. Xavier, who attended a private boarding school expressed the most dissatisfaction with his high school academics, not because of what he was taught but because of what was omitted:

It was a quality education, but I think I would have been challenged more if I had stayed in New York. Had I gone to a decent public school, I would have been in all the top regents classes. At prep school, there were AP classes, but the school wouldn't let me take them. I didn't get to take AP history, or English, or math, and math was always my strong point growing up.

Like Xavier, Rachel, who attended a charter school, felt that she might have been more fully challenged in a regular city high school:

It was still brand new when I got there, and some of the teachers were young and teaching two classes. It was a small environment, but I guess I didn't appreciate that. Some of my friends were going to Benjamin Cardozo High School or Forest Hills, and I was thinking, how come I'm not being challenged in the same ways? How come I'm not being offered the same things? I wanted to be challenged. I wanted to be pushed, thrown into something, so that I could be challenged to my full potential.

Lara, whose public high school near Hartford, Connecticut, had only 95 people in her graduating class, also felt that there were gaps in her preparation, but her concerns appeared to be more about the high school environment than the curriculum:

In some respects my high school prepared me for college, and in some it didn't. I had honors courses, so I knew that I had to work hard. But in the sense of critical thinking, not as much. It was the kind of school where there was a hidden curriculum, where if you were this person or that person, it was okay to get away with this or that. I remember my English teacher, she knew me well and she knew what kind of work I was capable of doing, so she didn't always make me do the work, and if I didn't hand it in, it was okay.

Cassandra, who attended a large urban high school in Boston, knew upon entering the college that there might be difficulties: *"My biggest concern when I got here was definitely doing the work. I didn't have the best public school experience and I was worried about that, because I just remember breezing through very easily. I didn't have anything to remember that was 'oh, wow, I learned this.' So I was very scared about that."*

Anissa believes that her high school preparation, in itself, was good, but that there were problems that stemmed from being in an environment where expectations about attending college were not the norm:

It was kind of at times annoying [to be different from a lot of my peers], because, especially my first years, I'd be in classes and I'm trying to pay attention to the teacher and you have kids doing this and doing that and I was just like I can't be in this class. I have to get into a class where I can actually pay attention and not be distracted by other students. So at times it was annoying, because they just don't understand. Yeah, it would be kind of annoying because there weren't that many students there who had similar ambitions, and the ones who did it was because it was ingrained in them because their parents—you know. But there were not many who were coming from the same kind of place I was coming from, you know, who had the kind of life I did who had that same level of ambition, which is not good. A lot of students there are the ones who have similar background as me and they're the ones who I think should be, who have to be ahead. You have to be ahead, because if you're behind, you're very much behind.

For the rest, students were satisfied that their high schools had given them the academic background and skills they would need to survive in college, and some, like Maria, Nick, and Bill, felt that their high schools had provided excellent preparation, particularly in giving them necessary writing skills, as will be discussed later. But perhaps the most excitement about high school came from Linda, who, despite being valedictorian of her high school graduating class, thinks of herself as far less intellectually able than her peers—a problem she blames on a lack of innate intelligence rather than on any possible inadequacies at her inner-city high school. While she did not comment on her overall preparation, she was enthusiastic about her science teacher. Despite the fact that he was, in the way of some school districts, teaching a subject other than the one for which he was certified, Linda found him inspiring:

I had a great teacher in high school. He was like a mentor. I mean I picked him to be a mentor, and what made me just stare at him, what made me know I wanted to do what he did, was that he opened an animal book and without even looking at the names of animals, he pointed all of them out. And I was, like, that's what I want to know! And it was just amazing. He would get so excited when we got to the ecology part of biology—he's a history person,

but he taught biology, and eventually he had to teach chemistry—he would, you would just learn it the first time he taught it because of the way he said it.

Non-Academic Issues

If the students in this study felt generally well prepared academically, some of them were less prepared for the social environment they discovered. Some of the students were discomfited by the lack of racial diversity they found at the college. For example, Anissa, who grew up with the college as a neighbor, was surprised when she got here as a student to find out that the school was less racially diverse than her high school. While she says she wasn't really personally affected by the lack of diversity, it is something about which she is always conscious, and, as shall be seen later, her racial difference has had some effects on her classroom behavior. Ironically, however, these effects have been positive in that they have spurred her to speak up more in order to provide her white classmates with a different perspective. Rachel, who had some ambivalence about coming to the college to begin with, found the lack of diversity more off-putting:

When I first got here it was the first time I ever felt like a minority in school. At home, in my neighborhood, everyone is really different—I live in the most diverse part of Queens. There's not much diversity among the students. And the thing I most don't like is just that I find that there isn't much diversity within the faculty. Sometimes, I would like to have somebody that I could look up to, somebody that I can relate to. Somebody who's not a student. Somebody who's a professor that I can actually talk to and approach and who would understand me, and that's what I feel I'm lacking here that I would like to have.

Linda, who has felt some of the same loneliness, recalls her excitement during her third semester here, when another Hispanic student, a freshman, moved into her dorm: *"She had Spanish music loud in her room, and I was, like, finally, Spanish music. So I went to talk to her and met her friends and her roommate, and now I'm*

always in that room.” Even Anna, an Italian-American from New York, points out, “*This is basically an all-white environment, and that’s new for me.*”

As noted earlier, Penrose says first-generation students do not begin to develop insecurities until after they have had some time at college. While not true of all the students in my study, this late-blooming crisis of confidence seems to have been the case for Cassandra. Most of the students were struck by the racial imbalance at the school almost upon arrival, but Cassandra says she “*had a great freshman year. I was absorbed in so much stuff and it was, like, oh, I’m learning about this and I’m learning about this.*” It was not until her second year, when she no longer had roommates, that she suddenly and painfully took notice of where she was and what that might mean:

Sophomore year was just a realization that I really am on an all-white campus. It hit me really hard. It didn’t hit me at all freshman year because I was surrounded by so many good people. And then [in sophomore year], I was just all by myself in my own room. I had white roommates as a freshman, but suddenly, when I was a sophomore it hit me that this was an all-white school. I was just like walking around by myself, which I never really did before. It was, like, wo-ow, I feel so isolated and, you know, scared almost. How do I deal with being so sad?

But there are more than issues of racial difference that can lead to a sense of isolation, sadness, and, sometimes, anger, as well as ambivalence about actually being at the school most of the students had anticipated with excitement. Class differences, often more subtle than racial and ethnic differences, engendered varying reactions among the study participants. For some, these differences affect their lives both in and out of class. Anna, for instance, says,

I don’t feel part of the community here. I don’t feel part of the student body here. I mean this is a huge generalization, but in general I don’t like the kind of person who goes to Connecticut College. The social life seems to me, I mean I

wouldn't know, but what it would be like at a private high school, and in class, I'm often the only one who answers the teacher's question. Sometimes I think these are kids who have been handed everything in their lives and now they're waiting for someone to hand them the answers.

And Rachel, who even as a junior has social relationships almost exclusively with students who come from the same kind of background as she, adds:

I used to think race was most important, but I realized that social class has a big influence. Somebody could be Latina just like me but be rich and up there, and I can't relate to that at all. I mean if he or she has had everything—I'm pretty aware of class. It's a conscious thing for me because a lot of people here come from wealth and it's pretty obvious. It's like in your face all the time. I mean if they're driving a Mercedes and you don't even have a car [laughter] it's kind of obvious. Class distinctions put you in a class by yourself, and some people don't reach out from that class.

For two of the students, however, class differences are something they notice, but appear to accept fairly easily. Nick, and Bill, both of whom went to private schools, see the difference, but do not feel that their daily lives are affected by them. Nick, for example, comments,

There are a group of people here who act as if this is a country club. And I'm conscious that I don't have the connections into the academic world or the professional or political world some might benefit from, but I do know that any connections I have, have been founded on my relationships with those people, that they're my connections.

Bill is even more sanguine: "My high school was pretty much the same as here socially, pretty much upper-middle-class families. I never found it to be an issue. I was concerned coming in that it might be, but it was never really a problem."

Xavier, too, found his prep school experience a training ground, in a sense, for what he experienced here:

I've always been able to assimilate to any situation, and being at school in New Hampshire prepared me for the social atmosphere here. I'm used to

dealing with upper class, upper middle-class students just from my high school. And I think my experience here has even helped me in terms of, from a social point of view, not necessarily to mingle or to make connections, but to, I guess, learn mannerisms, in some sense, in terms of conducting myself with individuals I may be dealing with in the future.

But perhaps because of his major, economics, or his activist leanings, or simply because as a senior he has successfully negotiated the sometimes difficult world of the college he entered four years ago, Xavier, views the issues from more than one perspective. He says about the seriousness with which he approached academic work, *"In my freshman year I considered leaving for academics and social reasons. It was a matter of smart people not seeming to care about their academics. I can't afford to just hang out."*

And, similarly, Maria says,

Socially, there aren't many networks besides my friendship with Anissa. She's the first person who supports me personally and professionally. It's positive and serious, and a lot of kids, they're not thinking about the stuff we're thinking about. We know what we have to do to get where we need to go. No one can afford to support us, you know.

Cherisse, as Bill and Nick, is easier with class differences than are some of the others, although she is not unaware that they exist:

I mean I definitely think there are things that I worry about, and I notice that at Conn there's such a, a mix of, like, people who have enough money to pay their tuition for four years in one shot and there's the people who can't. Like my roommate from freshman year had to transfer this year because they took away some of her financial aid and she couldn't come back, so there's just such extremes that you see both places, you can definitely see, I mean I've never seen-- I mean I'm from Westchester, so obviously I've seen people who have money coming out of their ears, but at Conn you can really see it a lot—like my best friends, I'm like "wow!"

As suggested above, and as shall be discussed in more detail later, class and racial differences can have both positive and negative effects on the way these

students negotiate their academic lives--in their classrooms, in their choice of studies, and in their writing.

Participation in Academic and Co-curricular Life

According to Tinto, and others (e.g., Kraemer; Pratt and Skagg), one of the deciding factors in student persistence is engagement with the college. The participants in the study have followed different paths in and out of the classroom, but almost all of them have been involved in one or more co-curricular activities, and in at least one case, Mike's, perhaps those activities took the place of attention to academic work. The major activities for the students of color have been centered on multicultural activities, with few exceptions. And, for most of them, academics have been, as they should be, a central focus.

Xavier is an economics major, who spent his entire junior year abroad at the London School of Economics (LSE), unfortunately to the detriment of his overall grade point average. Because LSE marks on a yearly, rather than semester, basis, three of his grades, all "C-," counted twice each when they were transferred to Connecticut College. Consequently he finished his college career with barely a "B" average, although his average for each of the other six semesters, all spent at Conn, varied from 3.10 to 3.70. In his senior year, he served as a Housefellow, and he has been active in co-curricular activities throughout his college years, serving previously as a student adviser, and as a mentor to incoming students of color, along with participating in the activities of the multicultural center, Unity House. Bill, the other senior, carried a psychology major and an economics minor and graduated with a 3.70 GPA. As noted above, his college extra-curricular activities extend over

a range of areas. In addition, he has participated in a number of community service programs as a volunteer, and is involved in Chapel activities, stressing that his Catholic faith is an important part of his life.

Of the students in the Class of 2004, Rachel is a human development major who plans to teach in elementary school, and is thus enrolled in the education department's certification program, although she says that she does not think she will be a teacher all of her life and may someday go into administration. She is active in Unity House and has served as a mentor to incoming students of color. Although her overall grade point average at 2.97 is just below a "B," it has improved steadily each semester, with her latest semester average at 3.93.

Cassandra, an American studies major with a 3.16 GPA, also began college with plans of becoming a teacher, but realized shortly after starting the certification program, and largely as a result of an internship that she undertook, that she was more interested in working in after-school recreation programs for disadvantaged children, such as the one she had been involved in while in high school. She will be working at another internship this summer to further get experience in that field. Active in Unity House activities, mentoring and student advising, she has been selected as a Housefellow for her senior year.

Anissa, who started out as a biochemistry major because she thought she wanted to be a doctor and work on a cure for AIDS, changed to a sociology-based human relations major after taking a few science courses and discovering that she "*really didn't enjoy*" science, and, in fact, received the only "C" grades of her college career in the two science courses she took as a freshman. She is now getting

ready to apply to law school, where she plans to concentrate on anti-discrimination law, particularly on human and civil rights issues, especially those dealing with AIDS. Her overall GPA is 3.20, but like Cassandra, as she settled into a major, her GPA began to rise and she, too, at the end of her junior year saw a semester average of over 3.90. For both the current semester and the past two, she has overpointed by taking two courses above the normal course load. She is also enrolled in the Holleran Center's Program in Community Action (PICA). Currently, in what originally started out as a project for a service-learning course, she is helping to develop an after-school, housing-project-based program and is living in one of the city's housing projects as part of that work. This program will form the basis for both the required PICA senior integrative project and the honors thesis she intends to write for her academic major. Anissa also works about ten to fifteen hours at an off-campus job, which limits her active involvement in co-curricular activities, although she has been active in Unity House to different degrees, serving at least once as chair of UMOJA, the African American student group, during her years at the college. She has also worked in the Office of Admission.

Like Anissa, who is her best friend, Maria is a sociology-based human relations major, but she started out as an economics major and still retains that as a minor. Maria intends to go to graduate school in urban studies and spent the summer between her junior and senior year at the University of Michigan in a special program that helps disadvantaged undergraduates prepare for graduate school. Her overall GPA is 3.00, largely because of an emotionally difficult semester while she was struggling with academic choices, among other things, and received an "F" in

an accounting course she took at the Coast Guard Academy. Her most recent semester average was 3.60. Although Maria was active in Unity House when she entered the college, she found it “*confining*” and, while not totally dropping her affiliation, gradually became less involved. Enrolled in the PICA program as well, she is, as noted earlier, a partner with Anissa in working cooperatively with the Housing Authority of the City of New London to develop the after-school program. As does Anissa, she works about ten-fifteen hours a week at an off-campus job.

Although students are not required to declare a major until the end of their sophomore year, all sophomores in the study knew early what they planned to do for a major field. Both Linda and Mike are zoology majors. Linda was among twelve entering freshmen in her class to be selected a Hughes Scholar, a grant-sponsored scholarship program that focuses on students of color who are interested in majoring in the sciences. The program brings these students to campus for four weeks in the summer preceding their freshman year, enrolls them in short term summer courses in biology and zoology, and provides a paid on-campus internship each summer thereafter. Consequently Linda is heavily involved in research with a faculty member. Her overall GPA is 2.98 and it has stayed fairly consistently in the “B-” to “B” range. She worries, however, because “*I just feel like it’s getting harder and harder.*” She, too, like many of the other students of color, is active at Unity House, serving as a mentor to entering students, but she says that most of her time is devoted to her major. Mike is also a zoology/biology major with a zoology track, but his grades in that area have been too low to make medical school a realistic option. As noted earlier, his over-involvement in extra-curricular activities may

have had some effect on his poor grades this year. And his failure in not only his English class, where his attendance has been extremely poor, but also a one-credit pass/not-pass seminar, whose only requirement is attendance, suggests that he, as many students, needs to understand how to order priorities so that he spends sufficient time on academic work.

Lara, as noted earlier, is a Hispanic studies major who plans to be certified to teach in high school. Her many hours of off-campus work have kept her from becoming involved in many extra-curricular activities beyond those required by her classes (such as service learning projects). She does, however, sing in the college chamber choir, and has consistently overpointed in order to take voice lessons.

Dealing with Home

As much of the prior research (e.g., London, "Breaking Away"; London, *First-Generation*; Ogbu; Oliver et al.) indicates, the college lives of first-generation students are often complicated by home and family issues traditional students do not have to face, and some of these issues may affect how they experience school and how they engage in their work when they are there. This is not to say that traditional students are unaffected by family conflict, or that their teachers will never notice or have to deal with such problems that affect traditional students' work. However, first-generation students, by definition, are leading lives their families have not experienced and cannot understand. Cassandra recognizes this when she says: "*[My family] have this warped image of college, and I represent that to them when I go home. It's hard to explain myself. It's not really the way they think it is.*"

And Anna echoes the same idea when she says of her father,

When I thought about not double-minoring [in psychology and English], I knew my father was going to flip out. I think he has this twisted idea that what my Bachelor's degree says is what I can do. So if I don't have English there, I can never do anything that involves English, which I don't think is the case.

Students who are not merely first-generation but who also come from extremely disadvantaged backgrounds may encounter yet other conflicts. As noted earlier, Piorkowsky argues that these students may suffer a form of survivor guilt for the good fortune they enjoy while friends and family have been left behind, often in poverty, often with little chance that they will see the kind of improvements in their lives the first-generation students expect to see in theirs once they graduate. For example, although Maria does not overtly express guilt, and indeed may not feel any, she does hint at the difference between her neighborhood and her college life when she says, *"Going home is really depressing. I don't have anything to offer [the people in my neighborhood]. I can't just go over and say, 'Hey, why don't you change your life?' You know?"*

Lara, too, sees the difference between the quality of her life and that of her sister and cousin, neither of whom seems to be headed for the kind of life Lara is pursuing. She worries about her sister, who is living with their mother, and is *"allowed to do whatever she wants, and she's just going wild."* And she says of her cousin, *"He's not going to school, he has no job. He smokes marijuana and he's doing nothing with his life, has no ambition, and he's doing absolutely nothing with his life."*

Although London considers first-generation college students in a community college context, his description of the challenges these students face is relevant for

first-generation students in general. London argues that as they progress in college, separation from their parents grows and that the students end up living “on the margin of two cultures” (London, *First-Generation*, 7). The dislocation these students experience as they move into “uncharted cultural territory,” he says, may have costs of which students are unaware, including “the loss of a familiar past [and of] a past self” (London, *First-Generation*, 10). It could be argued that the separation extends beyond parents to other family members and friends as well. The most obvious way in which this loss plays out is in the kinds of conversations students have, and by implication do not have, when they go home.

Anissa, for example, says that she can't ask her family for advice:

There wasn't, they just didn't have this kind of experience. You know, when they heard when I first came to biochem, "oh, science, you're going to be a doctor." And then when I changed it was like, "but what does a sociologist do?" And I was explaining that I want to go to law school and you don't have to major in a specific thing, and they were like, "oh, okay," but they really didn't understand what I was talking about.

Lara also speaks of trying to have conversations at home:

You can look at something and say certain things about it, but then you go into why or how it came to be that way, or what effect—and you know, my family don't see things that way. They just don't have that level of understanding, and it's not even that they don't have the capacity. It's just that they never had to, they never saw a reason why. They don't care. We were talking about pollution one day, and saving the earth, and I saw one of my cousins like just rolling her eyes at me.

Anna says that she doesn't talk with her father about anything she reads, because he doesn't read, “*he just would not be able to get through a chapter*” and her voice trails off as she says, “*and so if I just can't discuss that stuff with him, sometimes. . .*” She adds that conversations are also difficult because “*I feel like when I'm talking they think I'm talking just to hear my own voice because of the*

things I'm talking about." Lara, too, raises some of the same issues: *"You know, I'll use a good word and [my mother] is like 'what does that mean? I don't know what that means.' And it's not a big word, it's just a word that's common, you know? And sometimes I feel like she thinks I feel like I'm above her in some respects."*

And Nick's hesitations and partial phrases as he speaks show some of the conflict he feels as he tries to describe both his own words and actions and those of his family:

When I go home I speak differently. Sometimes I think they think I'm a spoiled brat because I'm a college boy who's been given everything, because I went to prep school, and all that. It's not that they, I mean they love me. It's just a question of, I think, when I speak, I just don't have the—I mean their sons and daughters are working right now. They're becoming firemen and things like that. In that situation, to speak with, a, a, a sort of high vocabulary doesn't have as much authority. You have to sort of, you know, dumb down. I'm not saying we're cavemen or anything like that, but it also limits the subjects we can talk about. I talk about TV shows when I go home. I don't talk about books. And my vocabulary probably drops the same amount.

Some students of color have yet another issue, that of being criticized as they take on characteristics of the white world. Ogbu, for example, says that "those members of involuntary minority groups who try to cross cultural boundaries may experience social or psychological pressures from other members of their group not to do so" (Ogbu 48). Maria addresses this conflict as yet another factor in the separation between her home culture and her life at school: *"I never really fit into my neighborhood. People there would say 'oh, you sound white,' or 'your family thinks they're too good,' or 'why are you figure skating or ice skating?' It was 'oh, you're doing white people's sports.'"*

But despite conflicts with their home culture, most of the students in this study have successfully managed the two different worlds in which they live. Some of them, in fact, have connected with the world they left behind through their volunteer activities and their choice of major and future plans. How academic literacy is a part of what they do, and how they approach the specific tasks of writing, reading, and oral literacy will be addressed in the next section.

CHAPTER 7: ACADEMIC LITERACY, WRITING, ACADEMIC
PERFORMANCE, AND ORAL LITERACY

The Importance of Writing

“Writing,” says Roz Ivaniç, “is an act of identity in which people align themselves with socio-culturally shaped possibilities for self-hood, playing their part in reproducing or challenging dominant practices and discourses, and the values, beliefs and interests which they embody” (Ivaniç 32). Higher education, among other experiences often provides a new social context for writers, one in which they may find practices that “support identities which differ from those they bring with them” (Ivaniç 33). Thus, understanding how writing and identity are related can help students learn about “the range of identities available for self-hood” (Ivaniç 34), an issue with particular relevance for first-generation students. That is, while most traditional-age college students are dealing with issues of identity simply because of the age and stage of life they are passing through, these issues can loom even larger for first-generation students for whom the dislocations caused by their new environment may be particularly unsettling. Writing in all its forms—journals, narratives, argumentative papers—can provide a pathway that will help these students better understand who they are and who they are becoming.

The Academic Literacy Model

But to understand something of the academic lives of these students, it is less useful to examine writing alone, and the literacy it requires, than to look at academic literacy, a concept both narrower and broader than “writing.” It is narrower in the sense that it involves a particular kind of writing—that done, as Hannah Ashley

says, “in a particular discourse community, that of the academy”⁵⁹—and it is broader in that it ultimately involves more than the simple sense of putting words down on paper; rather it is integrally connected to “the ability to negotiate between multiple worlds of discourse” (Geisler, “Exploring,” 44). Research into student writing, as Lea and Street note, usually involves one of three models: a study skills approach, which concentrates on deficits in students writing skills, such as grammar, spelling, and vocabulary; an academic socialization model, which helps students learn about their new world of institutional discourse and focuses on their learning how to interpret learning tasks; and the academic literacies model, which looks at written and other kinds of communication as social practices, and “institutions in which academic practices take place as constituted in, and as sites of, discourse and power” (Lea and Street 159).

Pointing out that the relationship between these models is not linear, but rather that each incorporates the previous one, Lea and Street note that most educational research privileges the study skills and academic socialization models. But, they argue, the academic literacies model provides the broadest understanding of student writing issues because it places these issues within “the whole institutional and epistemological context.” That is, the academic skills model is not entirely adequate because it views literacy simply as a set of “atomized skills” which students must learn and use in a variety of contexts and it “conceptualizes student writing as technical and instrumental” (Lea and Street 158). The academic socialization model, which grew out of the skills model, refines “the meaning of the ‘skills’

⁵⁹ Hannah Ashley, “Playing the Game: Proficient Working-Class Writers’ Second Voices,” *Research in the Teaching of English* 35, no. 4 (2001): 495. (Hereafter cited in text as Ashley.)

involved” in writing and demonstrates the need for “attention to broader issues of learning and social context” (Lea and Street 159). But although this model focuses on introducing students to the academic tasks they will encounter at institutions of higher learning, and treats “writing as a transparent medium of representation,” it “fails to address the deep language, literacy and discourse issues involved in the institutional production and representation of meaning” (Lea and Street 159). The academic literacy model, say Lea and Street, is the only model that views student writing as involving questions of identity and epistemology, rather than being a matter of only skills or socialization.

The Academic Literacy Model and First-Generation Students

And, again, though important to all students, the academic literacy model is especially relevant to first-generation students who must function in a world not only separate but also very different from their home and family culture, while they must yet take into account or continue to be affected by the world that shaped them. One of the ways to make their experience less alien, to help them better cope with their new life, is to connect the world of texts to the world of their experience. They, perhaps more than most, need to discover how the academy’s demands pertain to their lives, and then they need to approach these demands critically if they are to take full advantage of the “range of possibilities for self-hood” to which Ivaniç points.

Moreover, because academic literacy focuses on written language, how first-generation students approach the tasks and develop the abilities associated with such literacy is particularly relevant to writing teachers. In the composition classroom,

where the main purpose is to help students become more able writers, teachers often create a context about which students will write rather than having the context determined by the nature of the material they are teaching. These teachers can thus allow the opportunity for students' lives to become part of their work. It is in these classrooms, as well, that students may get the opportunity to examine critically the various discourses and tasks that will be required of them. For example,

From the student point of view a dominant feature of academic literacy practices is the requirement to switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes. A student's personal identity—who am 'I'—may be challenged by the forms of writing in different disciplines, notably prescriptions about the use of impersonal and passive forms as opposed to first person and active forms, and students may feel threatened and resistant—"this isn't me." (Lea and Street 159)

Understanding how to use and be comfortable with different voices or understanding what is involved in taking on multiple identities and voices in one's writing, while yet maintaining one's integrity and individuality, can have particular importance to students who are not only novice writers but also new to the world of higher education. The subjects about which they write and the particular kinds of writing tasks they do—particularly in writing classes—can offer them possibilities for connecting the various parts of their lives and may also offer them opportunities for learning how to critique and, when necessary, resist the institution.

Martha Marinara notes, "When students are encouraged to narrate their own education and work histories and then deconstruct their own stories, this not only broadens the parameters of the lives of working class students, but at the same time raises questions about academic knowledge" (Marinara 9). Her words apply, I believe, to first-generation students as well. As we shall see later, students' stories

provide an entry into the world of academe through which they can begin to familiarize themselves with academic literacy in general and the disciplinary demands of academic discourse in particular.

Moreover, the writing classroom can provide multiple opportunities for students to begin to tell their stories. That is, the pedagogical tools writing specialists use often include journals, free-writing, and other loosely structured writing tasks. These forms encourage students to move beyond particular textual boundaries so that they can, once again, use the familiar—the world of their lived experience—to connect to the more abstract and less known world of the academy and the theoretical and concrete ideas they will encounter once they are there.

For many first-generation students, their approach to academic tasks, including both writing and class participation, may come from individual personality traits. That is, a student who is naturally gregarious may feel free to speak out in class or to ask questions, and his or her writing may be characterized by a certain openness as well. A student who is shy or reflective may be hesitant to jump into a class discussion, and this reticence may also be reflected in the tone of the writing he or she produces for class. The approach some students take to academia may be connected to issues of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, so that their awareness of how well they fit in to the academic setting, how they perceive their difference from or likeness to their classmates may affect the confidence with which they state an opinion, orally or in writing, and even their tone and overall approach to the writing task.

Academic Performance

The twelve participants in this study, as noted earlier, were selected because of their first-generation status and their availability for the project, without regard for other characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. Yet in terms of many of their characteristics, they are no different from the majority of first-generation students who are the subjects of previous studies elsewhere. Like participants in other first-generation research, the students discussed here also come almost exclusively from the low socioeconomic status backgrounds that characterize most first-generation students; the majority of the participants, also like their first-generation peers at other institutions, are students of color and come from homes where English was not the primary language spoken by their parents. Almost half of them, in fact, grew up as bilingual speakers of English. But, as noted earlier, the majority of previous first-generation studies concentrate, with rare exceptions, on first-generation students at either community colleges or large universities, where first-generation students are likely to find a host of others who share their economic background, race and ethnicity, and first-generation status. At the college the students in this project attend, and at other colleges like it, their race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, first-generation background, or some combination of any of these, puts them in a very small minority.

Moreover, among the assumptions of this particular institution is that all students are equally prepared to undertake the rigorous academic tasks they will meet here without the benefit of remedial classes or special tutoring programs. Even the college's writing center operates on the principle that there are no basic

writers at the college and that its job is not to remediate but to help already good writers become better. However, although none of the students in this project could be considered a basic writer, they were not all equally well prepared by their high schools for the academic challenges they would face at this institution. And while the relevance of SAT scores to academic success is disputable, it is probably important to note that the SAT I verbal scores of all but two of the eleven students who submitted them are below the average scores for the institution. Previous chapters of this study discuss the ways these students have approached their lives at the college, their general experiences academically, socially, and at home, and their classroom performance. The question yet to be examined is how they handle the particular demands that are made upon them in classes requiring critical reading, writing, and analysis.

Accordingly, this chapter focuses on what happens to first-generation students in the classroom itself, how they handle the demands of classroom participation, and how they read, write, and apply analytical skills to their academic work. A note here on methodology: While all twelve of the students were asked to speak about themselves in terms of their classroom behavior and to comment on their experiences with writing, only five of them—Nick, Maria, Anna, Cherisse, and Lara—were enrolled in classes that required intensive writing during the time in which the interviews took place. Consequently, they were the only students whose writing, *per se*, became part of this study. The other students contributed information about their approach to writing, their writing experiences, and their general attitudes toward the academic literacy demands they have faced in the

course of their education, but they did not submit papers or other written work for my review.

This chapter, which began with a brief discussion of academic literacy, will also look at how students meet the demands of academic literacy in two arenas: in the classroom, in which they are called upon to listen, speak, and write, and in their written work, through which they apply what they have read, heard, and discussed in order to analyze, argue, describe, and persuade. Over the years, pedagogical practices have changed at Connecticut College as they have changed elsewhere. Few classes involve straight lecturing by the instructor. Instead, students are encouraged to participate and to shape the classroom through their discussion. The experiences of Xavier, Cherisse, and Lara, for example, show that in many **classes**—particularly those that are writing intensive—students are also responsible for leading class discussions at various times throughout the semester. As many teachers know, acts of writing and speaking can be excruciating for some students because these acts involve a public display of self. Students who are shy or self-conscious or feel less able than their peers can be particularly intimidated when called on to perform in these ways. If feelings of fear or inadequacy can affect the performance of students who are at least part of the majority in most ways, what are the potential effects on students who are already aware of their differences, already suspecting that they do not belong? Is a certain amount of self-consciousness and difficulty inevitable? What forces help students to speak out or keep them from active participation?

Factors Affecting Academic Performance

Race and Ethnicity

Just as the literature shows that racial and ethnic differences affect students' overall adjustment to college, so does it show how these differences affect their academic lives specifically. Much of the literature presents stories of cultural dissonance—often located in race and ethnicity—that affects how students respond to academic demands. Ogbu, for example, argues that “involuntary minorities”^{*} are under pressure to preserve their cultural heritage—by not, for instance, talking or acting “white”—often at the expense of academic success. He says that whereas immigrant minorities see learning the dominant language and adopting certain cultural features as a necessary step toward achieving the goals for which they immigrated, involuntary minorities see such activities as threats to their cultural heritage, and view “cultural and language differences [as] boundary-maintaining mechanisms between themselves and the dominant group” (Ogbu 48). Ogbu cites as an example the idea that there is a “White” way of talking and acting and an “Indian” or “Black” way, and that “those members of involuntary minority groups who try to cross cultural boundaries may experience social or psychological pressures from other members of their group not to do so” (Ogbu 48).

And, indeed, Maria speaks several times of being accused of “*talking white*,” both at home and at the college. Of her home community she says, “*When I was*

* those who came to this country involuntarily as slaves or who, like Native Americans, were subjugated by settlers.

growing up you know, people would say, 'oh, you sound white.' But when people cannot speak proper English and it's not even encouraged at school to speak properly, they don't." It is not only at home, however, that Maria's style of speech has been criticized. Even at the college, where she shares educational attainment and at least a few goals with others of her racial and ethnic heritage, she has met with occasional disapproval from other students of color for the way she speaks. She says of her experience with some of her peers of color at the college: "*You know, people make fun of me—'oh, you sound like you're white.'*"

But as she attempts to understand the differences between herself and some of her fellow students of color, it is clear that Maria believes that prior experiences may be a significant factor in their different approaches to life at the college. She says,

There are some students who, whether they're students of color or not, may define themselves [that way] as far as their ethnicity goes or where they fit in, and that wasn't my experience. I feel very comfortable with who I am. I don't feel that I talk "white." I don't feel that I don't know how to talk. But I feel comfortable fitting into wherever I am, and I think a lot of students might not have felt that comfortable or needed to grapple with those issues.

Part of the reason for the differences between Maria and some of the other students of color (who, in the main, are first-generation college students), she asserts, is that she dealt with many of these issues in high school—a predominantly white private school, but one that apparently provided a good deal of support to students of color, training them in leadership techniques, supporting their attendance at conferences for high school students of color, and providing a counselor who worked with them extensively. She says that her high school helped her to develop confidence in herself as well as comfort with living and learning in a largely white

society, an experience, she believes, that some of her peers at the college did not have.

Socioeconomic Status

Just as racial background can influence how first-generation students approach academic tasks, social class can be yet another source of difficulty. Gary Tate, for example, argues, "Social class—the perennial third item in the familiar trio, gender, race, and class—has been largely ignored in composition studies and in the academy generally" (Tate 14). But one of the reasons it is important to look at the socioeconomic background of first-generation students is that class issues do have relevance to their academic work, particularly their writing. As Lillian Bridwell-Bowles asserts,

Clearly [social class] is a powerful determinant of success and failure within academia and a restrictive force in our linguistic freedom. Standard Written English, with its roots in prestige dialects, does not allow our class roots to show. Our fear of revealing class identities that diverge from the middle restricts our writing options. Writing classes often serve as a gatekeeper, protecting the academy from the infelicities of "errors" generated by differences among dialects that derive from social, racial, and ethnic differences. (Bridwell-Bowles 359)

Gary Tate cites Lynn Bloom's argument "that Freshman English is a middle class enterprise" (Tate 15), and I would go a step further to argue that academic writing in general is the same. I suggest that social class issues can also be a factor in classroom performance. That is, differences in social class can further isolate first-generation students, whose experiences with educational attainment are already very different from those of their traditional peers, and can create conflict when first-generation students interact in the classroom, because the world of the academy itself is a foreign experience for them. This is particularly so for those who have not

come from private prep schools where there were many opportunities for exposure to the students they would encounter when they arrived at a highly selective college—students very unlike themselves.

Xavier, for example, another student of color who attended a largely white, private prep school peopled mainly by students from high socioeconomic status backgrounds, says, *“I’m used to dealing with upper class, upper middle class students, just from my high school. I think my experience there has helped me in terms of, I guess to learn mannerisms, in some sense, in terms of conducting myself with individuals I may be dealing with in the future.”*

And while Nick does not speak directly of learning mannerisms or other behaviors from the students at his exclusive prep school, the leather-elbowed tweed sports jacket, J. Crew shirts, and Burberry scarf he wears indicate that he is well aware of the kinds of differences that might distinguish a poor boy from rural New England from his more sophisticated, more affluent classmates.

General Issues of Difference

But it is not only racial minorities and students with low socioeconomic status who have the potential for having conflicting values systems impinge upon their academic lives. Gail Okaway (as cited in Soliday “Class Dismissed”) argues that “When student writers bring with them different languages, discourses, cultures and world views, the culture of the academic would leech out their cultural uniqueness, absorb them, assimilate them, graduate them, uniform in their uniforms.” She points out further that it is not surprising that students “often refuse that absorption, overtly or covertly” (Soliday, “Class Dismissed,” 733). In an earlier piece,

however, Soliday argues that, “although students from diverse cultural backgrounds experience discontinuity and difference when they come to college, many also identify a strong continuity among themselves, their experiences and the university” (Soliday, “Politics,” 269-270). So cultural and class differences do not necessarily mean negative academic experiences for first-generation or other students; nonetheless, they may play a part in how these students experience and react to academic situations.

Certainly, there is no one model for the way to live academic life. Prior research (MacGregor; Miller; Riehl; T-Bui; Terenzini et al., “Characteristics”) indicates that first-generation students enter academia less prepared than traditional students for the academic challenges that await them there. But, as Penrose notes, a number of case studies and first-person accounts show that, just as traditional students do, first-generation college students have both negative and positive experiences with academics in general and with writing in particular: “Intermingled with accounts of discomfort and self-doubt are stories of first-generation students who actively sought citizenship or participation in a basic writing class, viewing themselves as writers” (Penrose 440). Penrose adds, “Ashley” for example, “characterizes proficient working-class students as confident writers adept at playing the game of academic literacy” (Penrose 440). And, indeed, Ashley writes that “for the working class students in the case studies [she conducted],” most of whom were also first-generation students, “becoming proficient in schooled literacy was a complex set of experiences that could not be reduced to loss and gain and simply interpreted as negative or positive” (Ashley 506).

The rest of this chapter will look more specifically at the particular classroom and writing experiences of the students in this project. The first section is devoted to in-class experiences, in which the students discuss their roles as participants in their classrooms. The following section looks at how these students approach and undertake writing assignments, their preparation for college writing, and their general attitudes toward it, with a subsequent section devoted to a more in-depth examination of the writing experiences of five students, including review of some of the papers they have written for various courses. It is my hope that these discussions will yield suggestions for further research that may give insight into the particular issues surrounding first-generation students and their writing at highly selective and rigorous institutions.

Oral Literacy

Classroom Participation, Oral literacy, and Writing

The participants in this study, just as those discussed by Penrose, Ashley, Soliday ("Class Dismissed"; "Politics") and others, have had varied experiences and differ from one another in their attitudes toward both their written and oral literacy. Although oral and written literacy differ from one another, oral literacy is sometimes both a foundation for and an indication of written literacy. Oral literacy, for example, particularly as it is expressed through classroom participation, can lay the groundwork for student writing. That is, academic literacy is obviously not a function of class participation or vice-versa, but at a school like Connecticut College, where the philosophy is that students should be actively involved in their learning, one of the measures of a student's academic strength is class participation.

In fact, many teachers base part of the semester's grade on such activity. Often, the argumentative skills students put to work in their papers have been sharpened through classroom discussions where appropriate vocabulary and diction, clarity, use of evidence, coherence, and logical reasoning are modeled. It might be said, then, that in certain contexts, and particularly at the school where this study is located, academic literacy also involves oral literacy—or, more simply, that skill in writing is connected to skill in speaking. Some of the students in this study are comfortable participating in class discussion, asking and responding to questions, even if they are likely to make mistakes or garner disapproval from their classmates. Others—even at an advanced level—find speaking in class stressful and find it difficult to call up the vocabulary they need or to marshal quickly their oral arguments.

Student Attitudes toward Classroom Participation

Xavier and Nick express similar attitudes about class participation. Xavier, for example, says, *"I've always talked too much in class, since day one, so I've always been very active in voicing my opinions. Even when I don't know what I'm talking about, I still will talk, because that's how I learn. If I don't talk, I'm going to fall asleep, so I'll give an answer just to guess, and I don't care if I'm wrong."*

In a similar vein, Nick notes,

So many undergraduates here don't have the confidence to be wrong and I think that the most important part of a student is that you have to be wrong in order to move on. And that's something my parents have always told me so...um. I probably, if you come visit a class, I'm a voice in all of my classes, even though I'm wrong so often. But I don't know, I don't get shy about it because I think it's natural. I mean if I thought I was going to be right every time I open my mouth then I might as well not open my mouth. That's something that I've gotten from home all along is, is—you know, my mom

admits to making mistakes, but she says the mistakes she's made have not necessarily been so bad.

He adds with some humor, "Look, I'm the product of a mistake, an accident, so she, you know, that's what's been instilled in me all along."

And Anna, too, is confident about her oral literacy, pointing to her class participation as a kind of by-product of her upbringing:

I've noticed that I'm more talkative in the classroom than some of those other students. Not all of my classes, but, especially when we're in large lectures or when I was in freshmen intro courses, I spoke a lot more than a lot of other people. Maybe my family's not so reserved—not loud, but if you have something to say, you say it. And if I don't have something to say I won't just make something up just to hear myself talk.

Anissa, a junior at the time of her initial interview, says about her class participation that, as one might expect, it evolved over her first three years at the college:

In freshman year, obviously you can't do very much in science but listen, so I was a little bit more [quiet]. But in second semester I noticed myself speaking, and then sophomore year definitely a lot more, and this year, a whole lot more speaking out in class. So I think over time I became more confident in what I was saying.

But for Anissa, who is African American, the question of class participation is complicated by race issues. She says,

Some classes it's—there are issues that maybe pertain to race and you don't want to—if you're the only one in the class of color, then people think that you're speaking for everyone in your race, so you'd just rather not say anything. But it doesn't really stop me. My "Race and Ethnicity" class I was surprised. I spoke a great deal, I think. It's just that afterwards you feel like, oh, I hope that they don't think that I'm like, like this is how everyone feels. I usually say, "This is my personal opinion. Like I don't speak for everyone of my race, but this is how I feel about this certain issue, or whatever," just so that they know.

She adds that she is not certain whether the life experiences that distinguish her from the majority of students at the college are a factor in her willingness to speak out in class, but her interest in her major is definitely connected to her life and how she differs from the majority of her classmates:

Particularly in sociology, because a lot of students have, you know a very skewed view of people of color, people with low income, people who live in inner city areas, are disadvantaged, when we're talking about deviants and things like that, that you kind of have to bring out the other points that are sometimes missed, and I think would be missed, if someone wasn't there to say them.

Nick, Xavier and Anna bring with them a self-confidence that allows them to take some risks in the classroom, and Anissa, although initially somewhat reserved, rapidly overcame any hesitation she might have had. Moreover, her interests in social justice and sociology seem to make it vital for her that she provide a counter to what might be prevailing notions among her more advantaged peers about people whose backgrounds are so different from theirs. For Linda, however, speaking out is fraught with difficulty. As suggested earlier, for some students, worries about being wrong may mask larger issues of belonging on both intellectual and social class levels. For Linda, and for some of the other students in this project, fear of speaking in class is often tied to fear of being exposed as ignorant, further evidence that they do not really belong. Linda says,

Sometimes when I think the question is a good question and I want the answer, I'll ask after class, but usually I just sit there and let other people ask the questions. It's intimidating because there are a lot of people here who are very smart.

Cherisse and Rachel, both members of the Class of 2004, indicate that although their fears about participating in class have subsided to some degree as they have

moved on in experience, they have not yet managed totally to overcome their reticence. As noted earlier, Cherisse describes herself as “*one of the not-so-outspoken students*,” but asserts that she has changed over the years. However, her ambivalent language indicates that she still has not completely sorted out her feelings about speaking, or advanced as far as she’d like, even though she does feel as if she has made progress:

What I found in the beginning is, like, we would read something and I just wouldn’t have anything to say about it, I wouldn’t have questions and I wouldn’t have comments. I was, like, there you go, you told me to read it and I read it. But I think now that I’m older and I’ve learned a little bit more, I speak out more. But I, definitely, now especially, I see myself—like a professor will ask a question or ask for a comment and I’ll think of something in my head and am, like, oh, I would say this if I wanted to raise my hand or wanted to be called on, and usually someone else will say it before I raise my hand. And now I’m getting the feeling that I should just say it. I don’t think that even if you’re wrong, I don’t think that the professor would really be like “ohhhh.” I think it’s mostly, like, I don’t know, it’s not really like I’m afraid or anything, but—

Rachel is even less happy about her inability to acquire an academic trait she knows she needs:

I was very quiet as a freshman and even now it’s hard to speak up. I tend to be quiet as a person sometimes—but there are times in class when I want to say something and I won’t say anything. I just can’t bring myself to say it, and when I’m called upon, I’ll turn red. It’s affected my grades because I know that in some classes participation is required, and I still can’t speak up.

Sounding just a little like Linda, she adds, “*Sometimes I feel that what I have to say isn’t good enough. I feel well prepared, and many times I will respond in my head, but then I feel like when I say it, I’m not articulate enough, when I speak it, when I say it out loud. So that holds me back a lot.*”

All three of these students—Cherisse, Linda, and Rachel—characterize themselves as naturally reserved to begin with. The pressures of the classroom, of

doubting their inherent intelligence, as Linda does, or their ability to compete with students they believe are either more prepared than they, less worried about being wrong, or simply smarter, only serve to exacerbate some of the innate tendencies toward being reserved that they bring with them to the classroom.

Cassandra, Maria, and Lara, on the other hand, clearly love to talk—in all situations. Whereas the speech of the former three students, even in our informal and reasonably relaxed interviews, was often hesitant, with thoughtful silences preceding their answers to my questions, each of these three students, in their separate interviews, would answer questions readily and often at great length, moving from the immediate subject to a host of related ideas and issues, so that I often found myself having to double-check the question I had originally asked. Although for Maria and Lara, this exuberance apparently spills over into the classroom, Cassandra's classroom performance does not always reflect her outgoing and ebullient personality. Sounding a lot like her more reserved schoolmates, Cherisse, Rachel, and Linda, Cassandra says about speaking up in class:

In class it depends on the professor, it does. If the professor is very warm and kind of outspoken and embraces the class very much, I feel more comfortable. But sometimes, most of the times, I feel like I don't have anything to say, or someone has covered it, or I'm just not as smart. So sometimes I just don't say anything. I'm waiting to see what other people might say in the class. I feel like my ideas are just not as good. I feel like my ideas get jumbled in my brain. They don't come out the same way as I think of them, so I feel like I would repeat myself a lot more? So I just don't say anything because I don't want to sound like I don't know what I'm talking about. Even though I know what I'm talking about, when I have a point, it's not immediate, but I just feel like, I don't know, like maybe it's not what the professor is looking for? Or it doesn't make sense, or it's not really reflecting what I'm thinking?

Outside of class, Cassandra is confident and outspoken, but as the tone and rhythms of her comments suggest, she turns into another person in academic

situations. Moreover, her comments indicate that her hesitation about speaking in class stems from her belief that she has never really mastered the critical thinking skills so fundamental to academic performance at this college:

I'm definitely aware of the differences in my background compared to other students. Like sometimes when I hear students talk, I'm, like, where did you get this from? It's something that I never learned. Or the way they express their ideas about a certain topic, it's, uh, not even articulate, that's not the word. It's just that, it's very, uh—they know how to do that analytical thing that I'm still working on and not very well. And for me it's not so much analytical, it's how it relates to me and how it relates to the work. That's what I think of. I'm very much, how does it affect me? How does it affect the task and that kind of thing? I'm not, like, let's get into the theory. I'm just not very analytical because I just never really learned how to do it, and I'm just kind of grasping that idea and, so, sometimes it's harder for me to speak up. Because, I'm thinking, I'm not doing it correctly.

In short, although she does not frame her concerns in terms of oral literacy, she believes that her critical thinking and academic oral skills are weak, especially in comparison to those of the majority of her classmates. In contrast to the kinds of feelings Cassandra expresses, Maria and Lara—whose personalities outside-of-class are very similar to Cassandra's—have each found that their ability to participate has been a vital part of their academic and personal growth. Like Anna, Nick and Xavier, who seem to thrive on being active and vocal members of their classes, Maria is long past worrying about speaking up in class. She says, “*I love participation. Like in Catholic school it was all about participating.*” But whereas Anna, Nick, and Xavier speak about class participation mainly in terms of its connection to their own personality or upbringing, Maria goes a step further and looks at class participation as connected to the larger goals of the instructor:

I always make sure that I read everything. I don't like to go to class if I don't have all the reading done. Sometimes, like I know in my Sociology classes, people look at me like, is she going to shut up yet? But I don't just

bring in my own personal experiences. I'll really talk about the reading and I'll go back to the reading.

Despite her willingness to participate in class discussion, Maria is not unaware that speaking up can have its hazards:

I think that the professors appreciate it more than the students do. Sometimes it's difficult because you don't want to just be the only person speaking, and then sometimes the professors rely on you to speak. And I don't care what the other students think about me, but I [also] don't want people to think, oh, she's kissing up, or whatever.

Nonetheless, unlike Linda or Rachel, Maria is willing to risk her classmates' disapproval in order to make sure she is heard. Moreover, Maria has been able to put some of the difficult and potentially alienating experiences of her personal life into a larger context and to thus expand her understanding in a way that makes her experiences more than simply personal. Through both her major (Sociology-based Human Relations) and PICA (the certification program in community action in which she participates), Maria, like Lara, has been asked to examine her society critically as well as to consider ways in which she can bring about social change. In doing so, she has been able not only to meet the academic requirements of her coursework but also to look beyond college to a future career:

My PICA gateway course was the first time I was able to discuss what was important to me with other students in a way that I think was intellectual, not just, like, oh these are the problems. You know, we read about the problems all the time, but in this class people came up with solutions, people applied it to their internships, to the service learning that we were doing. And that's how I would integrate my personal experience with my academic life, and it made me figure out that I was really interested in public policy. I had a passion for it.

Again, her difference from Cassandra in this aspect is marked. Although both of these students are keenly aware of the inequities in society, Maria has become comfortable adding theoretical considerations to practical questions. She

uses both her oral and writing literacies to examine her academic and personal experiences, so that writing and speaking become pathways to understanding those experiences. Cassandra, on the other hand, is uncomfortable when she moves away from the concrete and the familiar. She says,

I feel like sociology is always a little harder for me because it's very theoretical, very analytical, so it's always a little harder for me to get into. English courses are great because you can talk about anything and it's free thought. Human Development courses, they give you a topic and you just kind of rip that topic apart, which is kind of nice. You can go from let's talk about the socioeconomic background and how that affects the child. You can go into great detail about that, which is, you know, cool, and I like that. But when it comes down to, you know, like basic theory and a grasp of what they're trying to say and other readings and the topic is complex, those kinds of classes are very hard for me.

Lara, a year behind Maria, resembles her both in a willingness to speak in class and an understanding that possibly uncomfortable classroom situations may provide an opportunity for a student to turn a potential negative into a positive—an opportunity for both learning and pride. She is, however, like Cassandra in her preference for the concrete and personal. Martha Marinara, in speaking of the experiences of working class students in the academy, says that “since the students’ stories are so often the site of conflict, personal narratives give [teachers] the unique opportunity to help students negotiate the borders between work and school, past and present, self and others” (Marinara 8), and Lara has discovered that some of the classes required for her teaching certification program have given her the chance both to examine her life and also to expose her classmates to realities with which they are often unfamiliar. One such course, “Fundamentals of Modern Education,” provided opportunities for both writing and speaking about these topics; her remarks

show that she may be beginning to move to the theoretical perspective that characterizes Maria's comments:

Basically we discussed the inequalities in education—segregation, different pedagogies, traditional, progressive and critical, revolutionary pedagogy, the differences. We have debates, we watch movies, we write papers. It was really a well-rounded class and I feel like it prepared me for the problems in the education system.

But she is still most excited about the work that relates to her personal experiences and life issues. So, for Lara, one of the most interesting experiences in this class was a "white privilege" exercise, an activity that was a revelation for some of the students and an occasion for Lara to examine her own and her classmates' reactions. In this exercise everyone, including the teacher, starts by lining up across the classroom. Students are then asked to take one or two steps backward or forward depending on how they respond to certain criteria. Lara says of the exercise:

I found it really like fun almost. Because the first question [the teacher] said was like, "if you're African American, Hispanic, or Asian take two steps back." And then she kept going, "if you or anyone in your family has ever been on welfare, take a step back. If you are the first person to graduate high school in your family, take another step back, anyone has ever been in jail in your family take another step back. If you went to a private school, take a step forward." And I was like, "No." "Your parents ever brought you to a museum, take a step forward." "No." The professor [once a first-generation college, working-class college student herself] was the furthest back. She was the last one. I was the second last. Then there were three Hispanic girls and a white guy and then there was a black guy. The rest were all white. Especially the white guys, they were all in the front.

In contemplating the situation Lara was angry at neither the injustices the exercise may have revealed nor with the students who had led more privileged lives than she. She says,

The thing is you have no control over what the outcome is going to be because you are who you are because of how you were born. But for me it was different. I was all the way back, but I was proud to show people because I'm here, you know? I found it interesting because in some situations, some people said they felt guilty for stepping forward. Mostly the male whites, but like all the guys, were up in front. It just showed you the male middle-class white, I know they felt guilty, but I don't look at them and say "oh, you're white and privileged, blah-blah-blah." That's how they were born, that's how they were raised, and it doesn't make them a bad person at all.

As can be inferred from her comments, rather than finding the exercise a source of embarrassment, Lara viewed it as a source of pride, one that gave her the opportunity to show how far she had come. She says,

I think you should tell people your stories and inspire people that are having a hard time, or show other people that you can work hard and get somewhere. I'm not ashamed of my past. I was not ashamed to say that my mom was on welfare and had food stamps because I learned from that and I'm doing something better with my life. You know what I mean?

For Lara, perhaps more than any other of the students in this project, class participation provides a number of personal benefits. She sees the "white privilege" exercise and other similar work around the critical examination of her society as important not only to her own intellectual development but also to the growth and understanding of her classmates. To begin with, she says, class participation is

really, kind of therapeutic, almost because I can understand it and just absorb it enough. That helps me, you know? I mean it not only helps me to grow intellectually, but also just to kind of understand my own life, where it all came from and maybe how to help other people, those that want something more.

And she believes that her life story, in the context of particular classes, can also aid her classmates: "It's so much more effective when someone who's had the experience, who knows what it's like, says something. You can read about it, but when you actually talk to someone who's lived it, it's more effective." For perhaps

the first time in her life, she is able to see the difficulties of her childhood as having a kind of social and educational utility:

It's really very interesting because a lot of my sociology or psychology classes here, I've had a lot of interesting experiences related to—like my adolescent development class talked about foster homes and one of the books we read talked about kids' stories and foster homes. I had so much to put into that class. And my Human Development class talked about that relationship that a child develops with her mother when she's a baby, and talked about that emotional attachment, and I didn't have that, and like I talked in the class and said, this has affected me because I've had problems with motherly figures.

As noted earlier, Marinara speaks of the importance of stories in the lives of working class students. In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien says that our stories "are for joining the past to the future,"⁶⁰ for connecting the people we were to the people we have become. For first-generation students attending a private, elite school, particularly those from low-status and ethnic and racial minority backgrounds, personal stories and personal experiences certainly have the potential to further set them apart from their more affluent, more traditional peers, from whom they are already quite separate in many ways. But the experiences of Lara and Maria suggest that telling those stories can also be at least initially therapeutic, and, then, educational. Under certain circumstances faculty can provide opportunities for those stories to help first-generation students feel like real participants in their education, valuable contributors to academic discourse, even if they are not yet ready to move from stories to critique. Anissa, who, like both Lara and Maria, is keenly interested in issues of social justice, suggests the importance of the classroom experience when she says,

⁶⁰ Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence, 1990) : 29.

I think some professors do a good job, but some professors don't do that good of a job at making sure that the students have both sides, or all sides of the arguments. Because if a person's not in the class questioning what they're saying, they're usually going to perpetuate that idea or [make other students] think that that's the truth, or that that is how it is.

Writing

As noted earlier, Connecticut College has a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program that requires that all students take two courses designated as writing courses, at least one of which must be "writing-intensive." In such a course, students are expected to complete the equivalent of at least twenty typed pages by the end of the semester; they must also have ample opportunity for revisions, and complete a variety of writing assignments. The inauguration of this requirement, in the late 1980s, heralded a renewed interest in writing throughout the curriculum at the college, so that there is now not a single department that does not include writing requirements in its course offerings, and this is true for departments which traditionally have not placed a strong emphasis on writing, such as math and the sciences, as well departments devoted to the arts, such as music, theater, dance and studio art. As an example, many art courses require that students keep a kind of artist's journal, and all senior art majors must submit an artist's statement that accompanies their senior exhibit. They are graded on this statement just as they are graded on their artwork.

First-Generation Students and College Writing

Not all of the students who participated in this project were enrolled in an intensive writing course during the study, but all of them have done a considerable amount of writing during their several years at the college, and they have done this

work in departments such as English, History, Education, and Sociology, as well as Biology and Mathematics. Although little of the literature on first-generation students deals specifically with writing, it is easy to speculate on some of the issues that might affect these students when it comes to college writing tasks. For example, students who have grown up in an environment rich with literature and have been exposed to a variety of books in their homes as well as in the classroom are more likely to develop extensive vocabularies and to be as aware of the rhythms of written language as they are of the rhythms of speech. Many first generation students receive their first real exposure to books when they enter school. Even in the small sample in this study, when the majority of students speak of their early experiences with the written word, they speak about not having many books at home, even when their parents encouraged them to read.

Moreover, habits of critical and analytical thinking—the kinds required in a rigorous college setting and particularly important to the writing one does in a liberal arts institution—often have their roots in conversations around the dinner table or in other settings with parents and siblings. Specifics about these students' home and family relations are discussed elsewhere, but the evidence from the students in this sample suggests that in these first-generation households, such conversation has been infrequent, if occurring at all. Finally, even when reading and analytical discussions are not a feature of the home life of a student—first-generation or not—parents who have been through college can provide a critical eye and help with proofreading papers that students bring home, starting with grade school and continuing through high school and even college. Students whose

parents not only do not have a college education but also may not have completed high school have not generally had the opportunity to have the skills they learn in school reinforced at home. And once again, this has certainly been the case with the students in this sample. When these students have received help with higher order academic tasks prior to college, they have received assistance from teachers and mentors rather than parents. But the fact is that at least for half of these students, mentors were not readily available.

An additional problem for first-generation students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds can be their prior school experiences. Some of the students in this project attended private boarding or day schools and strong public high schools, where they received the same sort of instruction as their more traditional peers. Only a slightly smaller number, however, attended local neighborhood public schools within inner city school districts, where classes were crowded and the majority of their peers did not expect to nor did they go on to college after they graduated from high school.

Earlier studies (Cross; Richardson and Skinner; Riehl; Ting), as previously mentioned, indicate that first-generation college students are generally less well prepared than students from traditional backgrounds, exhibiting lower SAT scores and ranking lower in their high school graduating classes than their peers. Indeed, in reading the literature, one comes to feel that "first-generation" and "underprepared" are synonymous. Although, as noted earlier, the eleven students who submitted SAT scores upon entrance to the college had scores below the average for their respective classes, in this group of students, most believe that their

high schools, public and private, had prepared them reasonably well for the challenges of a rigorous college. And although several of the students had some complaints about their high school training in essay writing, only three of the twelve expressed serious dissatisfaction with the grounding they received in high school, finding that it did not prepare them to meet the writing requirements that they would have to face. For these three students, especially, writing is generally difficult, and they entered the college believing that they would not be able to adequately perform the writing tasks required of them.

In Rachel's case, for example, her New York City public charter school may have given her the atmosphere and personal attention that helped her gain entrance to a rigorous college, but her English class left her dissatisfied and unprepared for the kind of writing she knew she would confront after she left high school. She explains that she found her teacher's attitude confusing. He was, she points out, the founder of the school, which like other charter schools is supposed to address the inadequacies of traditional public school education; yet, she says, "*I never even learned how to write a thesis statement.*" And when she asked what one was and how to write it, she says, "*My English teacher was, like, 'oh, you don't need that.'*" When I asked Rachel what kind of writing she did in high school, she said that she wrote "*only essays, not real papers.*" A little more probing revealed that what she called "essays" were largely narrative and descriptive papers dealing more with her life experiences than with literary analysis or argument.

Student Attitudes toward College Writing

Rather than Rachel's English teacher, it was her high school college counselor (as noted earlier, the son of a college faculty member and the person largely responsible for her applying to the college), who helped her to learn some of the rudiments of academic writing. But she remains uncomfortable about the act of writing, even though her grades have been generally good:

But it wasn't like—I think most of my writing has been writing ethnography so it's, I don't feel like it involves so much the, it involves structure but not, I don't know. I feel like if I was taking English classes I wouldn't do so well. But when you're doing ethnographic studies or like the ones they make us do here, a lot of it is personal so the writing comes easier for me, [but] grammar and vocabulary are still a problem for me.

Despite having taken courses in history, sociology and human development that were labeled either "writing-intensive" or "writing-enhanced," both requiring significant writing throughout the semester, she says,

I'm a junior now and I still don't feel confident in my writing. I took a history course, and I think it was a visiting professor, and I got "A" and "A-" grades on my papers, but I feel like that's because he gave us the structure and I wrote it the way he wanted me to. When I'm asked to write papers or to argue something, I have trouble doing that. Building an argument. I'm not sure about my point of view or about supporting it and I just don't feel confident about supporting it.

Whereas Rachel speaks sadly about both her writing experiences prior to entering college and also her writing experiences during the three years she has been in college, Cassandra's reaction to the question, "tell me a little about your experiences with writing" borders on the vehement: "*I don't like writing. I never did. I never, never, never liked writing.*" Nonetheless, she recognized even before college that writing might be a necessary skill:

It was something that I wanted to learn and it's something that I wanted to get into, but I never was able to get into it. I think it's mostly because writing was usually the form of punishment throughout my public school years, so I just never learned to like it in that way.

And like Rachel, she believes that what she did learn about writing at her public high school in inner-city Boston did not prepare her for the writing tasks she would face in college. She notes,

I never really learned how to analyze things in the way [I should have]. I mean, I'm used to summarizing, which is what has been taught to me since I was little, so it's been really hard, you know, coming here and then having to "analyze this," and "don't summarize, analyze it," and I'm like what does that mean? And I had to learn my grammar skills all over again from like freshmen year and things like that, so it's been really, really difficult for me—the writing aspect of the whole college experience.

Cassandra says that she attempted to compensate for the gaps in her writing education with the help of a grammar book she studied during the summer before she entered school and afterwards, and the guidance of her mentor, whom she had met when she participated in an after-school program. An alumna of the college, this mentor, like Rachel's college counselor, not only informed her about the school but helped her to apply here and tutored her, as well, in some of the writing skills she would need once she arrived. Cassandra says,

My chief concerns were definitely about grammar because I thought that I knew some things graduating from high school, but then I was like I didn't really learn that much. And when I got here and I did my first few papers, it was not the greatest experience—I bought all these grammar books and my mentor, she helped me and we did like weekly lessons to learn the basics and try to get that all down, and I think I did definitely well with all that. I worked at it for the first two years, and then I relearned it.

But she later adds that as she progressed in college she discovered that more than her mechanical skills and grammar were weak:

In high school, I didn't learn anything about analyzing—summarizing, that's what I did, summarize books and sometimes here and there they would ask you to reflect on, you know, to reflect on your life, but most of the time it was strictly summarize this, summarize that. I didn't learn how to do anything else until I got to Conn, by kind of looking around, reading other people's papers to give you a sense of what you should be doing.

Even Lara who, unlike Cassandra and Rachel, went to a small suburban high school, feels ill-served by her experiences there. Lara's tumultuous home life led her into a series of foster care homes and several different school systems. Of high school she says,

I remember my English teacher, she knew me well, and she knew what kind of work I was capable of doing, so she didn't always make me do the work, and if I didn't hand it in, it was okay. I got an "A" because she knew me and knew my [home] situation. But if I had gone to a bigger school, I wouldn't have gotten away with it.

In "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children," Lisa Delpit argues that whereas the goal of many "liberal educators. . . is for children to become fully autonomous, to develop fully who they are in the classroom setting without having arbitrary, outside standards forced upon them," the parents of children from outside the middle-class "want something more. They want to ensure that the school provides their children with discourse patterns, interactional styles, and spoken and written language codes that will allow them success in the larger society."⁶¹ Such educators often feel that it is most important to allow students from disadvantaged backgrounds to have the freedom to write and speak without fear, to understand that their lives and experiences have value even inside the classroom—and this desire sometimes translates into also allowing them

⁶¹ Lisa D. Delpit, "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children," in *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*, ed. Victor Villanueva, Jr. (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1997): 571.

to be free of rigorous standards, or not requiring them to learn the codes that students from more traditional backgrounds have often internalized and can call on as they begin to engage in the writing required of them in college classrooms, and most especially in the “middle-class enterprise” of freshman composition.

Although Delpit is speaking mainly about race, and about young schoolchildren and their parents, her arguments could apply as well to all who belong to marginalized groups, and they apply further to not only parents’ desires for their children but also to the desires of those children themselves as they become more aware of the gaps in their learning and the potential for difficulty when they enter college. Addressing writing issues particularly, Delpit argues:

Although the problem is not necessarily inherent in the method, in some instances adherents of process approaches to writing create situations in which students ultimately find themselves held accountable for knowing a set of rules about which no one has ever directly informed them. Teachers do students no service to suggest, even implicitly, that ‘product’ is not important. In this country, students will be judged on their product regardless of the process they use to achieve it. And that product, based as it is on the specific codes of a particular culture, is more readily produced when the directives of how to produce it are made explicit. (Delpit 573)

Certainly the remarks of Rachel, Cassandra, and Lara suggest very strongly that learning in high school the skills they would need for college would have been preferable to what actually occurred—not obtaining those skills—even if lowered standards made life easier for them. Their understanding of the lacunae in their high school preparation led Rachel and Cassandra to seek ways other than asking their classroom teachers for information, and to work outside the classroom to gain some of the writing knowledge they believed vital to later achievement. Lara, although more confident in her writing abilities and prior knowledge than either Rachel or

Cassandra, nonetheless feels that in her high school senior English class she “got away” with not needing to perform as well as she might have because her teacher knew about her difficult home life and did not require her to put in the effort that would have produced truly excellent work. Moreover, like many of her peers, she was unprepared for the amount of writing she would have to do in college:

I had to learn how to write a whole twelve pages. I remember my first semester I had a twelve-pager in my human development course and I was, like, oh my God, how am I going to write twelve pages on this topic? In high school I wrote three to five pages at the most. For one course the most was like eight pages in my history class, and that was like a big paper.

Coming from a slightly different perspective, and talking about her college writing experiences rather than those of high school, Anissa nonetheless suggests that she has some of the same feelings Lara has expressed:

Sometimes, I don't know, honestly, I mean, I like to think I'm a good writer, but I could be better. And maybe this is just me being paranoid, but sometimes I think that teachers give me good grades because I'm black. I mean, like, I wrote a paper, and I didn't think it was a very good paper, and I got an A. I don't, like, I mean I've never told my grades to others, you know, I don't discuss grades with people, I just don't think it's, you know, needed at this school. You know it's not like very, very competitive, with everybody trying to knock somebody else down type of school, but it makes me think, you know, like, okay, I think I need more critique.

Although none of these students is familiar with Delpit's work, the remarks of each of them imply that they are discovering what Delpit already knows about access to power and privilege. For Cassandra, Rachel, Lara, and Anissa, the circumstances of their lives—first-generation college, impoverished, inner city, and for the latter two, mothers whose drug and alcohol use led to jail terms—would have seemed to preclude attending a prestigious, rigorous, and highly selective college. Having gained admission to such a school, they know that its promises, the

potential future it enables, will be available to them to the degree that they can compete on equal terms with students from more traditional, higher-status backgrounds. Each of them is implicitly saying, "There are rules and standards for access here, and I need to be able to know what they are and know how to meet them just as well as everyone else if I am going to gain what this college offers me." None of them is asking for an easy ride; nor, as Lara and Anissa, imply, do they want to succeed for reasons other than their talent, abilities, and their own effort. That is, Lara and Anissa want to know that they are good enough to be judged by the same standards as everyone else—no matter what their skin color or the circumstances of their personal lives—and they want to be able to achieve and learn in the same way and for the same reasons as their more advantaged peers. Anissa says overtly that she wants her writing to be critiqued so that it can get better. What she implies, more sadly, is that if she is given good grades because of her race, she won't be able to know if she really is as good a writer as she would like to believe herself to be.

Anissa, just as Cassandra, Rachel, and Lara, attended a public high school. Although her school, located in New London (described elsewhere as a small city with many of the problems of an urban environment but few of the amenities), is underfunded and has a very small population of students who expect to go on to postsecondary education, unlike the three cited students, she believes she received strong preparation for writing and other academic tasks she would have to do in college. She says, "*For me personally, it was fine—if you're in the right classes, you can take everything from those classes. Trying your hardest, you're prepared*

to go to good schools like Connecticut College.” She speaks particularly fondly of an English teacher who encouraged her writing and for whom she wrote a short story based on her grandmother’s life, a copy of which she believes the teacher still has. Although the teacher is now retired, Anissa keeps in touch with her, and says that the writing skills she acquired in high school are largely due to this teacher’s efforts.

Although she is not as confident about her writing as Anissa is, Maria also feels that her private preparatory school prepared her well for writing:

In [my elementary school] they didn’t like take writing seriously, so I really struggled a lot when I got to Berkeley Carroll and it improved a lot also. I had a professor my junior year and she was—this was, like, the humanities course and everyone was, like, don’t take her if you don’t have to, and you know, I wanted a challenge and I took her. And that was a really good class and my writing improved so much because of her. She had me writing, like, four or five revisions and I wouldn’t even get into her grade book.

And like Anissa (as well as some of the others interviewed), she wants critique of her work: “*I think because I know that I’m going into a profession where I want to be able to write and do it well, that’s why I want to take classes that have professors who will really push to revise my writing and [make me] do it better.*”

Of the other students in the group, only Linda feels unable to meet the literacy demands of higher education, despite her having been the valedictorian of her high school, as noted earlier, but she attributes the problems to her own perceived inadequacies in reading, rather than to her high school preparation. She says,

I could never read fast enough, and if I tried to read faster I would understand it even less, and those reading-and-answering questions were the hardest thing for me. I could never do those. Now [in college] it depends on what it is. If it’s on science I can probably understand a little more, but if it’s on history or sociology, I probably won’t understand it. I probably have to read it over three times.

She adds that she hardly ever reads just for pleasure, and, when possible, she avoids reading even the books assigned for her classes:

There's just one book that I read just before finals and that was for one of the science classes, and all the other ones I don't look at unless there's homework assigned in them. I just don't like reading. I think I can understand the material through the professor, [so I'm happy when] they just say that "what I'm saying is going to be on the exam, not in the book." I'm pretty sure I would learn a lot more if I did the read the stuff, but I just can't. I start and then I just can't finish.

Although she is not comfortable as a writer, she finds writing slightly less a problem for her than reading is. She says that when she started high school, "writing was a pretty big issue. I just never knew how to write, or what to write, where to start and how to end, but somewhere in high school I learned a little more. I had really good teachers in high school."

As a zoology major, she is reasonably comfortable with the writing she must do for her science classes, saying, "In science class it's actually easy. There's the data and you have to find reasons for the data. Basically you learn that in class." But writing in her other courses is more problematic. Pointing out that she has a very small vocabulary in English, and an even smaller one in Spanish, her first language, she says,

Even what seems to be very easy for a lot of people is very, very hard for me. I guess I'm a very slow thinker and putting my ideas together. So I just have a bunch of scattered ideas and putting them together just takes a very long time. What part of writing is really hard? Vocabulary and the subject. What is it I have to write about? Can it be about anything? Something you learned in class? 'Cause it's hard for me to think about what exactly and how I am supposed to start.

It seems apparent that some of Linda's vocabulary problems, and perhaps

even problems with developing her ideas, can be connected to her poor reading ability and the small amount of reading she has done in her life. Yet when I ask her how those reading problems were addressed in her prior schooling, she tells me that in the third grade she was put in a class for speakers of English as a second language, "*kind of as a punishment*" for being a slow reader, and then that she attended three different schools in two different states before she entered high school, where her reading issues were largely ignored. She does remember that her high school English teacher, despite her being first in her class, told her she would never succeed in college because of her difficulties in submitting papers on time, difficulty she attributes to her slow reading skills.

But while those reading and related writing problems may have their source in second-language interference issues (as noted earlier, her first language was Spanish), it is conceivable that there might be other reasons as well, for example, a learning disability. However, it wasn't until Linda entered college that anyone even suggested that she be tested for learning disabilities, and it was not until I referred her to the college's Office of Disability Services that she realized that she could be tested at no cost. In high school she says that, apart from taking "*a long time*" with writing assignments and submitting papers late, she didn't have "*much trouble with grammar and punctuation,*" so she did well. As her earlier remarks suggest, however, she believes she did not develop the critical thinking skills, or the ability to do the non-scientific analysis required when writing almost anything other than lab reports, and argumentative or analytic writing continues to be a problem for her. Nonetheless, she has received grades of "B" in the two writing enhanced courses

she has taken, as well as “B” or better in all but two of her other courses, so it is difficult to tell if her problems are real or perceived, or, if real, whether they hold her back as much as she thinks they do. (Interestingly, the only two courses in which she received “Cs” were Organic Chemistry and Marine Biology, both science classes.) Whatever the reason, and despite the good grades she has received, she states repeatedly that college work is a continual struggle for her because she is “*not as smart*” as the other students in her class.

The other students in the group present a range of attitudes toward their high school preparation for college writing and classwork and their ability to handle the writing tasks they meet here. Mike, for example, presents a picture exactly opposite that of Linda’s. Despite the fact, as noted earlier, that shortly after he was interviewed for this study, at the end of his sophomore year, he was directed to withdraw from school (for reasons connected to his failure to submit work or attend class), he spoke with great confidence about his preparation for college reading and writing and his ability to meet the literacy challenges college might present. His small New England private school offered the International Baccalaureate (IB), and his IB English course involved extensive written work:

My high school prepared me for writing. The second year of preparation for the IB thing was writing every day. Sometimes it was just on a word. I think grammar I definitely have down pat. So it’s not grammar. In the IB course at the beginning, we went through how to structure the paper and that helped me out [at Conn] because I kind of found it a little easier to write something here [under the pressure of time].

But even so, as Mike continues to speak, his language implies that he has adopted the language of knowing how to write without really having internalized his understanding. The “*so, it’s not grammar,*” for example, implies that there may

be something that he does not “*have down pat*,” even if he has not identified what it is. Speaking about the work for his English class at the time of his interview, he says,

I always resort to the thesis statement and then several proofs proving why this is true, and it has to be an argumentative type thing, so I mean I think for me that 's the best way to go about it. So then I do like an outline and I'll go through my thesis and then I'll have the proofs and I'll get examples from the different books. Actually tonight I plan on making the outline, like finalizing everything and coming down to a thesis.

Phrases like “*resort to the thesis*,” and “*argumentative type thing*,” along with the earlier mentioned “*so it's not grammar*,” indicate an uncertainty about the process that his confident tone may mask.

Anna, focusing largely on mechanical skills, says she was “*good at punctuation and grammar*,” throughout her early schooling and so did well in her arts-focused public New York City high school, earning only “As” in her English classes, and graduated believing that she was well prepared for what college writing assignments would ask of her. But her college English grades have not matched those she received in high school, and she expresses frustration at her inability to get more than a “B+” in any of the English classes she has so far taken at the college.

Bill, who attended a parochial high school close to his home, also believes that he received excellent high school preparation for writing, although he says his “*writing improved significantly*” after he entered college. He attributes this improvement to his college English teacher who spent a good deal of time commenting on his work and also mentoring him through some difficult personal problems with his family, from whom he grew estranged for a while after entering the school. “*But*,” he says, “*I think my high school was very good, I mean looking*

back, I want to say that my high school definitely prepared me for college [writing]. I actually thought that this school was easier in some ways than my high school, though in different types of projects.”

Unlike Bill, Cherisse says that although her suburban New York high school was a “good” school, the writing requirements there were “nowhere nearly as demanding” as what she has faced in college: “*I think the longest paper I ever wrote in high school was, maybe, five or six pages.*” And she adds that while she learned something about the structure of writing in high school, about “*having a thesis, and connecting paragraphs, and developing a good introduction,*” she got this information from her social studies classes rather than from English:

In English, mostly we read a lot and then had tests, hardly any papers, and when we wrote it was like, reports on the book, or answering little questions about the book. I think I learned to write mostly by trial and error. I never used to revise in high school. I would just write the paper and hand it in and it was fine.

Xavier, who attended a boarding school in New England school, has more mixed feeling about the way he was taught there. An indifferent reader before high school, he discovered literature at boarding school: “*We read books, that’s what we did, and I loved my English classes because I loved to read and discuss the readings. I would always recite. I’d start reciting like words from Midsummer Night’s Dream in the middle of class.*”

But writing was a more difficult issue for him: “*I remember in sophomore year I wanted to be in this honors class because I read everything—I probably wasn’t the fastest reader. I read and understood the material, but I couldn’t get in because I wasn’t a good writer.*” Unlike Cassandra and Rachel, he received

instruction in writing, but he found the instruction—and the experience of writing—boring and unsatisfying. He says,

The writing to me, at least the way they taught it, it seemed very systematic. I didn't know how to be creative about it, because they'd have like, this intro paragraph. You have to have this intro paragraph, and you have to, say, have this necessary quote and have to comment on it, and answer some particular question on it. I never knew about—although I was coached in critical writing, I never really was taught how to do it, I guess, and then, that was the same for all my classes. Because all the essays followed the same funnel-to-thesis routine.

Although Xavier believes that his “writing matured a little” by the end of his senior year in high school, it wasn't until the end of his sophomore year in college that he began to develop any confidence about his writing. Speaking about his writing-intensive English class, in which he was expected to both speak and write, he says,

I felt very comfortable in that class, not only because I knew the topic, but because I knew it was kind of my job to kind of teach the topic and delve into it analytically more, much further than anyone would in a first read of original pieces, being critical of what we read and discussing points that I thought were important. The teacher said to me once, “make it as if you, you're actually speaking to someone,” so I actually did that. It became very clear to me as I was writing that I was actually writing something that was comprehensive and cohesive.

But despite his sophomore English class in college and his steadily improving ability to handle difficult material, he remains uncomfortable about his ability to express complicated ideas in writing. Sounding a little like Cassandra, he says,

Last semester I took a government course in international human rights, and I enjoyed the course. And whenever I had to discuss something, write on something that was not too academic or theoretical I did very well, but whenever we had to discuss something that was theoretical and very academic, I could not articulate the information that I wanted to in my arguments. So whenever the grade was dependent on “[Xavier], tell us how you feel about something,” I did better than most of the other students. But when the question

was, "what are the ideological differences between economic social and cultural rights and civil political rights?" that was difficult.

Nick, also the product of a boarding school, albeit a more well known and elite school than Xavier attended, appears more confident about his writing abilities than Xavier, and attributes some of his success to habits he acquired in high school, even if not the actual writing instruction he received there: "*The topic-evidence-significance pattern I learned in high school. I was never told that this is the way you should write, I was just told that this is a successful way of writing and specifically for writing, you know, standardized things, like the SAT writing.*"

He believes that he developed some of his oral skills in high school, "*where the classroom was run totally on class discussion. It was the most important part of each class.*" But his writing has sharpened since arriving in college, where "*the only say I get in a lot of my classes are the four pages or five pages I hand in every three or four weeks.*" It is, however, more than the opportunity to express his opinions that has given him an appreciation for what he has learned in his writing classes here:

My own writing style has matured since high school, but my organization and structure have been what's changed the most in college. My vocabulary's gotten better, my sentence structure has gotten more sophisticated, my organization of the paper is, realizing that, you know, what audiences I'm writing for, also what is appropriate for a five-page paper that is not appropriate for a fifteen page paper. Things like that, I'm, I've started to figure out. In high school every paper was three-to-five pages and sometimes I would totally like overshoot my allotted space, or I would just, because I would just resign myself to "oh, this is too short, so I'll just give a superficial reading."

Writing at a Competitive School

Earlier I defined academic literacy as involving more than students' ability to read and write, and certainly the students in this project, no matter what their

individual perceptions, have demonstrated an extremely high degree of literacy as defined in those terms alone. Through their high school records, their admission to a highly competitive college under the same rigorous admission standards as for traditional students, and the academic work they have done in college, these first-generation students have shown that their fundamental literacy skills are as strong as those of their more traditional peers. But the ability to read, write and use language fluently is only the foundation for what writers must do in a demanding academic setting. As noted earlier, Geisler says that those who are skilled in academic literacy must be able to move easily among three different worlds—that of daily experience, of “logically related truths,” and of “abstract authorial conversation” (Geisler, “Exploring,” 44). According to their own perceptions, not all of the students in this project can negotiate those worlds successfully.

That is, one of the threads that runs through the remarks of the students who express difficulty in handling comfortably the writing tasks they are expected to complete in college is their inability to move from the concrete to the abstract, to develop analytical skills, to speak hypothetically. Although he is not using the same term, it seems to me that David Bartholomae is discussing the idea of academic literacy when in “Inventing the University” he says,

Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion. . . . The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community.⁶²

Bartholomae points to some of the issues involved in this process of

⁶² David Bartholomae, “Inventing the University,” *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*, ed. Victory Villanueva, Jr. (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1997) : 594. (Hereafter cited in text as Bartholomae.)

invention when he adds:

The writer who can successfully manipulate an audience (or, to use a less pointed language, the writer who can accommodate her motives to her reader's expectations) is a writer who can both imagine and write from a position of privilege. . . .She must be either equal to or more powerful than those she would address. (Bartholomae 594).

It is clear that some of these students more than others believe themselves to be competent at undertaking the invention of which Bartholomae speaks. For example, Linda, the least confident student generally, feels most comfortable with the scientific discourse required by the courses in her zoology major. There, where the rhetorical form is usually highly structured, the content is based on the results of concrete research, and the language she uses can be technical and scientific, she believes she can minimize the effects of an inadequate vocabulary and an inability to handle the stylistic demands of sophisticated writing in the humanities. Adopting the conventions of scientific writing allows her to distance herself from the perceived personal failings that she sees as a threat to her academic success.

Cassandra dislikes writing intensely, feeling most comfortable when she can speak of her own experiences and least at ease when she must move into the realm of theory and the abstract. Although she has improved her mechanical skills by dint of extremely hard independent work, the fluency that characterizes her oral speech disappears when she turns to writing. As an American studies major, she must write in a variety of disciplines—history, government and sociology among them. Stymied by what she sees as a lack of training in necessary critical and analytical skills, she finds writing in all of these areas laborious and unpleasant. Xavier, who, like Cassandra, loves to talk and speaks easily and articulately, finds that when he

needs to write from an abstract or theoretical point of view, he writes hesitantly and clumsily. Rachel's good grades in courses requiring writing have done little to convince her that she knows how to write. Her arguments imply that she has received good grades because of the kind of writing ("ethnography," "highly structured") or the teacher (a visiting professor), or, like Cassandra and Xavier, because the writing is concrete rather than abstract. Mike talks a good game, but his inability to actually complete and submit the written work he referred to when he discussed his writing process indicates a very large gap between what he proposed to do and what he actually did. Even his language, when one considers it carefully, reveals someone less certain about the writing process than he purports to be.

None of these students sees himself or herself as the kind of writer who can, in Bartholomae's terms, "both imagine and write from a position of privilege" (Bartholomae 594). Moreover each of them has difficulty with some of the other requirements of academic writing that Donald Murray speaks about, as described by Lillian Bridwell-Bowles. Bridwell-Bowles points out that Murray believes that "academic writing should appeal to reason, maintain a distanced and detached tone, cite outside authority, and be written in response to previous academic writing: 'scholarly knowledge is built in increments of small additional bits added to previous knowledge'" (Bridwell-Bowles 351). Although Bridwell-Bowles points out that Murray's words refer to a "contested convention," it is a convention alive and well in some of the more traditional departments at Connecticut College. Even college students familiar with traditional academic requirements might have trouble meeting some of the demands of this convention. For some of these first-generation

students, however, the greatest worry before attending college was to make sure their grammar and punctuation skills were strong; for others, the ideas of tone, style, and scholarly knowledge were not even a consideration.

Of the students from whom I did not collect writing samples, two—Bill and Anissa—both enjoy writing and also report that they have had few troubles as writers during their college career. Bill, who when I interviewed him had been admitted to law school as a senior government major with an overall GPA of 3.80, sees himself as a strong writer. He describes himself as writing well in high school, although he says that his “*writing improved immensely*” after he entered college. Unlike some of the students already discussed, Bill likes writing and says he writes “*fairly often even if I’m not in those courses at the college.*” Bill’s most significant writing problem, one that he believes he has mastered, was in trying to organize and streamline his material:

I guess I would have to say the most difficult thing for me in writing was organization of thoughts. I was never one who had only a few thoughts. I had enough to go with the paper topics but I sort of merged them together often, so it wasn’t clear essentially what I wanted to do and. [my English professor] helped me to be more organized and get to the point a lot faster than I did originally.

Anissa, too, likes to write and is at ease with the various writing tasks she must do in school. Mentored by a high school English teacher, she still writes for pleasure outside of school and is comfortable with the demands of academic writing. Her papers generally receive high grades although, as mentioned earlier, she occasionally worries about whether she is as good a writer as her grades indicate. She says, “*I mean, I like to think I’m a good writer, but I could be better.*” And, as discussed earlier, she worries that she receives good grades because of her

race rather than because of her skill: *“You know, I know what I do. I mean, I’ve never gotten less than a B+ on a paper, and I’m thinking is this normal?”*

A member of the Class of 2004, she is hoping to attend law school after graduation and wants her teachers to be rigorous in their examination of her papers: *“You know, I’m hoping that this semester my professors will maybe critique my writing a little more. I need to be a good, good writer for law school. I don’t think that I have too many problems, but still—you know I just wonder if that’s what’s going on, because I know when my papers aren’t that good, so I just wonder.”*

Despite her concerns, however, she seems to have been able to do what

Bartholomae talks about when he says that there is “an important distinction to be made between learning history, say, and learning to write as an historian”

(Bartholomae 599). Her honors project for both her major and for her PICA certification, as noted earlier, involved not only designing a plan for an after-school project, but writing the proposal and submitting it both to her academic department and to the New London Housing Authority. Accepted by the New London Housing Authority, which is providing the funding and other necessities such as space and some personnel, the plan is in the first stages of implementation. It would appear that Anissa’s writing has reached a level of development that allows her to speak authoritatively and persuasively both in the academic realm and outside of it, comfortably occupying in her thinking and writing the “position of privilege” Bartholomae discusses.

Five Writers and Their Work

Located at different places in the journey toward strong academic literacy, the five students in the project whose writing I examined in depth—Lara, Maria, Cherisse, Anna, and Nick—show in their writing and their discussion of that writing that they are learning how to invent the university and themselves as they try on different voices, develop an awareness of their audience or audiences, and understand to one degree or another how different writing tasks make different kinds of demands. Two of these students—Cherisse and Maria—are reaching the end of their undergraduate careers, with majors almost completed. The other three declared their majors in the spring of 2003 and must still complete about half of the requirements. Consequently, they have different levels of experience with the discourses of their individual disciplines, and for some the language of those disciplines presents a challenge that may or may not be connected to their experiences as first-generation students.

Moreover, they have different attitudes toward the writing task itself. For example, although the two members of the Class of 2004, Cherisse and Maria, see themselves as comfortable with the vocabulary of their major fields (Latin American studies and sociology-based human relations, respectively), Maria sees writing mainly as a vehicle through which she can convey her understanding of the material she is studying; Cherisse sees it—even when difficult for her—as a generally pleasurable and vital activity, one that she has used all of her life to express her feelings and to discover what she is thinking. Interestingly, however, Maria's writing displays a surer voice than Cherisse's (as will be seen below).

Although both have been successful in courses in their major fields and have received roughly the same kinds of grades on their written work, Cherisse speaks more uneasily about her work, needs more feedback from her professors during the writing itself, and shows the hesitation of someone not fully confident about where she is going when she writes. Similarly, the three members of the Class of 2005, Lara, Anna, and Nick, have varying levels of ease with writing and different attitudes toward language and writing. Lara, for example—a fluent and voluble speaker—is much less easy with the writing task and much less comfortable with the size and adequacy of her vocabulary than either Anna or Nick, both of whom enjoy writing poetry and prose for pleasure as well as writing for classes, and take delight in organizing their ideas and working them through on paper.

The section that follows looks at the writing and words of each of these students in some depth, examining their attempts at academic literacy, that is, at speaking the language of the academy with confidence, strength, and skill.

Lara

Although she received very good grades in high school, Lara says that at first she was

definitely scared to hand in my papers because I didn't feel that my writing was up to everyone else's level. But I've definitely come a long way. I mean I'm not afraid to say what I want, and I make it sound real, not like all—fancy, you know. And I can back up more what I say than I used to. I mean, I'd say something, but I wouldn't back it up or give an example, or have a good conclusion or a good thesis—which I really think is important. I've learned what that is.

Nonetheless, she is still struggling with the requirements of academic

discourse. As her statement that she makes what she says “*sound real, not like all—fancy*” suggests, she is still trying to understand when technical and precise vocabulary moves over into jargon, or unnecessarily “fancy” language. For example, as her written work shows, Lara is only newly becoming aware of the idea of critical pedagogy that informs the teaching in many of her education classes and of the vocabulary it sometimes requires. As she discusses the topic, it is clear from her words that she is not fully comfortable with the language or the idea of this new subject. Speaking about a paper she had to write on critical pedagogy, she says:

I didn't particularly care for that one, because critical pedagogy is kind of hard to understand. You know, you have traditional and progressive, those are more straightforward, you know, traditional is this is how it is, you follow the teacher, standardized tests, you know. And then progressive, there's more discussion, the students are more active. But then critical, the teacher looks at everything from a political point of view and everything is politics in the classroom. It's, it's liberal in a sense, but it's a kind of a Marxist view. You know what I mean, but it's a little more complicated and a lot of people have trouble understanding exactly how you teach a critical classroom, like you can't do it with Math, really, or with Physics, so it's different. But it wasn't too bad, I guess.

Mary Lea suggests that learners need to use both academic texts and their own experience in order to construct knowledge, and this may be particularly true in the case of first-generation students. As discussed earlier, Lara is most comfortable with class discussions that enable her to talk about her personal experiences and history and with writing assignments that call for personal and emotional responses rather than critical analysis and theory. She says, “*if I'm doing a research paper, or having to refer to things, I'm not so secure with that. I'm not a professional in that field.*” Consequently, in her education classes she is happiest with “reaction paper” assignments, and enjoys the informal and personal language she can use in these

papers. In one of her reaction assignments, for example, she says directly, "*Today's discussion and class based on meritocracy, aristocracy and the reality of systems helped me use my own personal experiences and past to, in a way, prove my beliefs on the way it all works.*"

But note the introductory sentences in the following, an essay, written in the second semester of her sophomore year, and requiring her to analyze critically a text about teaching in inner-city schools and to use specialized vocabulary in her discussion: "*Upon the instance of reading Life in Schools, there were many confusions and questions concerning Peter McLaren's ideas and beliefs about education. Initially, his writing seemed too verbose for my liking.*" The stilted phrasing of "*upon the instance of reading*" and her avoidance of the personal in "*there were many confusions and questions concerning. . .*" as well as the use of "*verbose,*" rather than the more familiar "*wordy,*" all reflect her discomfort with this kind of assignment as well as possibly with the material itself.

Bartholomae talks about the difficulties beginning writers have when they have to "appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse," especially when they must also "do this as though. . . a member of the academy" (Bartholomae 590). For a sophomore, as well as a first-generation student coming from a background far removed from the academy, specialized discourse can be particularly challenging, and we see some of that challenge in her discussion of one of the students the paper describes, a twelve-year old bully who is feared by both teachers and students: "*Again, we see the incredible amount of hegemony he has in his relationships with people around him.*" (Emphasis mine.) Although Lara works hard in her analysis

of the book and is finally successful with it, some of her sentences show her attempting to “appropriate. . .specialized discourse” without being fully comfortable in using it. For example, the phrase, “*the incredible amount of hegemony he has in his relationships. . .*” not only mixes levels of diction (“incredible amount of hegemony”) but also misuses the word “hegemony” itself. As another example, note the awkwardness of the following sentence: “*The fact that this school is in an inner-city setting, we find that the social construction of knowledge is very different from that of a suburban setting.*” (Emphasis mine.) Or the following: “*If a student is underprivileged from the start how can meritocracy work and allow for upward social and economic mobility or keep us the same in terms of class?*” (Emphasis mine.)

Lara is clearly trying to manipulate the worlds of which Geisler speaks—the world of the logically connected truths that she finds in the book and in her understanding of what the author is saying, the world of her everyday experience and the author’s, and the world of rhetorical conventions, audience, and voice—and it is difficult for her to do this in a paper requiring her to use vocabulary with which she is both unfamiliar and uncomfortable and ideas that she is only beginning to play with. Although her teacher’s concerns are evident in some of the marginal comments, such as “so what does this mean to you,” “and in your own words?” and “at times unclear that you understand what you are writing,” ultimately Lara’s teacher judges that she has understood the material and that she has written a good analysis, and grades the paper with a “B+.”

In a later interview with that instructor, conducted after final grades had been submitted, the teacher told me that Lara had enormous potential and had come a long way in that class, eager to talk, “gobbling up learning,” and providing a perspective often lacking among the students more typical of the college. But Lara is still figuring out how to strike the right balance between the kinds of writing she will increasingly be called upon to provide and the kinds with which she is most comfortable. Bizzell speaks of the difficulties poor writers have with goal-setting, for example, that arise from “their unfamiliarity with the academic discourse community, combined, perhaps, with such limited experience outside their native discourse communities that they are unaware that there is such a thing as a discourse community with conventions to be mastered.”⁶³

Lara reflects some of this difficulty when she says,

I think that my papers are a lot better when I can be subjective and personal about things because [being subjective] makes them more real. It doesn't make me uncomfortable. It doesn't make me feel that I have to use this word, and I have to sound like very formal and sound good in my paper. I think that . . . personal opinion gives you a chance and it makes it more interesting to the teacher. It makes it different from the other papers that give you generalized, general things. Just general experiences that they've maybe read about, but they wouldn't know about how it is. I think experience matters a lot.

Maria

Much like Lara when she started out as a student, Maria, now a senior, speaks of the importance she initially placed on being able to discuss her own experiences and to place them at the center of her learning and writing. For her, one evidence of her growth has been her ability to understand her own life in more theoretical ways

⁶³ Patricia Bizzell, “‘Contact Zones’ and English Studies,” in *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*, ed. Victor Villanueva, Jr. (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1997): 379. (Hereafter cited in text as Bizzell.)

and to understand that while her experiences are unique and personal, they also fit into larger contexts. She says, for example,

I think I feel more confident in my writing now than I did when I started Conn. When I used to write—I think every time I write you can tell what kind of person I am, no matter what kind of paper it is, but I also felt like, well, I don't have anything to back this up. You can't write about groups in American and not have any hard facts, and I think now, getting to read books and articles and journals, I really can support what I'm talking about, and I think, really, that's the only way I've changed, that now, I have supportive evidence for what I feel.

Unlike Lara, who sees personal experience as at the forefront of her work, Maria believes she has moved away from herself-as-center to become a more balanced writer: “*I think that my writing is still very honest, but it's not as personal as it used to be, which I think is good, because if you can kind of defend yourself without bringing your own personal issues into it, it's a lot more concrete.*”

Yet, although she believes she has improved significantly as a writer, she says she still needs to work on improving her writing:

The most serious problem for me is being concise and just figuring out what I want to say. Sometimes I just go like all around like a big circle before I get to my point. I definitely can't just write a paper the night before and feel comfortable, because I know that I need to improve my writing. Freshman year I went to the Writing Center a lot. I haven't really gone that much since, but this semester I'm required to for my English class, so I know that I'll definitely use it much more. And it's awful because sometimes I don't feel comfortable with people reading my writing. I don't want them to think, like, oh, gosh, she's stupid, or anything like that. Sometimes I have good points and I just don't get them down.

In her response to a question about her expectations for professors' responses to her work, however, she projects some of the same insecurities of other members of the group when she says,

My professors give me more credit than I feel I deserve—ever since high school. In I high school I didn't feel like I earned the good grades in writing

that I received, but all my professors tell me that it is in my head and that they like my writing. I know I have very low confidence in my writing.

But despite some of the weaknesses she perceives in her writing, papers written in her third year of college show that Maria is able to speak with some authority, and is becoming easy with using new ideas and new vocabulary. Her paper on “Critical Race Theory,” for example, is written with clarity and directness. A typical sentence reads, “*Concerned and dismayed that any gains made by civil rights laws of the 1960s were being eroded in the 1970s, Derrick Bell, a lawyer who served as the executive director of an NCAAP [sic] branch, began to create arguments that were designed to change existing laws.*”

Within this paper, as she analyzes Bell’s work, she pauses to explain terms, giving specific examples when useful or showing the context for the term. For example, she states, “*An example of constitutional contradiction is the failure of the government to acknowledge the kidnapping and bondage of Africans in order to build the foundations of this country.*” Or she explains a term operationally: “*Interest convergence, for instance, is used among white workers to maintain control and diminish class issues.*” Although the version I viewed was a rough draft that had not yet been proofread or reviewed by anyone other than Maria, the style, length, and composition of her sentences show a writer in control of her ideas and language, despite her belief that she is not.

A paper for her course, “Urban Sociology,” outlining her plans for the proposal she would later co-write with Anissa for their PICA project, combines her personal experiences with knowledge she has gained from her course work: She begins by saying, “*My quest for justice and equality for all people, especially children, is one*

that has taken me down many paths.” And she continues by describing the evolution of her proposal: *“My initial plan was to design a weekend program for middle school students to experience college life, but this idea did not really seem as though it would make an impact at the scale I desired. My Urban Sociology seminar became a catalyst for brainstorming and analysis of the New London area and its youth.”*

Later she points out that *“Living in a housing complex has allowed me to learn first hand how the negative portrayal of government housing affects self esteem and life expectancies.”* Although these small examples are neither extensive nor brilliant, they show a kind of competence that Lara, for example, has not yet been able to exhibit. Maria has control of her language and states her ideas confidently and directly. She uses her personal experience not as an end but as she might use any other specific example to support an argument or clarify an idea. She appears to have found a way to tell her story as well as to develop the critical literacy skills that will serve her at college and beyond. Maria’s interests in public policy, which she plans to pursue in graduate school, are evident in her discussion, and it is apparent that she has begun to feel comfortable with the language of that field.

Cherisse

As a major in the Department of Latin American Studies, Cherisse, the other senior in the group, must do extensive writing in almost every one of her major courses. Latin American Studies is interdisciplinary, but the majority of the courses are in History, one of the two departments (along with English) that offer the bulk of writing-intensive courses. Consequently, Cherisse has been writing regularly

throughout her college career, building on a base she received in her suburban high school where her social studies courses offered her more writing instruction than she received in her English courses. Although she describes herself as generally reserved in terms of class participation, she says that her writing has improved steadily since she entered the college, largely because she has learned to start papers early, to revise, and to pay attention to the feedback she receives from her instructors. *“I do a lot of revising,”* she says. *“That’s been a characteristic I’ve developed over time. I never used to revise in high school. I would just write the paper and hand it in and it was fine.”* But once she started college, she started to revise her work, and that process has made a difference: *“I try to start my papers earlier now, and I’ve seen definite results in my writing by starting earlier and making sure everything fits, and I’ve seen a difference in my grades as well.”*

Despite her asserted comfort with writing, her remarks about different writing assignments show a student who may not be as at ease as she says she is, and her descriptions of her feelings about writing are similar to those about her experiences as a speaker in class. That is, although, as discussed earlier, she says she participates more than she did in her earlier years, her remarks indicate a kind of ambivalence, and she points out that while she’s deciding whether she wants to raise her hand, the professor often calls on someone else. Her final comment *“I think it’s mostly like, I don’t know, it’s not really like I’m afraid or anything, but—”* is spoken softly, with her voice trailing off while she leaves the thought uncompleted, and her tone belies the words she speaks..

The process described below suggests that she is equally reluctant in writing to assertively move forward with her ideas, and indicates at least a small feeling of unease that one would not expect from a second semester junior when speaking about requirements for a sophomore level course in her major, particularly a student whose grades have generally been in the “B+/A-” range:

I like the idea of meeting with my professor before I start writing the paper, and it's even better if we meet after I've started thinking about what I want to do with the paper and I go in to talk with the professor and they kind of give me feedback. It helps me if they say, "okay, well, if you want to do that topic you should touch on these things" or they give me, like, a question.

Speaking about her Latin American History course, a course in which the instructor provides a good deal of feedback on the writing but asks students to choose their own paper topics, she says, “*It's easier when I have a little more direction than I necessarily have with [some of] these papers. I feel with this [class] the topics are just too open, and it's very difficult to just pull out what I want to write about.*”

She also expresses concerns about the way she approaches her writing assignments, concerns that are evident in her tone and in her hesitations as she attempts to explain how she works::

I think that my writing process is maybe not a good one. I mean, I think it's good for me the way that I write papers, but I don't really have, like I don't sit down and say, okay, I have a paper due in two weeks. Tonight I'm going to brainstorm ideas and write them down. Like I really don't do that. I'm kind of like one night if I think I should start this paper, I should start thinking about it, I'll start it and that might mean starting to write it, or it might mean starting to think about things. Usually, I just, I don't really like to, but I don't really outline what I want to say. I'm sure outlines work out for others, and I probably have—the thing is that I know I've tried it, but it usually doesn't really work out. It's usually more of a hindrance.

These remarks were occasioned by my asking her, without elaboration, to describe her writing process. Despite her saying that the process is “good” for her, she expresses doubt that it is good in some absolute sense and ends somewhat defensively. It seems apparent that at some point in her writing career, Cherisse was told that good writers use outlines and feels a need to justify not using them. When the interviewing process was completed and I told her that I had rarely used outlines in college for short papers (or afterwards, for that matter), she expressed great surprise, with comments indicating that she had trouble believing that an experienced writer did not omit outlines for any but the most insignificant writing tasks.

While Cherisse has more facility operating according to rhetorical conventions than, say, Lara, as she talks she makes clear that she is not entirely confident about the process she uses to write and, although she is reflective about her writing, her remarks suggest that she may suspect that when she does good work, she does it almost by accident—or by flouting rules. Nonetheless, a look at both Cherisse’s remarks about her papers and also at the papers themselves shows that Cherisse approaches her writing carefully and intentionally, even when her final product does not quite meet her goals. For example, about a paper on gender roles in Peru, she says,

I wanted to focus on, um, the idea that although, yes, slave women were treated even worse than slave men, I mean being a slave in general was obviously bad treatment, but I also wanted to focus on that even elite women, the wives of masters were also being treated badly.

This idea translates into her paper as:

Ultimately, men were superior to women regardless of their classification as slave or elite. In the urban slavery system in Lima, Peru, the subordination of elite and slave women is demonstrated through the sexual relations male masters had with their female slaves.

In the margin of her returned paper the instructor wrote: "You seem to suggest that slave men enjoyed superior status to elite Creole women. Surely you don't mean to argue that?" Her teacher's comment indicates that although Cherisse knew what she wanted to say—and said it clearly in our discussion (which took place after she submitted the paper but before her teacher returned it to her)—she did not make the transition from thought to writing as clearly as she would have liked.

Aware of this problem, Cherisse says,

I think part of the problem was that my, the sources that we had to chose from, none of them really talked about that so it was kind of hard to find things that would really support my thesis, which is a big part of our paper. He wants us to just say a thesis and then he wants us to take bits and pieces from our sources that either support the thesis, or if they don't support it, then to prove why we should disregard that. So I feel that I was trying to pull things out of nowhere.

But a look at the paper, in which she did use evidence from her reading, shows that she does support the thesis, even though she is not always able to state that thesis as distinctly as she might. In this paper, Cherisse wants to say that gender roles make high-born women and slave women equally powerless in a patriarchal society, but she has trouble asserting that idea clearly, although she is more able to do so at the end of the paper than at the beginning:

The distinction between the power that men and women had was not one of class, it was a question of gender. No matter what background, occupation, or status a woman held, her gender would be the ultimate determining factor when considering her subordinate position to men.

For Cherisse in this paper, the difficulty in writing seems to stem more from

a lack of confidence that she has the ability to make a convincing argument than from the failure of the argument itself. She says that her argument “*wasn't the focus of a lot of the articles, which is why I think I had such trouble with it, but that was the only thing I could come up with.*” Her words imply that she is uneasy about extrapolating from evidence that does not appear to speak directly to her argument.

A second paper in the same course—discussed after it had been returned by the instructor—presented the same kinds of difficulties, even if to a lesser degree:

I felt a little bit better about [this] paper. I felt better about the sources I was using. I felt they supported my thesis better. [But] I again kind of had trouble. I think I just don't explain things necessarily as much as I'm supposed to—I feel like I didn't necessarily explain well, and I had a hard time wording, like he said, “awkward wording,” like a hard time wording what I was trying to say

Despite Cherisse's sense that the wording is an issue in the paper, examination reveals that over the course of a five-page paper, the teacher referred to the wording only twice, once referring to her introductory sentence—“*Throughout Latin American the gender roles of men and women have been the same from as far back as the colonial eighteenth century in that women have traditionally been subordinate to men*” (emphasis mine)—and once in regard to the word “*dictated*” in the phrase “*the patriarchal norm that dictated her life.*” In the first instance the instructor writes “awkward wording” in the margin; in the second, he circles “dictate” and writes “wrong word.”

Her other concern, that she does not “*explain things*” as much as she should, is perhaps more pressing and more valid: “*I guess that's kind of a problem in general. Like I kind of know what I want to say in my head, but I don't know how to get it out. Like I think I could say it better, but I don't know how to sort of go about doing*

that.” In fact, more than speaking to word choice, the teacher’s comments refer to the need for fuller explanation, or more evidence. And instructor requests for more elaboration are prominent in each of the papers I read.

In the gender roles paper, however, the positive comments far outweigh the negative ones. For example, in the margin next to the last sentence of a paragraph—“*This alternative model to the traditional gender ideal of women being subordinate to men shows that it is possible for men and women to live in societies in Mexico that support gender equality*”—her instructor has written “strong paragraph and solid analysis.” Toward the end of the paper, Cherisse discusses the relationship between her stern and demanding Ecuadorian father and her spirited and independent mother, and the lessons she has learned from her mother’s decision to divorce. She says, finally, that her mother’s leaving her father has demonstrated that “*it is possible for any woman to live on her own without a man ruling over her.*” She concludes the paragraph by asserting, “*From observing my mother, my views of gender roles are very different from the traditional ideal of the subordination of women. This is how gender roles can slowly be changed in society as a whole.*” Although the idea could have been stated more smoothly, she has made her point. Her instructor’s comment—“useful conclusions drawn from your own lived experience”—went unremarked in our interview, and repeatedly during our discussions about her papers, she indicated that she saw the professor’s written comments less as guidepoints or as positive reinforcement, even when that was the case, than as evidence that her own worst fears about her work were correct.

Cherisse's writing, as she notes, needs fuller development, but her failings appear to lie less in the area of writing ability than in her confidence in the strength of her ideas and her ability to use supporting evidence that does not present itself as directly related to her thesis or arguments. Bizzell says that in order to meet the requirements of college writing assignments, poor writers "may sensibly try to enlarge their knowledge by rereading the assignment, seeking clues to the conventions of this new discourse community or those 'ready-made goals' without which no writing gets accomplished" (Bizzell 379). While Cherisse is not a poor writer, as unsophisticated as Lara, or unfamiliar with the discourse community of her major field, she has not yet mastered writing and, like many of her peers, feels more comfortable writing when she has very clear guidelines about what to do. She needs "ready-made goals" whenever she feels that she is not fully in control of the material. For example, she was much more at ease with the Latin American history aspect of the course from which the material examined above was taken than she was with gender issues, one of the main topics discussed. She pointed out in an interview that she had not taken any courses in the Gender and Women's Studies department and felt herself at a disadvantage because of her unfamiliarity with the discipline. Consequently, she found herself unable to assert her ideas confidently, reluctant to extrapolate or generalize from the material she was studying.

Ann E. Berthoff speaks of a "pedagogy of knowing" through which students can "learn to define . . . abstract in the discursive mode . . . [and] generalize" so that they will become able "to 'think abstractly' because they will be learning how

meanings make further meanings possible, how form finds further form.”⁶⁴

Although she wrote these papers as a junior, Cherisse had not yet become fully able to do these things. She says, however, that she grew more confident as a writer as she progressed through her first three years at school and more secure about her ability to handle difficult material. Perhaps her senior year will bring with it an even greater growth.

Anna

Anna, in her sophomore year at the time of our interviews, entered the college with full confidence in her writing abilities and with the intention of pursuing either a dual major in English and psychology or dance, or some other combination of major and minor work in those three subjects. Throughout our discussions, she indicated that dance is her greatest passion, but that she and her parents agreed that it was important for her to attend a liberal arts college, “*kind of like insurance so that if I’m not successful as a dancer. I have something to fall back on.*” Part of this “insurance” would also be to pursue a traditional liberal arts major along with dance. When her grades in English did not live up to her expectations, she began to change her mind about that major. Over the course of her sophomore year, as our interviews continued, it was evident that she was wavering about her major, moving back and forth from a decision to major in psychology and dance with a minor in English to a decision to major in dance, minoring in psychology and “*just taking whatever I want in English,*” despite her love of literature and her love of writing.

⁶⁴ Ann E. Berthoff, “Is Teaching Still Possible?: Writing, Meaning, and Higher Order Reasoning,” in *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*, ed. Victor Villanueva, Jr. (Urbana, IL:NCTE) : 320. (Hereafter cited in text as Berthoff.)

Some of Anna's feelings about English were no doubt affected by a fluke in registration that allowed her, as a second semester freshman, to register for a 400-level seminar course, "Topics in English," in this case a study of Vladimir Nabokov and Salman Rushdie. The 400-level "topics" course is required of all English majors, who normally take it during their junior or senior year, although a few, like Nick, take it in the second semester of their sophomore year. Topics change depending upon who is teaching it and it has a number of writing assignments, including four five-to-seven page papers during the semester and a long (25-page minimum) final paper that also satisfies a senior essay requirement for the major. Taught by a teacher who has a reputation for being particularly demanding, this course created difficulties for Anna in several ways: *"I was very intimidated in that class because it was a senior seminar and I didn't know it was a senior seminar when I signed up for it. And I was intimidated by the 25-page paper because I had never written one before."*

Although she did relatively well on the shorter papers (with grades ranging from "A-" to "B+"), she received a "C+" on the final paper and finished with a final grade of "B." This was the same grade she had received in the introductory course for potential majors, "Techniques of Literary Analysis," one of the two English courses she took in her freshman year. Both grades were a demoralizing surprise to her after her high school English courses in which, as noted earlier, she had never received a final grade lower than "A." In addition to her own feelings about the grades, she had to deal with her father, who could not understand *"why he was paying so much money for [her] to come here, if [she] wasn't going to get all 'A's'"*

Those grades, her father's reaction, and the difficulties she had in the Nabokov/Rushdie seminar set up a chain of feelings that made her question not only her desire to major in English but also her ability to do well in that major, so that she declared dance as her major field—despite her father's objections—discarding her other potential choice, even though her psychology grades were strong. Nonetheless, along with her dance courses, she continues to take courses in both English and psychology, and in the one English course she took in her second semester of sophomore year, a survey of British literature from medieval to modern times, she received an "A-."

Anna is more reflective and self-conscious about her writing process than Lara, Cherisse, or Maria—perhaps for the same reasons that she considered majoring in English in the first place: a love of language and of the particular tasks involving writing literary criticism. She says,

My usual process for writing a paper is I usually go through the material that I have to work with, if it's a book or comparing two books, I'll read them completely and I usually skim, well, I don't know, I usually think of a thesis and then skim over my materials again and then take out anything that I feel supports my thesis or anything I can tie together or use and I start from there, just writing.

Unlike Cherisse, whose approach to outlines (or the lack of them) appears slightly worried and somewhat defensive, Anna is assertive when she talks about how she organizes her work: "*I don't really organize until I have a chunk of writing. I don't usually use an outline, although I did use one for the 25 page paper because I'd never written one that long before. I don't like using outlines.*" She speaks with some confidence about how she goes about writing, illustrating her ability to adapt rules flexibly to her needs:

I think what I've been doing with writing is kind of a combination of my own thing and something I learned in sixth grade, or maybe it was in fifth grade. My teacher told us when we were doing research papers to look through our materials and then write down anything we wanted to use on index cards, and then separately write down any thoughts that we wanted to include on index cards and then organize the index cards, and that's your research paper. So I still use that. I don't do that with the index cards but I think that's kind of what I'm doing when I take out the ideas and I write them down on the computer.

Bizzell discusses George Dillon's argument that "it is the sense of the whole project that most stimulates a writer's thinking and guides her language use," (Bizzell 375), and a look at various papers Anna has written indicates that she spends a good deal of time thinking through the whole project. For example, for what will turn out to be a seven-page paper on a section of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, for the senior seminar discussed above, Anna shows me approximately ten pages of rough notes, including handwritten jottings and notes she has typed on her computer, along with several drafts of the paper itself.

Although I will not reproduce in their entirety the notes she has given me, a description of her process makes clear her movement from getting her thoughts on paper to the final version that she submits to her instructor. Her notes include a page of brief comments and questions, e.g., "*Are Shade and Kinbote one person?*" "*Who invented who? And why, for what purpose?*" "*Isolate poem's italics—see what they have in common*"; "*Distinguish between what he chooses to explain and what he simply ignores and what he morphs.*" In the notes she has written on her computer, it is clear that she has begun to turn the rough notes into a writing plan. She starts with questions that indicate how she will approach her topic and then proceeds to write out two paragraphs. Handwritten notes in the margins indicate

that she will switch the order of the paragraphs when she begins to write the paper. The paragraph that initially comes first is a more complete version of the kinds of jottings found in her handwritten notes. An excerpt reads, "*The difference in their writing styles. Subjectivity versus single mindedness. Careful editing and requesting alert readers, 'retake,' doesn't even bother to correct his mistakes, thinks his current opinion can change facts stated in the past (like what he's trying to do to Shade's poem in general).*" Further along on the page she writes, "*want to discuss different perceptions of reality. Mention stuff about senses and the name play shade, grey, letter switching with botkin, kinbote, and knife point about poking holes in the poem.*"

A few sentences from the first draft of her paper show how the rough notes make their way into coherent prose. First, her original draft:

This leads to the matter of subjectivity within "Pale Fire." The poem's first Canto appears dedicated to the subjectivity of sensory perception. In it, Shade suggests several alternate ways of perceiving things such as nature and the passage of time.

Handwritten changes in the typed rough draft cross out some words and add others, so that the amended first draft of these sentences reads, "*This clearly leads to the matter of subjectivity. P.F.'s first Canto includes significant contemplation on the subjectivity of sensory perception. Shade suggests several alternative ways of perceiving things such as nature and the passage of time.*" The final version reads almost the same as the amended draft, but Anna continues to make changes, changing her mind once again about the word "*clearly,*" and eliminating it from this version, spelling out the poem's title, and replacing the phrase "*perceiving things such as nature and the passage of time*" with the tighter, more concrete, "*perceiving*

one's surroundings and the passage of time." The final version, then, reads: "*This leads to the matter of subjectivity. 'Pale Fire's' first Canto includes significant contemplation on the subjectivity of sensory perception. Shade suggests several alternative ways of perceiving one's surroundings and the passage of time.* Both the rough draft and the final version show throughout Anna's careful consideration of her ideas and a fairly authoritative use of language, as well as a general tightening of her writing as she moves from draft to draft, eliminating superfluous words and substituting more precise language for vague or general ideas.

Anna's writing for other courses shows the same meticulous reworking of ideas from notes to final version. For example, a paper written for her survey of English literature course compares two Donne poems and shows the same mixture of jottings, handwritten and typed notes and drafts until she reaches a version that "sounds right" to her. As an example, she plays with several different openers for the paper, writing notes to herself such as, "*need a stronger opener,*" or "*too long an opening sentence, break it up.*" Her first version reads:

"The Flea" and "The Ecstasy" are two examples of John Donne's romantic poetry. They are both titled after the complex conceit that the speaker of each respective poem uses as an expression of his desire for sexual union with the woman to whom he speaks within the context of the poem.

A second version reads:

John Donne's poems "The Flea" and "The Ecstasy" are very similar on a superficial level. That is, in each of the two poems, Donne writes about his desire for sexual union with a woman to whom he speaks and tries to persuade, within the context of the poem.

But her marginal comments to herself— "*need a stronger opener*" and

“*grammatically messy*”—indicate that this is not yet the final version. She then moves to:

“The Flea” and “The Ecstasy” are two examples of John Donne’s romantic poetry. In them, he expresses his desire for sexual union through the voice of a speaker who employs a particularly complex metaphor (indicated in these cases by each of the poem’s titles), in order to lure a woman into bed.

Unlike Cherisse, whose lack of confidence can stymie her and keep her from writing with the authority that her ideas should allow, Anna is able to play with the discourse of her field, and like Bartholomae’s students, she is “invented by” the language of literary criticism as she “[approximates] the language of a literary critic” (Bartholomae 600). Although she sometimes has trouble tying ideas together under a forceful thesis, her teachers repeatedly comment on the excellence of her ideas and her promise as a writer. (Keep in mind that the papers I examined were all written in her sophomore year.) Away in Spain for her junior semester, Anna will not be taking English classes again until she returns—if then. But it is clear from the writing she has done so far that difficulties with academic literacy affect her to a lesser degree than they do many of her peers in this study.

Nick

The final student in this group of five, Nick—like Anna a sophomore when I conducted his interview—is a declared English major and has been since he entered the college. Like almost all the others in this study, he grew up in a household with few books, although he describes himself as having great curiosity that led him naturally into loving reading as he entered school. His athletic talent allowed him to receive a scholarship to Exeter Academy, an elite preparatory school, where he says

that for the first two years his grades were below average, but where he learned both the motivation and the skills he would need to excel in college:

I was surrounded by motivated students, by faculty member dorm heads, so they were surrogate parents and they were very smart people, so I felt like it helped me catch up a little bit. [But] whereas other students were able to get ahead, I felt like I was catching up—Then a huge jump in my senior year, from “B” to “A.” And I didn’t take the senior slide, I didn’t take the easy courses, I kept going because I realized—this is serious, and I really like to read and I really like to write, and I’m going to try to get as much out of Exeter during these last two terms as possible, and that’s the attitude I came into Conn with. And I sustained it. I think I got into Conn and I just finally looked around and was “why am I idolizing these people around me? They’re not any smarter and they don’t work harder, they just have different strengths.”

Although that confidence falters at times, he, more than any of the other students in the group—in his writing and in his class performance—continues to take risks, to ask questions and make comments without worrying about exposing his ignorance or appearing foolish. Unlike Anna, whose foray into a senior seminar was intimidating and may have been a factor in her turning away from selecting English as a major, Nick says, he’s “*taken two senior seminars . . . the Tolstoy course [in English] in the Russian department, and now . . . the Rushdie and Nabokov course [the one Anna took as a first-year student]. I’m telling you I’m going to try to take as many as I can because I just like the classroom dynamics so much better.*”

Also more than any of the other students in the group—including Anna, whose approach to writing most resembles his—Nick has thought extensively about his writing process, approaching it intentionally, usually writing drafts (and sometimes final versions) that are longer than required. Part of the excess length stems from

Nick's concern about developing his ideas completely and supporting them adequately with quotations and other evidence from his texts:

I just don't want to assume, I mean I know my professor knows what I mean when I say, "well, Beowulf does this." But my paper I feel like should stand up to the person, you know, if it was found in Paris and the person knew nothing about Chaucer, my paper would tell them everything about Chaucer. It should stand on its own, so for that reason, I don't write for my professor, but I write the paper the way I think it should be written.

I suspect part of the length issue comes also from Nick's love of language.

Although several of the students in the study (notably Lara, Maria, and Xavier, and Cassandra) were enthusiastic speakers, filling an entire tape in one session, Nick seemed to cram two hours worth of discussion into every hour-long interview we had. As I noted earlier, he would sometimes use the wrong word or the almost-right word, sometimes without realizing what he had done as he moved rapidly to the next idea he wanted to express. But more often he would recognize his mistake, laugh at it, reach for the right word and then move on. Just as in speaking, his interest in language-as-language is an important part of his process. In one interview he says,

My worry about vocabulary is, well, sometimes I feel like I'm using a word too often, so I'll go through the thesaurus and switch it up. But thesauruses aren't dictionaries, and sometimes there are variations, so I worry about it. I worry about using a word for the sake of using a word. Sometimes I do that. Other times, I'm just, I, like I said before I can be lazy and just make a stupid mistake about "affect" and "effect" or "throne" and "thrown," which I know the difference, and I get the comment on the paper, "there's a difference between these," and it's the fifth time I've heard the comment.

But despite his worry about using a word for the sake of using a word, one

gets the sense that he wants to use as many words as he can—albeit correctly. In a subsequent interview, he returned to the idea of language and the online thesaurus, saying,

Sometimes I think there's a lot of research that could be done on the average college student's vocabulary. If you look, a lot of that vocabulary is just language that you can find in the thesaurus on the right-click on the computer screen. Okay, what's another word for "sick," and then it will come up with all these things, but not all of them fit into the sentence. There's something to be said about a coherent diction throughout the entire paper, as well. So even if the word is right and it doesn't fit in with about 90 percent of the paper you should try to find something that does.

It's funny, you type in certain words, and they'll give you, like, six words. Like I'll use "inherent," "innate," "tacit," and then just because I've said "inherent" six times—But I'm trying to get away from that. When I write a paper, I write with the OED online open, so that when I'm using a word, I get every meaning of it, and it also gives its origin, and with its origin it gives you other words you might want to use. It takes a bit more time but it's worth it and I don't feel like I'm recycling so much.

What I find most interesting about Nick and his writing is that, without realizing it, he is an echo of Bartholomae's ideas about learning how to write academic discourse. Bartholomae says his students' "papers don't begin with a moment of insight, a 'by God' moment that is outside of language. They begin with a moment of appropriation, a moment when they can offer up a sentence that is not theirs as though it were their own" (Bartholomae 600). Nick says, without being aware of Bartholomae and with perhaps an unspoken concern about unwitting plagiarism,

I'm a mimicker to some extent before I'm a creator. . . . When I read criticism I look, and I love reading the opening paragraph of criticism to see how I could start a paper, like sentence structure, with like eight sentences and there are two subject verbs and a gerund, and, like I pay attention to that. . . . I'm interested in that because I like to write, and I'd like to write criticism someday if I ever can get to that level. . . . I sort of, I think I just have a general interest in that so that some of, some of my comments, um, some of my writing style is I think definitely just imitation almost?

I remember last year at the beginning of the year, I read a lot of Harold Bloom and I was writing with his sort of over-exaggerations? And I started getting a lot of comments on that, and I went back and I said, "you know what? He overexaggerates, so I've got to stop doing that, so then I stopped reading a critic just like I would read an author, so I think it's dangerous to take someone's opinion like that. It's just someone's opinion. But as far as writing style, I can see how, at this point, I've read a wide array of critics, so I can't say who I'm necessarily like, but I think I'm influenced by that.

But it may be Nick's imitation of tone and style that help to make him as successful a writer as he is. Although he is only a sophomore, some of his work has the maturity of an older student. Here, for example, is what he says about his intent for a paper on Beowulf (written for a sophomore-level survey course required of all English majors):

[In my first paper] I compared the pagan culture portrayed in Beowulf to the poet's evident Christianity and about how they interact and about how the poet sort of put himself on—What I did was I just went through and I found Biblical allusions or things that united Beowulf with Christ. I found some parallels, but I never wanted to go so far as to say that Beowulf was a Christ figure, just that those values that Christian society have for, or that derive from Christ were also sort of put onto Beowulf. So I did that and then I read the Book of Revelations, just to, because I'd never read it and that depiction of the Messiah is different than the rest of the texts, so I wanted to make sure that I had a full understanding.

I had some sense that the author was at least conscious of the Old Testament God, because a vast majority of the allusions are to the Old Testament, and that would fit the pagan world Beowulf lived in, one of judgment, but at the same time there were a compelling amount of New Testament references.

Nick goes on at some length to talk about how his ideas developed and how he decided to structure the paper. He expresses both assurance and worry when we says, *"I'm absolutely confident in the idea and in my organization of my argument, but I have insecurities about my language and general punctuation. That is definitely my weakness."* Note, however, the sophistication of the ideas and expression in the final version of the first paragraph of the paper:

The extent to which a people have changed is most fully realized when a man of one epoch endeavors to take down the stories of another. As a result, Beowulf can be read not only as a heroic narrative relating the adventures of a Scandinavian prince but also as an account of the predominant moral atmosphere at the time it was recorded The world of Beowulf is racked [sic] with conflict At the same time this pagan Germanic world is delivered by way of a displaced Christian poet informed by a society concerned more with the soul's destiny in the afterlife than with the accretion of heroic deeds and fame-gaining exploits. To be sure, the Beowulf poet amplifies the reader's sense of tension by imbuing Beowulf and the pagan society he represents with his own Christian beliefs.

While the “to be sure” and the “amplifies the reader's sense of tension” may be examples of Nick's taking on a voice not quite his own (compare with the language of his interviews, especially when he is not talking about literature), these phrases, like the rest of this paper, show also a student being invented by the discourse of his chosen field.

An examination of Nick's papers for a variety of courses, both in the English department of his major and in other disciplines, shows that, just as Anna does, Nick goes through multiple kinds of preparation for his writing as well as multiple drafts. A paper on *Anna Karenina* is preceded by lengthy notes to himself in which he plays with the notion of how Tolstoy uses “hands as referential symbols of character,” listing the many different characters and Tolstoy's descriptions of their hands. Included also in boldface type are sentences that Nick is obviously considering making part of the paper. Then, as his notes go on, brief statements and lists evolve into paragraphs that will be lifted verbatim for the paper, so that the “note” becomes a rough draft, with parenthetical questions such as “(split paragraph here?)” Nick also plays with a possible thesis:

Vital to understanding Tolstoy's message in Anna Karenina is Levin's vision of truth—the necessity of a life lived according to the concepts of Christian

goodness—which is revealed through the heightened sensation and intense intimacy of birth and death.

In the paper, he connects the ideas stated in his thesis to his examination of the role of hands when he states in his first paragraph, once again using that critical catch-phrase, “*to be sure*”:

To be sure it is this realization of feeling over calculation that Levin understands while holding the hot hands of his beloved wife shortly after she bears their child. Certainly, it is the be-humbling feeling Levin experiences while grasping the hand of his dying brother—in these situations Levin looks through the mysterious windows of life and death and glimpses truth.

Following these sentence, comes the statement of thesis, changed from the rough notes only in an expansion of the last part of the sentence: “. . . *which is revealed during the heightened sensations of birth and death and the intense intimate state propagated by human contact symbolized by hands.*”

Throughout his writing, Nick is conscious of himself as a writer. In a note to his teacher that accompanies one paper, he says “This paper is a risk for me. I’ve never tried this voice before.” Although Nick is no more experienced a writer in some senses than the other members of the group, both the larger group of twelve and the smaller group of five whose papers have been examined in some depth, and in fact is earlier in his college career than several of them, he is a more assured writer, both understanding and having the ability to take the risks that can move writing from the competent to the excellent.

Summary

An examination of their writing shows that all of these students play with the discourse of the field in which they are writing, but both Nick and Anna show more skill at the game than any of the others. Lara is passionate about telling the story of

what she has experienced in her life and has chosen a field (education) the coursework of which allows her at this moment in her academic career to make close links between her experiences and her academic learning. But she writes tentatively, with a mistrust of formal vocabulary and a fear that somehow that technical vocabulary will mask the authenticity of the feeling and experience that permeate her writing. She is at a stage in her life and academic development in which her life experiences still hold the most central place. In some sense, she sees her coursework, when possible, as a backdrop to that life. Maria, like Lara, has chosen a field that enables her to make important connections between her life and cultural experiences and her academic work. But she has found that she understands her experiences better having a critical vocabulary and disciplinary lens through which to examine those experiences. As she writes, the experiences of her life become concrete examples of the theoretical framework she has developed.

Similarly, Cherisse, choosing Latin American studies as a major and doing much of her writing in this area, begins from the experiences of her own life and Latina background. But while she is able to apply a critical intelligence to the intellectual understanding and expression of the material of her field, she has not truly mastered the discourse of the academy, nor at this point in her life is she able to practice using the voices of the academy in order to make them her own. A lack of confidence about her ideas interferes with her ability to express them with the authority she needs, and although her ideas are valid, she expresses them in language and style that do not match the level of her thinking.

In fact, of the five students whose papers I examined, Anna and Nick show the most sophistication in their writing overall, in their vocabulary level, and their ease at using the technical language of the field, in this case, literary criticism, as well as in the tone and rhythms of their sentences. Each is skilled to a greater degree than any of the other three students in the inventing of self and the understanding of the needs of the academic discourse community that they have entered. At the same time, each of these five students is a competent writer, able to compare successfully to other writers and learners at this rigorous school. Each of the five students, that is, has achieved a sufficient level of academic literacy to enable them to thrive at this school, as have most of the other students in this study. The costs and levels of achievement have differed, however, and the concluding section of this paper will focus on what those costs and achievements have been as well as offering suggestions for further research on the academic literacy of first-generation students at elite and rigorous colleges and universities, and pointing to issues of particular importance to teachers of writing.

CHAPTER 8: FINDINGS, DISCUSSION, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Introduction

The twelve students whose portraits are presented in this paper have in common that they are of the first-generation in their family to attend college. In all but one instance, they are not only of the first generation, they are also the first ever, and in five instances, they are the first to receive a high school diploma. They differ from one another in several ways. The group includes:

- men and women,
- students of color and Caucasians,
- students of different ethnicities,
- students who have attended inner-city public schools and charter schools, private boarding and day schools, and suburban public high schools.

Moreover, these students are at different levels of academic experience, including among them representatives from all classes but the first-year. All were admitted under the regular admission standards of a highly selective college, that is, one that accepts only a third of its applicants, for, as noted earlier, this college does not have special admission standards for any group or class of students. Nor does it provide remedial services or a special counseling office or programmatic opportunities for students who differ in academic, personal, or financial background from the majority of students.

Review of the problem

Although the faculty and staff of this school, as at many of its type, provide close personal attention to students, the lack of special provisions for students who do not meet the general profile underscores the assumption that any student who is admitted to this institution is able to meet its academic and social demands without special programs or provisions. Thus, among the questions I wished to examine when I began was whether, in fact, first generation students at this college are able not only to survive but also thrive in this kind of institution. And if these students are able to survive and thrive, what combination of personal and institutional attributes helps them to do so? That is, as noted earlier, most—although not all—of the literature dealing with first-generation students, examines these students as they live and study in two-year colleges and large universities. The literature shows that first generation students tend to be students of color (McDonough; Pascarella and Terenzini; Richardson and Skinner; T-Bui; Ting; Terenzini et al., “Characteristics”) and from low socioeconomic status backgrounds (Cross; T-Bui; Terenzini et al., “Characteristics”).

But although traditional students with similar racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (that is, students from racial and ethnic minorities, with low socioeconomic status) may not be in the majority at schools such as those providing the background for much of the existing research, neither are they found in such small numbers as they are at elite, predominantly white institutions, where the median income is well above the poverty level. That is, much of the previous research has been conducted at very different kinds of institutions. Most first-

generation students here differ strongly from the majority of students—who come from families with a history of attendance at college, some of them at similar elite institutions, and who for the most part come from more affluent and more privileged backgrounds, backgrounds that usually prepare them well for the intellectual and social milieu they are about to encounter. Thus traditional students bring with them not only the academic preparation they will need to meet the demands of their classes but also implicit understandings about what college will be like—what it means to choose a major or think about an internship or make full use of the resources the school provides, as well as a sense of privilege and entitlement to the benefits such a college can provide.

Along with the questions of what would help them to flourish in this atmosphere I had further questions about whether first-generation students brought with them specific attitudes and habits of mind that might affect how they connected to the college and that might also be unrecognized by them and the institution. For example, the research shows that first-generation students lead more stressful lives than traditional students, with greater worries about failing to succeed academically or losing financial aid (T-Bui; York-Anderson and Bowman). Since most first-generation students at Connecticut College receive relatively generous financial aid packages, one might assume that financial issues would not particularly trouble first-generation students here. Similarly, if the Office of Admission selected them one might also assume that they would not worry unduly about their ability to succeed academically. But should they be like first-generation students at other schools, these concerns might still exist, although there was likelihood that the

institution—their teachers and faculty advisers specifically--would not recognize these stresses.

And, finally, I wanted to look at these students in the context of their literacy practices, meaning not only their reading and writing practices but also related issues that might have some effect on how they performed as students. And I wanted to present them largely through their own words and perceptions. Earlier studies show that first-generation students are more academically at risk than their traditional peers (Terenzini et al., “Characteristics”) and had lower self-esteem than traditional peers (MacGregor et al.). Were these students satisfied with their academic preparation? Did they feel ready for the academic work they would be required to do? Did they “fit in” and feel comfortable at the college and in their classes, as though they really had a right to be at this school and belonged there? And because writing is so integral a part of the academic experience at this kind of college, I also wanted to examine what their specific literacy practices were and how they helped or hindered these first-generation students in their academic lives. And at the close of my examination of these questions, I wished to know what information my study might offer to point the way to further research that would be useful and relevant for faculty in general but particularly for teachers of writing.

Academic Literacy and Writing

Roz Ivaniç tells us that “the notion of literacy practices is particularly relevant to the study of identity in academic writing”(Ivaniç 68) and especially to first-generation students, who are engaging in experiences foreign to their background and who, like all college students, are in the process of shaping themselves,

becoming. At Connecticut College, particularly because writing is so central to their academic experience, the writing first-generation and other, more traditional, students engage in not only reflects who they are but also helps shape the person each will become. But the issue is not a simple one. First-generation students, no matter where they attend college, are always forging a new path. Without the experiences of their family to guide them, they have one less source of advice than their traditional college-attending peers do when it comes to course choice, decision about a major, decision about tying that major to a career.

And in a sense, these are the easy issues. The sense of entitlement that helps many students negotiate their academic path does not come as a matter of course to these students. For many first-generation students familiarity with academic discourse—and even what one might call the grammar of daily life at the institution—is hard won. Depending on their high schools and overall pre-college academic experiences, they may find themselves less knowledgeable about the kinds of academic demands they will meet, less able to handle some of the routine tasks they will do in their classes, or even really to understand some of the accepted vocabulary of their classrooms. At a highly selective college, such as the one that provides the background for this study, first-generation students find themselves a very distinct minority. If, as noted earlier, they are also students of color, or come from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, their differences are even more pronounced.

Literacy practices become quite important in this regard, for, as Penrose points out in her paraphrase of in Bartholomae, “Because literary practices enact the values

and customs of a community, they represent a critical site of vulnerability for those who are uncertain of their membership. It is in written texts that a newcomer's outsider status is most clearly and tangibly exposed" (Penrose 457). A newcomer may reveal his or her "outsider status" in many ways, for example, through approach to subject matter, through infelicities of language, or through mechanical or other kinds of errors that reveal an unfamiliarity with important rules of grammar and punctuation by which one shows oneself to be a careful writer. Thus, I was interested in looking at the texts these students wrote to see if their differences from their traditional student peers were made evident in their academic writing.

Findings and Discussion

The Students

As I interviewed these students and examined their work, I discovered much about them that helped me to answer my questions—at least in a limited way—and also enabled me to make some tentative surmises about the sources of their success and of their challenges. And while I discovered that in some ways they fit the profiles of first-generation students that were developed through other research, in other ways they also did not. To begin with, except for what one might infer from reading personal accounts, such as that of Rodriguez or Rose, or some of the few ethnographic studies (Chiseri-Strater; Sternglass; Sewell, "Encountering Writing"), there is little in the scholarly literature that talks of the intangible qualities that help first-generation students reach success in challenging and unfamiliar territories.

Rose points out that we need to find a way "to determine and honor the beliefs and stories, enthusiasms and apprehensions that students reveal" (Rose 236). And

although not directly connected to the focus of this study, the strength and resiliency of these students have helped them be survivors and in some sense have allowed them to tackle and begin to conquer the challenges presented by this new environment.

Early Home Life

Very little of the literature speaks of the early experiences that might have affected the academic progress of first-generation students. But even in this small group there were some notable elements that seemed to have helped shape their life's direction, especially in terms of how these students were able to start on a path that would lead to a rigorous educational environment. These are particularly obvious in looking at the students who come from extremely low socioeconomic status backgrounds and often have had tumultuous family lives as well. A breakdown of their homelike shows that of the group of twelve:

- Six grew up in two-parent households where at least one and sometimes both parents were regularly employed, although generally at blue-collar or manual-labor jobs.
- Three of the students grew up with a single parent and one or more grandparents.
- From the age of ten, until she entered college at eighteen, one was a ward of the State, living in a succession of foster homes.
- Two grew up on one-parent households, with one or more siblings; of these, one was sent to live with a sibling in another city once she entered high school.

- The mothers of two of the females and the father of one of the males have been imprisoned for terms ranging from several months to five years. One of these is currently serving a prison term.
- Seven grew up in urban, impoverished neighborhoods, where crimes ranging from drug-dealing to drive-by shootings were regular occurrences.

As may be inferred from the last statistic, the first important issue for some of these students was their survival—a larger question than where or whether they would eventually attend college. That is, seven of the twelve students grew up not only in relatively poor families but also in troubled neighborhoods where there were any number of hazards they would face in their daily lives. Four of these students talk of not being allowed to play in their neighborhoods or socialize out on the street, even when they were past early childhood. Thus, while their childhoods were sometimes lonely, they were as safe as their parents could make them. They talk also of being enrolled by their parents in after-school programs as a means of keeping them relatively safe, and some of these students credit those programs with fostering an interest in staying in school.

In addition to rigorously guarding their children's safety, the parents of these students—despite their own lack of education—worked to ensure that they would go to charter schools, parochial schools, or out-of-the-neighborhood public schools, and in one case, school in another, presumably safer, city, assuming that such schools would provide a better foundation for later educational experiences. As a result, these students not only survived but also reached young adulthood without

the kinds of problems that plagued many of their neighborhood peers. They were able to complete high school with strong academic records and with a vision of the future that included not only college but also perhaps graduate or professional school after college graduation.

Early Literacy Experiences

My questions about their early literacy experiences yielded some other important details that helped create the portraits of these students. I had wondered whether these early experiences had fostered a love of reading and learning that might have started them on a path that would lead them ultimately toward higher education. I found that while only half of the students in the group recalled having books around as they were growing up, nine of the twelve have strong memories of being read to as a young child or being encouraged to read through regular trips to the library, especially as they grew older. Despite—or perhaps because of—their lack of education, almost all of the parents of these students, especially their mothers, seemed to recognize that literacy skills were important to their children and encouraged these skills from a very early age.

Support for Academic Aspirations

As the research indicates, first-generation students do not receive the kind of academic support from their families that traditional students generally receive (London, “Breaking Away”; London, *First-Generation*; Terenzini et al., “Characteristics”; York-Anderson and Bowman). This lack of support is another potentially “hidden” area that not only separates these two groups but could also have an effect on the academic success of the first-generation student who lacks an

important source of encouragement and advice. Whereas half of the students in the group did receive familial encouragement to continue with their education past high school, the other half did not. Three, for example, had no contact with their father and had mothers who were not present in their lives for one reason or another as they entered high school. At least three had parents who were either unable to advise them about the next step or showed little interest in or enthusiasm for their children's higher education aspirations.

Those students are perhaps the most interesting of this small group, since their own will seems to have brought them as far as they have come educationally.

Although almost all of the students in the group of twelve did their own research about attending college and made decisions about what they would do pretty much on their own, six of these students especially made decisions about college without parental help:

- Three of them found mentors, either people they met outside of their regular classroom experiences or a favorite teacher who encouraged them to pursue their interests and gave them the confidence to apply to a rigorous college, ensuring them that they had the ability to succeed there.
- One student joined the Boys' and Girls' Club because he had heard that the club gave scholarships to prep schools and he wanted to attend high school in such an environment.

- One student, moving from foster home to foster home, decided in the ninth grade that she would change the history of her family and be the first to attend college.

Because the answer depends on ineffable qualities or too many variables to control, it may be impossible to discover what provides the strength of will and the belief in one's own future that can propel a student into a good high school program or toward a selective college that lies far from home neighborhoods and daily experience. But it is clear that these students were able to discover, apply, and gain admission to a rigorous, elite institution—one that was almost literally a foreign territory.

High School Preparation

The high school experiences of these students differentiated them from one another and also distinguished several of them from some of the students who figured into earlier research, as reported earlier. That is, because this is a rigorous college, entering students are expected to meet certain minimum requirements in terms of their high school preparation and academic records. None of these students, for example, is a basic writer, although several felt that they were not adequately prepared for college writing.

Those most satisfied with their preparation, as might be expected, were those who had attended rigorous high schools:

- Five of these satisfied students attended private schools, two of them residential.
- Another attended only parochial schools before coming to college.

- One attended parochial schools until high school when she went to a private day school.
- One attended a private day school that offered an International Baccalaureate program.

All of these students spoke of being required to write regularly and receiving specific instruction in writing. Although one of these students found that his high school writing classes were “boring” and mechanical, he nonetheless believed that he had learned the basic skills he would need to survive in college. But despite feeling that he had received an adequate high school education, he stated that he did not really learn to write until he was a sophomore in college. His college transcript indicates that he has done reasonably well in his writing courses at the college, but not as well as many of his peers, although his oral literacy skills are strong.

The transcripts of the other students who attended private or parochial high schools reveal that two, one who went to a highly regarded* boarding school and the other to a Catholic high school, have had excellent academic records, including their work in courses requiring major writing activity. One of the other two was directed to withdraw from the college at the end of his sophomore year because of poor grades but, as noted earlier, according to his teachers, his failing grades resulted from a failure to submit work rather than poor grades on the work itself, so it is difficult to determine the quality of his written work. The other student who attended private school, a well-regarded day school* in New York City, has received

* According to the College Office of Admission.

* According to the college’s Office of Admission.

high grades in her writing courses, indicating proficiency in writing. These students, then, seem to be able to perform at the same level as their traditional peers.

Of the remaining seven students,

- two attended small suburban high schools where they wrote regularly and received individual attention on their work;
- three students attend public high schools in Boston, Bridgeport, and New London, respectively;
- two attended specialized public high schools in New York City, one a charter school and one a school devoted to the performing arts, but also providing an excellent general education.*

Of the students who attended the small suburban schools, one believed that she “got away” with a lot, even though she received high grades in English, because her teacher was well aware of her difficult home situation and, so, allowed her to submit assignments late or not submit them at all. Both of these students are competent writers, but neither has received extremely high grades in writing courses at the college. Two of the students—one who attended a public high school in Boston, and the other who attended the charter school in New York City—believed that they received inadequate preparation for writing in their English classes. One of these students, with the help of a mentor and some self-tutoring, was able to do excellent work in her first-year English course, but overall her writing grades have been average. The other, who received a little guidance from her counselor, fared slightly less well, receiving first-year college grades that were considerably lower than those of her peers. For both of these students, grades improved as they progressed

through school, so that in their junior year, each had close to a straight “A” average. The other three students were generally satisfied with their high school preparation, although one speaks of her extreme slowness in writing and reading, and says that her high school English teacher predicted that she would not succeed in college. That student, a zoology major has generally avoided English classes, although she has received grades of “B” in all classes requiring writing as a major element of the course. The other two students have received decent, although not spectacular, grades in writing courses.

In general all of these students have performed reasonably well in their writing courses, but for some, their early experiences in college indicate that they may have needed more help than they initially received. The degree to which their writing problems were related to their high school preparation may have gone unrecognized by their instructors who were generally unaware of their academic background.

Academic Success

Penrose points out that there are “theoretical predictions that [first-generation] students, who are less likely to have been exposed to academic culture in the home, will be less familiar with academic discourse than [continuing generation] students when they enter college.” But she also notes that “the college data indicate. . .that this early disadvantage had no observable effect on academic performance generally or on literacy performance in the first year” (Penrose 355). Certainly this limited sample supports previous findings.

With the exception of the student who was directed to withdraw, the participants in the study have had satisfactory academic records, showing marked

progress as they have advanced through their college experience. Only three, however, two members of the Class of 2005 and one of the Class of 2003, achieved high honors (3.7 or above) for the majority of their semesters in college. The other nine students have had averages of slightly below or above 3.0, largely because of their initial academic experiences in their first two semesters. Because the college does not rank its students, it is hard to know exactly how these nine compare to the rest of their peers, but it is clear that they are not in the very top layer of students, as are the other three. Thus while almost these first-generation students show competence, they are not academic superstars. On the other hand, if they continue to work at their current level of performance, these students will graduate with satisfactory to excellent academic records, despite backgrounds that differ significantly from those of their traditional peers.

Academic Literacies

Oral Literacy

Finally, in looking at the literacy experiences of these students—especially writing and related classroom activities such as oral participation—other important issues begin to emerge. For example while all of these students but one met the rigorous demands of their classes, almost half of them indicated in one way or another that they did not speak in class unless they were forced to do so. Obviously, natural reserve can keep students from speaking up in class, but observation of some of the students in the project in social situations, especially among their close friends, showed that outside of class they were lively and talkative. Since none of these students was in his or her first-year, it was unlikely that they were still feeling

the awkwardness of being new to the college and that unfamiliarity with college work was impeding their class participation. Instead, as our interviews progressed it became obvious—through both their words and their body language—that what kept them from speaking in class was a deep-seated sense of inadequacy, the belief that they were not as smart as their classmates, or, as two students put it, the feeling that they were admitted to the college through some sort of mistake.

In this sense, the students in this project supported earlier findings that showed issues of self-esteem and other problems for first-generation students, particularly those who come from ethnic and racial minorities (Richardson and Skinner; MacGregor et al.). These students know well the social divide between them and their classmates, who come not only from more affluent backgrounds but from more educated backgrounds as well. It is almost as if the social gap between them and their classmates translated in their minds into an intellectual gap as well, so that they do not really believe that they have as much right to speak and as much ability as their classmates. Nonetheless, at least for the students in this project who expressed their hesitancy about speaking up in class, it is obvious that their failing to do so put them at a disadvantage in their own minds if not in their actual work. Even understanding this disadvantage, they were unable to overcome their reluctance to talk, hoping that their papers and exams would show their teachers the seriousness of their intent and their understanding of the work.

Academic Writing

Some of those feelings about inadequacy carried over into their written work, manifesting themselves in students' reluctance to take a strong stand on an issue

without almost incontrovertible evidence to support their argument, or an unwillingness to develop a thesis without receiving help from their instructor. Although none of these students made fundamental errors in grammar, punctuation, spelling, or mechanics, it was evident that issues of confidence about their vocabulary, or lack of comfort with the writing process itself, hindered some of them from providing the best showcase for their ideas.

Among the seven students in the group who provided testimony about their work but from whom I did not collect writing samples, only two, one of them a graduating senior, felt that they were good writers and displayed a reasonable amount of confidence about their work. The remaining five—despite good grades in writing and positive, even encouraging, comments from their instructors—saw a gap between their understanding of the material and their ability to express that understanding in writing. One of these students has taken a bare minimum of courses requiring significant writing, and, were there not a writing requirement at the college, would have avoided even those. The others, majoring in disciplines requiring a certain amount of writing (e.g., sociology, history, and human development), were forced to deal on a regular basis with what they consider a generally unpleasant task.

The work of the five students whose writing I examined in depth showed varying levels of sophistication—with three of them writing with grace, fluency, and strength, and the remaining two writing at least adequately and sometimes better, depending on the situation. Only one of these three was, however, able to judge the quality of his work reasonably accurately. Even the others who wrote

quite well expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to satisfy the demands of the material and of their teachers. The other two students expressed major discomfort with work requiring them to move into abstract thinking and away from the concrete and personal experiences of their lives; when they were forced to write abstractly or theoretically, their writing was characterized by failures in coherence with sometimes awkward rhythms and sentence structures. Although these infelicities were not serious enough to have a major impact on their writing, they nonetheless made it less effective than it should have been. It is important to keep in mind that all of these students have received better than average grades in their major courses, indicating a proficiency that they display but do not seem to believe they possess. Again, although to a lesser degree, some of the issues of self-confidence appear to affect these students' writing as they affect classroom performance, just as Bartholomae and Penrose suggest might occur.

Suggestions for Further Research

In *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose writes,

Class and culture erect boundaries that hinder our vision—blind us to the logic of error and the everpresent stirring of language—and encourage the designation of otherness, difference, deficiency. And the longer I stay in education, the clearer it becomes to me that some of our basic orientations toward the teaching and testing of literacy contribute to our inability to see. To truly educate in America, then, to reach the full sweep of our citizenry, we need to question received perception, shift continually from the standard lens. (Rose 205).

This limited study has drawn portraits of only twelve of the hundred or so first-generation students at a particular highly-selective, four-year, undergraduate, liberal arts institution, but it has yielded important information that points the way to further research that could speak more definitively to the experiences of these and similar students at other institutions like this one. Added to the research that exists on first-generation students at other, different kinds of colleges and universities, such studies can help us to broaden our vision of how first-generation students learn and grow and allow us, perhaps, to meet more fully the needs of these students as they negotiate the world of higher education. For example, along with showing lower academic aspirations among first-generation students as compared to their traditional peers, earlier research also shows that first-generation students have higher attrition rates (Billson and Terry; Cope and Hannah; Kraemer; Penrose; Tinto). Obviously, this study deals with the survivors. It would be most informative to study first-generation students who have left this college and others like it. One of the areas of this research, then, could be to examine the percentages of first-generation students at highly selective colleges who do not persist to a

degree. For example, all of the students in this project have received strong financial aid packages, and these packages were influential in the students' decision to attend. However, several of them indicate that although the financial aid was good, they still felt the need to work extra hours to make up for the gap between their aid and their perceived need. Research cited earlier (T-Bui; York-Anderson and Bowman) has shown that financial pressures on first-generation students are often greater than for traditional students. How have these pressures factored into a first-generation student's desire to leave the college? For those who transfer to another institution what factors influenced their choices? How many of the "leavers" have left school for good or at least for the foreseeable future?

Future ethnographic research, particularly in a multi-site, longitudinal study undertaken at several highly selective liberal arts institutions, might provide some of the answers to important questions about the qualities and attributes needed for success in a rigorous educational environment, or, equally important, those qualities or attributes that lead a student to such an environment against reasonable expectations. For example, one of the commonalities among the majority of students in this project was the degree to which their parents protected them against the hazards of dangerous environments and provided them with opportunities to read and develop language skills, despite the parents' own lack of education. Of the students whose parents did not provide adequate care and concern, all but one had grandparents who offered some measure of nurturing. The connection between these early experiences and the emotional strength that many of these students

exhibit is unclear. But further research might profitably concentrate on the very early experiences of first-generation students who attend highly competitive schools, examining connections between, for example, their involvement with their peers in their neighborhoods and the kinds of educational choices available to them as children, as well as the kinds of choices their parents made for them. Another area for further research would be to study whether and how early reading experiences contribute to the ability of first-generation students to do well in college academics, especially courses requiring writing or synthesis of reading.

As noted earlier, it is hard to either measure or determine the effects of the intangible qualities of strength, motivation, will, persistence, and resilience that these students exhibit. But future ethnographic research, particularly in a longitudinal study that concentrates on non-cognitive as well as cognitive attributes, might provide some of the answers to important questions about the qualities and attributes needed for success in a rigorous educational environment. More important, it might help to determine those qualities or attributes that lead a student to such an environment against a number of reasonable odds.

This study suggests that first-generation students may believe themselves less prepared to enter college than their traditional peers, and in some cases may, in fact, be less prepared. Certainly, the early college academic records of almost all of the participants in the study show academic weaknesses, although in most cases, academic records became stronger as these students progressed through college. Thus, another suggestion for further research is to examine whether there is indeed a

general disparity between the academic performances of first-generation and traditional students at highly selective colleges, and if so, how this compares to the relative academic achievements of first-generation and traditional students at other kinds of institutions. Moreover, examining the connection between high school preparation and academic performance for first-generation students could yield information that would help rigorous institutions determine necessary services for first-generation students whose academic performance does not meet the level of that of their traditional peers, so that they can more readily overcome obstacles to their academic success.

Oral literacy provides another area for further research. Although the feeling was not universal among the participants in this study, a striking commonality was the reluctance of a number of these students to speak up in class for fear of being found stupid or less articulate than their peers. Whether these feelings happen to a greater degree for first-generation students than for their traditional peers should be the subject of further study. My sense as both a long-time teacher and as an academic dean for almost a decade is that the first-generation students I have known do experience these ideas more often and more severely than their traditional peers. But it would be extremely useful to have hard data showing whether this is actually so.

The quality of writing as well as attitudes toward writing varied widely among the students in this group. Ethnographic studies that follow students and their academic writing over a period of time can continue to yield important information about the relationship between academic literacy and such factors as early literacy

experiences, high school preparation, engagement in the topic, and the connections between life experiences and writing assignments. The recent work of people like Chiseri-Strater, Sternglass, and Sewell has provided an important window into the writing experiences of first-generation students. Other ethnographic studies are needed to add to the body of knowledge that already exists and help us to do as Rose suggests and “question received perception [and] shift continually from the standard lens” (Rose 205) in order to be certain that we appropriately assist these students.

Such research—ethnographic, longitudinal, multi-site studies following first-generation students from their first year until graduation—could yield information about students who stay at such a school and those who leave. It could provide information about the cognitive and non-cognitive elements that affect the lives of students whose first-generation status means that they differ from their peers immediately and most obviously in their family backgrounds and perhaps or even probably in their race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. It could show more definitively how these factors affect students’ writing and overall academic literacy. Moreover, more extensive research could look at such factors as the intersections between social class and race that also affect first-generation students to determine how large a part class and race play in the academic issues that affect them. Such research could also examine whether and how gender plays a role in this mix. That information, in turn, could help highly selective institutions ensure that all of the students admitted have equal opportunity to survive and thrive, no matter what their background.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

In this work, I have examined the lives of twelve students at a highly selective, rigorous, four-year liberal arts institution. As noted earlier, this college, and others like it, provide optimum conditions for student success, and, certainly, its reasonably good four-year graduation rate (generally averaging around 85%) indicates that most students meet their academic goals. Nonetheless, the achievements of the first-generation students in this project are still noteworthy. Two of these students have since graduated, and one of these is in graduate school, the other in law school; almost all of the others are planning futures that include graduate school or law school. Only one of these was not considering further academic work at the time of this writing, and only one of the students who participated in this study was unable to meet the demands of the institution. Yet, as noted earlier, even for him the outcome has not been determined. He will be allowed to re-enter the college after a year, and, if he is like many of the students who have been directed to withdraw over the years, he will come back having learned what he must do to succeed. The other students who participated in this study have shown themselves to be the kinds of students any institution of higher learning would be happy to have among its matriculants. They are hard working, disciplined, aware of the challenges that face them, and determined to succeed.

Despite research that says that first-generation students have limited educational aspirations beyond a college degree (Pratt and Skaggs, 1989), the first-generation students I interviewed have plans to go on to the highest academic level they can reach. In that way, these first-generation students are like their traditional

peers at this institution, a place where graduate or professional school is a logical next step after a rigorous undergraduate education. Yet they are unlike those students in that they have come from backgrounds where such aspirations are not only not the norm, they rarely factor into family conversations or concerns. Moreover, inadequate high school preparation for some, a lack of guidance for others, and a profound sense of difference for many have led to missteps in course selection, early academic difficulties, and other problems that these students have had to overcome to a greater degree than most of their traditional peers. For at least a few, most of their college career has been accompanied by a deep and usually unspoken belief that they do not really belong at such a school will someday be discovered to be imposters (this despite their academic and other successes). Thus their achievements are a testament to their resiliency, their courage, and their determination to make a life for themselves that is different from that of their parents and families.

Their first-generation status is often the least visible of all their qualities, but it is also a quality that has profound effect on the way they experience education. For in some senses, many of these first-generation students—especially those who have come from weak high schools—are like long-distance runners who have begun the meet at a starting gate several miles behind the other racers. By running hard and fast, they can close the distance between themselves and the front-runners, but frequently they cannot quite reach the head of the pack. Their intelligence and their will bring them to highly selective, rigorous institutions. It behooves those institutions to keep them there and provide optimum chances for their success by

understanding and helping to eliminate the obstacles that are not of these students' making. I hope that this study will play some part in helping with that effort.

APPENDIX 1: SAMPLE LETTER TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

Dear _____

I am writing to invite you to participate in my research for my dissertation, in which I will be studying the kinds of factors that influence students' writing but that are not part of the writing assignment or classroom situation. That is, I am particularly interested in discovering whether students' writing is influenced by growing up in a household in which English is a second or other language and whether such factors as being a first generation college student have an effect on one's writing choices.

Your participation in this project would include your being interviewed by me three times during the semester (roughly at the beginning, middle and end) as well as allowing me to have access to both the rough drafts and final products of your written work for your classes. I would also ask you to keep a writing log, the details of which I will describe to you when we meet, but which, briefly, will consist of your keeping a short record of your responses to each writing assignment you have during the semester as well as the parts of it which you found easy or difficult. I expect that the writing logs will take no more than twenty minutes to a half-hour of your time, and the number of logs you write during the semester will be determined by the number of papers you are assigned.

If you think you would be willing to participate in this study and would like to talk with me about it, please call me at X2050 so that we can schedule some time to meet. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you or your work will not be identified by name in my dissertation or in any subsequent writing I do about the study. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Theresa Ammirati
Dean of Freshmen
Instructor in English

APPENDIX 2: SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Name

Class Year

Place of birth

Primary language(s) spoken at home

Tell me a little about your early reading experiences.

If English is not your first language, when did you begin to speak English?

What is the highest year of education of your father?

your mother?

How would you characterize your parents' attitude about your attending college?

Highly supportive? Generally supportive? Not very supportive?

How would you characterize their attitudes about your attending a highly selective liberal arts college?

Highly supportive? Generally supportive? Not very supportive?

To the best of your recollection, what were your chief concerns as you began college?

What were your chief concerns about writing?

Which classes did you take that were writing intensive?

How did you feel about them in terms of your preparation for college level writing?

Describe some of your most memorable college writing experiences.

What was the most helpful factor for you in achieving writing success?

What were the most serious stumbling blocks?

As a senior (junior, sophomore), you have obviously overcome some of the initial problems you may have faced. What helped you to do so?

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