Subsidizing Basic Writers: Resources and Demands in Literacy Sponsorship

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ABSTRACT: After eliminating a developmental writing course and creating an accelerated "Studio" composition course for basic writers, I investigated these students' needs (uninterrupted time, quiet spaces, social support, and academic help) and the resources that met those needs. Qualitative analysis of interviews with forty-nine students demonstrated that successful students were able to draw upon more resources, including time, space, and social support, than unsuccessful students, who ran short. I theorize, using terms developed by Deborah Brandt, that the literacy of the less successful students was not fully subsidized. These results support basic writing course models that integrate academic, affective, and social support into classroom work.

KEYWORDS: basic writers; literacy sponsorship; resources; support services; writing centers

"Struggling—doesn't seem to understand the assignment." An experienced instructor made this note on a roster, describing a particular student enrolled in a 4-credit, "Studio" version of first-year composition. By the end of the semester, the student had stopped attending, and she did not return to college the following fall. In the program I directed between 2000 and 2015, many other students, whose instructors described them in similar ways, also disappeared. What caused these students to fail? Did they lack preparation or aptitude? Did segregating them into a "special" version of first-year composition stigmatize and demotivate them? Did the "accelerated" nature of their basic writing course move too fast and leave them behind? In the analysis that follows, I will suggest that none of these questions identify the crucial element for all these students—literacy subsidies. Understanding subsidies can help students themselves, and also instructors and programs, to find the time, space, and mental states within which writers learn and grow.

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For those of us who teach basic writing, it is easy to assume that our courses *are* spaces where writers can learn and grow. Even twenty-five years after its publication, David Bartholomae's critique of "those of us who work in basic writing, who preserve rather than question the existing order of things," can sting a little (15). Bartholomae's critique focuses most clearly on two areas: placement testing and curriculum. By separating students from each other, and by giving some students a different curriculum, he argues, we produce "the basic writer." Ira Shor takes this argument to its rhetorical limit by naming basic writing as "apartheid," calling out the separation that seemed inherent in the work. Karen Greenberg's response focuses on program design, explaining how attention to pedagogy and assessment could mitigate the negative effects pointed out by Bartholomae and Shor. This debate still lives for us in the field, as we continue to question how or whether to separate a group of students from others and provide different, or more, writing instruction to them. If we design a program thoughtfully and well, as Greenberg and her colleagues did, can we get outside the dynamic of separation and definition identified by Bartholomae and Shor?

A more specific and recent version of the Bartholomae-Shor-Greenberg debate has been carried out around "accelerated" basic writing programs. These programs move students directly into credit-bearing, 100-level writing classes, often with incorporated supports such as extra class time, one-on-one help from tutors and advisors right in the classroom, and explicit attention to non-cognitive issues such as academic anxiety and time management. Systematic studies of the Accelerated Learning Project at the Community College of Baltimore County, the California Acceleration Project, and others, have shown that such programs can enable more students to complete 100-level courses, lower cost-per-completer, and improve students' experiences (Adams et al.; Anderst, Maloy, and Shahar; Cho et al.; Hern and Snell; Hodara and Jaggars; Jaggars et al.; Jenkins et al.).

This model's notable successes have been important for the students who have benefitted, and for the programs that have been able to serve those students. But it is important to understand why accelerated programs are successful, and for whom. When the accelerated model is taken up, as it lately has been, by state legislatures, boards of higher education, and other policymakers who work at a distance from the classroom, we in the field need to be able to advocate for the elements of the model most crucial for students. Patrick Sullivan shows how high the stakes are in his critique of the Connecticut State Legislature's requirement that all basic writing courses in

state institutions become accelerated ("Ideas about Human Possibilities"). Sullivan shows how many students will have no access to college if Connecticut's model becomes a national standard. Hunter Boylan and Alexandros Goudas support the argument that not every student will succeed in an accelerated course, pointing out that the good effects cited in the literature on acceleration come from students whose test scores fall just below the cutoff for placement into the 100 level, not from all students (3). A fuller picture of such a student, and such a course, can be found in Emily Schnee and Jamil Shakoor's coauthored article. They synthesize a student's perspective with an instructor's, providing compelling evidence of the importance and potential of students for whom an accelerated program is not enough:

> Time spent in developmental courses is often seen as derailing students from their pursuit of a degree, yet Jamil's two semesters of basic writing provided him a foundation of confidence and academic skills without which he is convinced he would have 'failed miserably' in college. (104)

If accelerated programs keep students from getting lost in an ever-expanding developmental pipeline, but also have the potential to exclude students entirely from the opportunity to attend college, how should programs be designed? I suggest in this article that the concept of "literacy subsidy" can help us focus on the wider social context of students' experiences with writing, rather than on the institutional containers for those experiences. This focus on subsidies can help us understand what resources are required for students to successfully complete first-year writing courses. I will describe how people and conditions inside and outside the university subsidize students' literacy, and also how those people and conditions make competing demands on students' time, effort, and attention. Colleges, families, friends, bosses, and the larger economy all influence students' progress toward and within academic literacy, accelerating it or slowing it according to interests formed and located outside a single classroom. I will suggest that to help these students succeed, writing programs and institutions must be able to provide support calibrated to outweigh the competing demands students face.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

My experience as director of first year writing has followed the trajectory of the wider conversation about developmental courses, acceleration,

and student success. In 2005, five years into my time as first-year composition director at a 10,000-student public university in a rural state, I began to focus on our developmental course. This course was not part of any academic department, being offered by the Academic Support division of Student Affairs. It was graded pass/fail and did not earn graduation credits for students. Hiring and curriculum were handled by staff outside the writing program. All of these elements led to frustration on the part of students and faculty. Students wondered whether the course was a waste of time, and resented spending money on a course that did not advance them toward graduation. Faculty had difficulty motivating students in this situation, and did not have access to professional development in the English department. When the staff member who had been scheduling and staffing the course decided to retire, she suggested to me that we take her position apart and add the developmental courses to the English department. I saw this as a good idea and worked with her during her last year to change the placement processes for these students.

I spent a year working with this colleague and with faculty in the English department, which offered first-year composition, to create a new, four-credit, "Studio" version of our first-year composition course, modeled on the one Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson describe in their 1996 article "Repositioning Remediation." The new course followed the practices and aimed at the outcomes of our existing 100-level first-year composition course. This existing course focused on source-based academic discourse, using sequenced assignments modeled on those found in textbooks such as *Ways of Reading* (Bartholomae and Petrosky), *Rereading America* (Colombo et al.), and *Literacies* (Brunk et al.). Individual instructors, all experienced full- and part-time faculty, had different ways of assigning low-stakes writing, of weighting grades, and of conducting classroom writing and discussion. Since course assessment and student evaluations had demonstrated that these varied models were effective, I saw no reason to ask people to change or standardize them. Faculty chose their own readings and paced their courses themselves. In each section, students wrote four formal essays totaling 20-25 pages of finished work, accompanied by prewriting, drafting, revision, and peer review. The Studio sections would follow the same course outline.

Added pedagogical supports for the Studio sections were taken from Hunter Boylan's 2002 report *What Works: Research-Based Practices in Developmental Education*. A committee of full- and part-time faculty held workshops to discuss the rationale for each pedagogical element and created sample

materials incorporating them. Individual instructors chose how to incorporate these elements into their own sections:

- Limit the use of technology
- Provide frequent and timely feedback
- Teach comprehension monitoring
- Use active learning

While the conversation around classroom technology has developed significantly since Boylan's work was published, the recommendation to limit technology worked for us at the time. It was congenial to the approaches of many our faculty, many of whom saw technology as a distraction rather than a tool. Boylan's research also helped us explain to the administration why this course should not have an automated or online "extra help" feature, but instead have 50 more minutes of class time, with the same teacher and students as the other 3 credits.

To provide frequent feedback, another of Boylan's recommendations, we tracked and graded not only on attendance, but preparation and participation, so students could see how their engagement in class related to their grades. Each instructor held one-on-one conferences with all students at least once a semester. Each instructor designed classroom activities that would help students develop and monitor their comprehension. These approaches comport with recommendations in the ALP literature (see Hern and Snell 2013, Rounsaville et al., Sullivan et al. 2017). The other key element we added to our Studio sections was explicit attention to sentence-level reading and writing. Faculty developed this approach in workshops using Martha Kolln's 1991 book *Rhetorical Grammar*. Some instructors used Nora Bacon's *The Well-Crafted Sentence* with students in class, and others developed their own materials based on this approach. Our goal was to focus on style rather than error, and to teach students phrase and clause structure.

The following academic year, we placed all basic writing students into this new Studio course, using an SAT cutoff of 500. At the end of the first semester, many skeptics among the faculty were convinced. A committee including full- and part-time faculty carried out an assessment, reading graded papers from both courses. The committee reported back to the department that B papers in the 3-credit version of the course met the course outcomes and were consistent with B papers from the 4-credit course. The same was true of C papers and A papers—the work done in each version of the course was meeting the program objectives, and meeting them in consistent ways.

Identifying Problems

This assessment led to another, more difficult question: what about the students who failed or bailed? Did some really need that extra semester of developmental work we had eliminated? Could we develop a curriculum, pedagogy, or support system that would help them succeed? Students had shared some stories with me about difficult life situations that made it impossible for them to attend, concentrate, and succeed. My colleagues had similar anecdotes, leading us to suspect that some students were just too stressed by life events, or too disengaged from college, for any curriculum or program to reach them. The clearest and most extreme form of this disengagement appeared when students registered and did not attend. The best curriculum, the most inspired teaching, the most thoughtfully-designed program will obviously still not improve the writing of a student who never attends. By separating out students near this extreme, I hoped to locate another group of students whose needs I could learn about and address. Targeting these students could keep them from disappearing and raise the number of successful completers each semester. Looking at student work could not help us locate this group, because in many cases these students' work did not come in at all. By midterm, many of these students were not present in class, or were not handing in work. I needed a form of assessment that derived information from something other than student work.

To learn about students' needs and problems, I turned to their teachers, suspecting that their knowledge about students would provide richer, deeper information than even the best test scores or third-party portfolio assessments. Gathering knowledge from instructors is supported by Brian Huot's approach to assessment, which aims for "appropriate, contextual judgment" over standardized, "reliable," narrow measures (169). I wanted to know which problems were basically academic, in their origins or their solutions, and which were outside the arena of a writing class. I also wanted to get this information early in the semester, and to make as little demand on faculty time and attention as possible.

Early Results

To fit all these requirements, I devised a quick assessment to carry out early each semester. I sent rosters to all basic writing instructors (our staff ranged from fifteen to twenty people, depending on the semester), and asked them to make a brief notation next to each student name. I proposed that they sort students into three groups:

"Doing Fine" If the student keeps up current learning and behavior, he or she will earn a C or better in the course.

"Needs More" The student is doing the work but seems to have academic problems. More time and assistance with writing and reading are needed for this student to earn a C or better in this course.

"Other Problems" The student's academic performance is being disrupted by a nonacademic problem.

A critical reader might wonder at this point whether this scheme simply created the effect that I hoped to find. By saying that this "needs more" group existed, did I impose spurious order on a more complex situation? Perhaps all the students who appeared to "need more" academic support actually also had significant "other problems." Or perhaps the students who appeared to have significant "other problems" were focusing on them to avoid primarily academic concerns. While it looked possible that the two groups were inextricably mixed, I did have two early indications that the distinction between "other problems" and "needs more" was not entirely in my head: teacher responses and student retention.

Teacher responses fit students into the three categories of "doing fine," "needs more," and "other problems," with intuitive ease. The rosters teachers returned were heavily and poignantly notated with comments on students' situations and behavior. Students "doing fine" were easy to identify, with some instructors adding refinements such as "excellent student. Could teach the class," or "will pull through." Students in the "other problems" group had given their instructors information about significant problems that were impeding their academic engagement and performance, such as accidents, unpredictably shifting hours at work, or sick children: "3 jobs and can't organize things"; "left class recently in an ambulance"; "works 40 hours a week"; "thinks she might be pregnant." Instructors had gotten this information from conversations about missing work or missed class, from students' writing, and from casual hallway conversations. Students who missed a lot of class during the first month also went into this group, whether or not instructors knew the reason for their absences.

The "needs more" group, however, was annotated differently by instructors. These students had not shared stories of significant life problems. They came to class during the first month, and handed in homework

and papers. But instructors did not see a clear path toward success in the course for them. Characteristic comments described students' effort and frustration: "struggling. Unresponsive in class. Writing is superficial. Has trouble digging conceptually"; "struggling but trying"; "underprepared"; "weak student. Tries"; "didn't seem to understand the assignment." These comments differ from the comments on the "other problems" students in their abstraction. Rather than naming ambulances, jobs, and children, these comments frequently characterize the students themselves (as in "weak") or the students' actions ("struggling" or "trying"). These comments also differ from the descriptions of the "other problems" students in their attention to learning and writing itself, although that attention tended to be negative, describing what students were *not* learning or achieving.

Despite their nebulousness in describing "needs more" students, teachers' comments did differ significantly between the three groups. This difference gave me one indicator that this grouping scheme might help me understand our students. A second indicator that this grouping could be useful was student retention data. I followed the students from one year to the next, and found that the rates at which they returned to the university correlated with the group into which their basic writing instructor had placed them. Students who appeared to be "doing fine" in October of their first year had a 64% rate of returning the following fall, over the 6 years for which I collected data (fall entering cohorts from 2008-2013). The other two groups differ both from the "doing fine" students and from each other. The students experiencing "other problems" had a low rate of return the following fall: 40%, over the same 6 years. Considering the severity of the problems instructors reported, perhaps this low retention rate is unsurprising. The "needs more" students also had a low rate of return for the fall semester following their entry year, averaging 54% over the six years. This number distinguishes this group overall from the other two, and gave some substance to my hunch that there was a distinction between the three groups.

If our program included these three distinct groups of students, then it might be possible to tailor our program and pedagogy to address each group's particular challenges and needs in order to maximize success in the program. The "other problems" could not be addressed directly through classroom pedagogy, because so many of these students' difficulties kept them out of the classroom and away from their books. In fall 2010, I began sending the names of these students to advising services as soon as teachers sent them to me each semester—we made sure this happened before midterm. Advisors called and emailed students, and in some cases were able to connect students

with support services such as counseling and legal aid. This effort, sadly, did not seem to positively influence retention numbers for this group of students:

Table 1. Percentage of students in the "other problems" group who registered at the University the fall semester following their entry year.

Fall 2010	43%
Fall 2011	23%
Fall 2012	60%
Fall 2013	30%

If only 23-60% of the students in the "other problems" group were able to stay in college, even with the early warning provided by their instructors and the offers of help from their advisors, a much more robust program is likely needed. The complex issues surrounding such students and their needs are not my focus here, despite their importance. For examples of well-developed programs connecting students with support services, see *Becoming a Student-Ready College: A New Culture of Leadership for Student Success* (McNair et al.). The complex issues surrounding the "other problems" faced by students suggested even more strongly the need to clarify the academic issues faced by the students in the "needs more" category, who were more likely to benefit from our instructors' expertise.

Limitations to the "Needs More" Label

Instructor comments and retention data provided some indications that the three-part division of all students into "doing fine," "other problems," and "needs more" corresponded with definable elements of students' lives and writing experiences. But the scheme also had significant limitations, particularly in relation to the students in the "needs more" category. Unlike the "other problems" group, the "needs more" group had issues that appeared to be academic, and possible to address in a writing program. But the labeling scheme did not give me clear information about what would help these students. They were not sharing horror stories with their instructors, as students in the "other problems" category were. Yet they were not apparently benefiting from the instruction in class. If my label, "needs more," was correct, what did they need more *of*?

Since the students' work was not giving teachers a "way in" to helping them, or giving me, from my bird's eye view of the program, a clear idea of what students needed, I developed interviews about the conditions

and situations in which students did their work. I had a hunch that these students were being interrupted by demands in their lives, and that these interruptions were a crucial part of their academic profile. An exchange with one of my own "needs more" students served as the inspiration for this approach. I asked a student to stop texting in class, and she responded "I'm sorry—I'm helping my Dad buy a truck, and I just have to answer this question. . ." This comment stuck in my mind as an example of the ways in which family and money could intrude into the space of the classroom, or into the metaphorical mental space in which a student engages with reading and writing. I wondered if this moment represented a larger pattern in students' academic lives.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To develop my hunch into a question I could investigate systematically, I looked for framing concepts that would make sense of situations like the one my student found herself in with her Dad's truck. In the work of Pegeen Reichert Powell and Deborah Brandt, I found these framing concepts. Both writers move outside the classroom and both contextualize students' writing as a practice structured by larger social forces. Rather than looking for the influence of larger social forces on *what* students write, these scholars help us see the influence of larger social forces on *whether* students write at all, and when, and with and for whom.

Powell's *Retention and Resistance* is both a critique of retention discourse as it is used by administrators and institutional programmers outside first year writing, and a call for people in composition to attend to this discourse. Powell notes that the retention literature tends to place responsibility for retaining students on the shoulders of those who teach first-year students, at the same time that retention initiatives often ignore faculty expertise and students' communities. Many of these initiatives, while well-intentioned, "only attempt to align the individual student more thoroughly with pre-existing intellectual and social values of the institution" (94). Instead, she invites readers to think about communities, rather than individuals. Such thinking, attentive to "community conditions" instead of "individual conditions," has the potential to change the "intellectual and social values of the institution" in positive ways (94).

A thoroughgoing analysis of literacy in relation to community conditions can be found in Deborah Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives*. Brandt examines the ways in which literacy has been demanded, regulated, and

conditioned by social groups reacting to economic change over the course of the twentieth century. She borrows the idea of "subsidy" from public policy and develops a conception of subsidy systems for literacy (8). A subsidy is a sum of money or some other medium of value, provided to someone to achieve an aim that is in the public interest. Brandt explains that in the interviews she conducted, "people sometimes turned their attention to the resources on hand for developing as writers or readers – that is, where it was that they found opportunity, assistance, inspiration, or information" (6). Such a collection of resources, in her conception, is the "subsidy system" for that person's literacy. Using this idea to frame our view of college students, we can see that subsidies come in multiple forms, from multiple sources: a boss lets a student use the office computer to print a paper; a parent pays for books; a friend spends time working quietly alongside a writer. Not all of these subsidies are financial: time, space, attention, and emotional/social support also subsidize literacy. Brandt subsumes all of these subsidies in her concept of "sponsorship," which includes social and emotional, as well as financial support (19). Crucially, Brandt sees sponsorship as serving the sponsor as well as the student. The sponsor has something to gain from a particular type and experience of literacy. Sponsors "regulate" literacy to correspond with that interest, speeding it up or supporting it when it serves that interest, and slowing it down or withdrawing support when it does not.

It seemed likely to me that the difference I was looking at, between more- and less-successful basic writing students, could be explained in the larger context of "different and often unequal subsidy systems for literacy, which often lead to differential outcomes and levels of literacy achievement" (8). This conceptual framework helped me think about my student and her Dad's truck. Her Dad was depending on her literacy by texting her to ask for her help, whether it was with the paperwork, with money, or with logistics at home. He was also slowing down the development of her academic, college literacy by interrupting her work in class. This is an example of "regulation." To find out whether subsidy and regulation might explain larger patterns among students, I developed an interview process framed around these ideas. I wanted to ask students where they did most of their writing, and how important people in their lives provided "opportunity, assistance, and inspiration," as well as interruption and regulation, as they practiced college literacy. Understanding these conditions would, I hoped, clarify my muddy idea that certain students "need more," replacing it with conceptual understanding of the students as a group, and leading to practical actions I could take to help them succeed.

RESEARCH METHOD

Undergraduate interviewers seemed more likely than teacher interviewers to set students at ease when talking about the conditions in which they wrote, and especially about the conditions in which they did not write. After obtaining IRB approval for the project, I needed to find some interviewers. I created a one-credit course, "Internship in Writing Research," for advanced undergraduates in English and Psychology. English students took the course because they were interested in teaching and literacy theory. Psychology students wanted to get their feet wet with qualitative research. These students read a qualitative research article as a model, and we met to discuss the questions and problems I was investigating. Each student took the CITI training on ethical research with human subjects, and we talked through the process of obtaining consent and asking questions using the interview script.

Next we needed to find basic writing students to interview. Using a random number generator, I chose students from the Studio composition sections of instructors who had agreed to be interrupted for this purpose. The interviewers went to classrooms and called out individual students who had been chosen at random. Taking the basic writing student to a quiet spot, the interviewer explained the purpose of the project, outlined the process we would use to keep their comments anonymous, and assured the student that they could decline to participate, with no effect on their grades or progress. After this introduction, the interviewer asked the student whether they would like to participate. Some students declined, in which case the interviewer would walk the student back to the classroom and call the next name on the randomly-generated list. Students who agreed to participate signed a consent form, and the interviewer started the recording and began asking the questions on our interview script. Interviewers did not know whether the students they spoke with had been identified as "doing fine," "other problems," or "needs more."

We conducted a total of forty-nine interviews during the fall 2013 and fall 2014 semesters combined. Because I wanted to zero in on the "needs more" group, I focused on getting as many interviews with them as possible, and on interviewing students in the "doing fine" group for contrast. Because the instructors had provided so much information about challenging life issues faced by the group identified as having "other problems," I did not see the need to investigate further why they were having difficulty completing their coursework. Thus we interviewed fewer of them. We carried out

the project over two fall semesters, 2013 and 2014. In total, we conducted twenty interviews with students "doing fine," twenty-four with students in the "needs more" group, and three with students in the "other problems" group (plus two students who were not labeled by their instructor).

In fall 2014, we had to cope with the intrusion of administrative and political forces into our program design. In the midst of an institution-wide budget crisis, the administration eliminated the 4-credit Studio version of first-year writing and mainstreamed all first-year students into 3-credit first-year composition. Because thirty-four of these interviews were conducted in fall 2014, when the studio version of the course had been eliminated, we talked to a mix of students who might be designated "basic writers" and others. Of the forty-nine total interviews, ten were with students who would not have been designated as "basic writers" under our institution's former practices. Tellingly, not all ten students in this group who would not have been placed into basic writing were labeled by instructors as "doing fine." This discrepancy underlines the arbitrary nature of an institutional "basic writer" designation based on standardized test scores.

When all the interviews had been transcribed, I began qualitative analysis, based on the grounded theory approach presented by Johnny Saldana. I split students' responses to interview questions into sentences, and assigned each a code, as defined by Saldana: "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data"(3). Because I was interested in the subsidies described in Brandt's work, and in Powell's concept of students' communities, I began coding for descriptions of "help": where did students get support for their work? Where did they turn when faced with challenges? If a student mentioned a helpful friend, or a quiet place that made it easy to concentrate, or a teacher's clear explanation, I coded the comment as "helpful" and specified whether the help was academic, emotional, or attentional. I also coded for something I originally thought of as "the opposite of help": distractions, interruptions, stresses, painful emotions. Through these categories, I hoped to change my phrase from "needs more" to a specific description of what students needed, and where they would be likely to find and use that support.

As I read and reread each interview, revising the coding to account for the students' words, larger themes began to appear. Saldana describes the next stage of analysis as part of a "coding cycle," in which the researcher critically rereads the data and the first set of codes, "generating categories, themes, and concepts, grasping meaning, and/or building theory"(8). In this

process, I noticed that all the various types of "help" seemed more specifically to depend upon resources. Whether the student's problem related to their reading comprehension, their ability to focus, their resilience, or their bank account, the student needed to draw upon a resource. Similarly, all the challenges grouped together as "demands." I could almost hear voices calling the students away from their writing: friends, bosses, parents, and devices asked for students' time, attention, and care.

When all the interviews had been coded, I began to count the codes, separately and also grouped into "resources" and "demands." I noted the total number of times that a code appeared in the data, and also the number of individual students who made such a comment. For example, the most frequent code in my whole data set is "instructor—academic support." When asked to describe their practices and experiences with writing, students most frequently mentioned help and support from their teachers. In all forty-nine interviews, I identified seventy-six such comments, made by thirty-seven different students. One student described a teacher's help with organization: "She's been really great with helping with that, because she'll tell us straight up right away, like 'this is not in any way related to your thesis.'" Another student described the teacher's mix of truth-telling and specific instruction: ["Who helps you the most with this writing class?"] "Definitely my professor herself, yeah. She's great and she gets to the point right away. She doesn't want to. . . she wants you to feel good about your papers, but she isn't going to baby you about it. Like she's going to tell you how to fix it so you know for the future what to do."

Collecting all the coded comments together, we can compare resources to demands overall and develop a picture of how frequently students mentioned them:

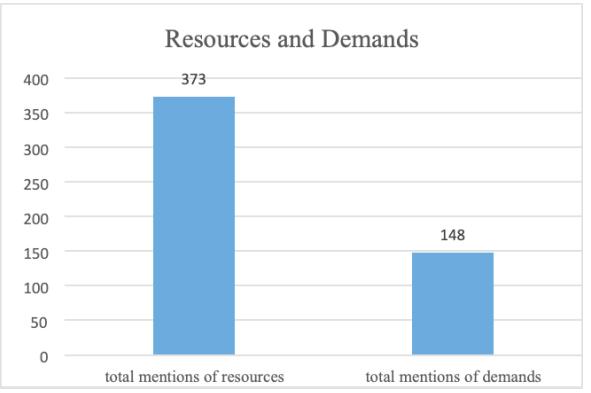

Figure 1. All mentions of resources and demands in all interviews.

Figure 1 suggests that students are aware of many more resources for their academic work than they are of demands pulling them away from it. Supportive instructors, quiet and solitude, comfortable spaces, friends, classmates, and family, all mentioned frequently by students, provide what Brandt would call "subsidies" for students' growth and development as writers.

After teachers' support, the most frequently mentioned resources in the data set are quiet, solitude, and university buildings that provide them. Forty different students mentioned the importance of quiet and solitude, for a total of seventy different such statements, in response to interview questions such as "Where do you do your writing?" and "Do you write better with people, or alone?" Many student responses are quite emphatic: ten students used repetition or adverbs for emphasis, as in these two examples: "Complete silence. No music, nothing. Just silence." "Alone. Definitely." Students mentioned both distraction and embarrassment as reasons for avoiding company while composing, as in these three examples:

> Since I am dyslexic I don't like other people possibly looking over my work. . .

> But definitely writing alone is easier, because you can talk out ideas to yourself, and not have to listen to other people talk about their ideas. And you can be original about your own ideas.

> If I work with someone, I'll try and go off their ideas, even though I don't really have the evidence to back it up. I'll just try and make it work.

Thirty different students identified university buildings as the best places to find quiet working conditions, making a total of fifty-two different comments about dorms and libraries as comfortable, peaceful spaces for work: "if I'm like, you know, in my dorm, on the bed, all comfy and cozy, then it's fine."

The most frequently-mentioned demand in the whole data set was a difficult or confusing instructor, with twelve different students making a total of thirty-five different comments about conflict with an instructor. Students described teachers they perceived as unfriendly or unhelpful:

> Even just. . .asking her questions in class, like about a homework assignment, she'll immediately shut us down and be like, you need to look in your packet, . . .even if you're just double checking. . . I'm

> just making sure this essay is due on Thursday and she'll be like, what did I just say?

After conflict with a teacher, the most frequently mentioned demands come from friends and family. Eleven different students mentioned friends, or sometimes just "people," interrupting and distracting them from their work: "I talk a lot, so I would get distracted I feel like. I get distracted talking, then I'd want to get on my phone, and then I wouldn't pay attention to my paper." Families were also frequently mentioned as making demands that took students away from work. Leaving aside family emergencies, the data set contains twelve different comments from ten different students: "Two weeks ago I had to go all the way back home to drive my sister to practice. But I got it done!"

COMPARING SUCCESSFUL AND STRUGGLING STUDENTS

The relationship between resources and demands is not distributed evenly across groups of students. Displaying the information in Figure 1 in a different way clarifies the relationship between more and less successful students. Recall that Figure 1 reflects every individual mention of a resource or a demand, by all forty-nine students in all the interviews. It presents a picture of college students drawing on many resources to meet the demands they face. If we separate the students "doing fine" from the students who "need more," we can see that the relationship between resources and demands differs sharply between these two groups.

Table 2. Comparing resources to demands for more and less successful student groups

	# of times resources were mentioned	# of times demands were mentioned	Resources compared to demands
Students "doing fine"	167	54	3/1
Students who "need more"	155	78	2/1

All students experience demands. The significant difference between these groups is the number of resources students mentioned for each demand. For successful students, this ratio is 3/1. For each mention of a demand by a student in the "doing fine" group, there are three mentions of resources. For

students in danger of failing, the ratio is 2/1. For each mention of a demand by a student in the "needs more" group, there are two mentions of resources.

The difference between these two groups suggests that success in college requires significant resources. Two resources to one demand is not enough for a large group of students. The lower number of mentions of resources, in relation to demands, provides a possible explanation for the low retention rate of the "needs more" students, which hovered around 54% over six semesters. To use Brandt's terms, students draw heavily on the subsidies provided by their families, friends, and colleges to support them as they meet education's demands. The subsidies for literacy that Brandt describes allow sponsors to "enable, support, teach, and model," and also to "recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy" (19). My results provide an example of how social forces and actors "regulate" literacy. They "fix or adjust the time, amount, degree, or rate" at which learning occurs (Merriam Webster). All these students described multiple sources of support, and all of them described learning and writing. But the rate at which their resources outweighed their demands regulated their eventual performance and persistence.

The comparison between resources and demands mentioned by students in the two groups also calls into question the original labels that I had used to distinguish the groups. In our original assessment project, we had attempted to distinguish between students with "other problems" and students whose needs were primarily academic. We thought of the "needs more" group as students significantly underprepared for the academic demands of first-year writing, those who might benefit from an extra semester of work or perhaps from tutoring. The patterns in the data, however, suggest that the students in this group don't "need more" of some academic program or an internal quality like "aptitude" or "college readiness." What they need more of is the subsidies provided by instructors, spaces, friends, and family.

What is the nature of the demands faced by the students who "need more"? Notable patterns emerge around two issues: social ties and mental distractions. Combining all the mentions of demands from social ties, we see that the two groups mention these demands with very similar frequencies:

Table 3. Demands from social ties: friends, family, spaces outside the University

total mentions	44
"doing fine"	17
"needs more"	18

If the demands are similar, what creates the difference between more and less successful students? The difference that emerges is between the number of demands and the number of resources students mention. Their descriptions of writing at home are noticeable here:

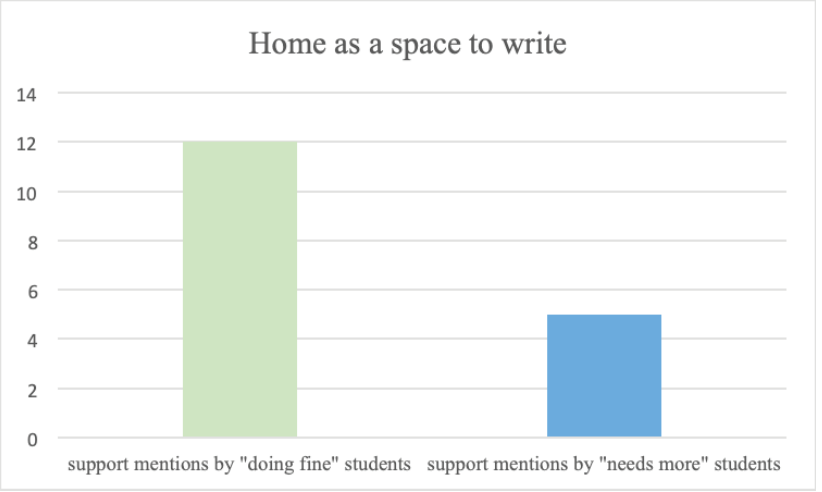

Figure 2. Mentions of home as a space to write, by more and less successful students

Students who were "doing fine" mentioned their kitchen tables and bedrooms as comfortable, productive spaces to write more than twice as much as students who were not doing fine. This particular set of comments is an example of the larger pattern in which the ratio of resources to demands differs between the two groups of students. If all students experience demands from their social ties (which of course all humans do), then it makes sense that more successful students will have drawn upon more resources for meeting those demands. These students who "need more" are characterized by their limited access to resources.

Most of the patterns emerging from this data set are social and economic, rather than individual or cognitive. But this observation must be

qualified, because the students also differed in the way they described mental distractions: too much background noise, too much quiet, temptations from devices. Students in the "needs more" category mentioned these types of distractions almost twice as much (15 mentions) as students in the "doing fine" category (8 mentions). Perhaps students in the "needs more" category find the same conditions (noise, quiet, music, TV) more distracting than other students do. Whether the demands are internal or external, however, the key finding here is that less successful students mentioned fewer resources for meeting them.

INFLUENCES ON STUDENT EXPERIENCE

To think about the relative importance of people and situations inside and outside of college, I grouped them together as influences. By collating all the mentions of influences (either as resources or demands) in the data set as a whole, I looked at which were the strongest.[1]

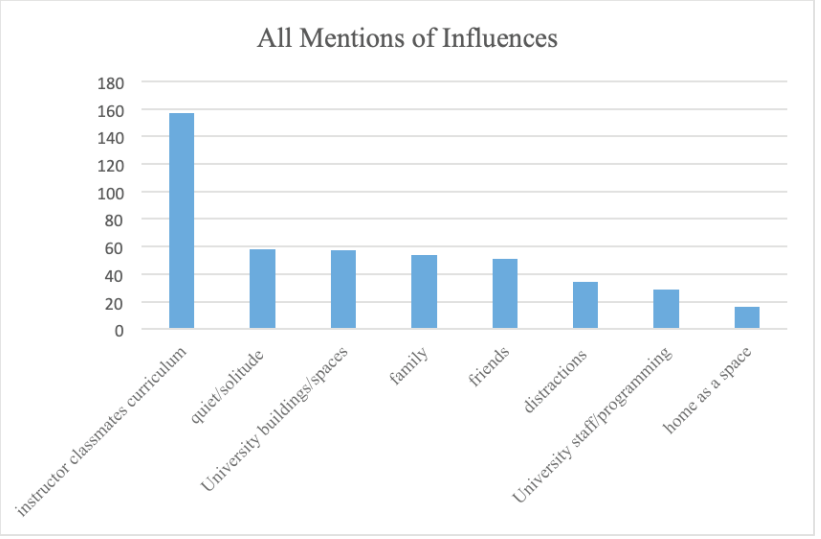

Figure 3. All influences mentioned in all interviews.

For instructors and programs, it is important to understand these influences, because these are the resources students draw upon and the demands they meet. Thus the results in Figure 3 have implications for the relation between writing courses, writing programs, and the colleges and universities that house them. Instructors, classmates, and the curriculum were mentioned more than twice as often as any other factor. It is in class that students

receive the strongest subsidies, in both academic and affective support, and also experience the strongest demands. Other structures, such as the writing program, learning center, or advising center, are mentioned much less frequently in these interviews. One student argued explicitly that the classroom is more important than the program or institution. In response to the final interview question, "What could the university do differently to help students succeed in the course?" Amanda[2] responded,

> I think the class is fine the way it is. I don't really think the school did much to do that.
>
> Interviewer: Who do you think is responsible for [you] being successful in the class?
>
> Amanda: The teacher. I think the teacher. The way the teacher, . . . how my teacher puts us into groups and makes us expand our ideas and explain more and I think that's really what a college writing teacher should do, because it helped me a lot with my writing.

Amanda explicitly rejects the question's premise that the university is or could be providing support for students' success in the course: "I don't really think the school did much." Instead, the teacher's classroom practices and her classmates' listening and discussion account for her success. Amanda's claim, and the large number of mentions of instructors and classmates in the data set as a whole, support the strong emphasis on pedagogy in basic writing scholarship.

The corollary of the teacher's influence is that conflict with a teacher is perceived by the student as a significant demand on motivation and attention. Heather describes her response to her teacher's expectations:

> Writing is hard in college. I've had the worst time in this class.
>
> . . .This is probably my first time [writing a paper longer than two pages]. And it's like, even in my other classes they're two pages, so it's like, that would make, that's easy. And he doesn't build us up to it. The homeworks, the "rough drafts" he calls them, of the essay. The first rough draft is one page. And then the second rough draft is two pages, and then we jump from two pages to five. So it's like, I think in a way he. . . they expect a lot from you. Not knowing what

> your background was, not knowing that you came from a [high] school that didn't care.

Heather's account of her difficulties provides an example of the importance of the comparison between resources and demands. Many college faculty would see a sequence of three drafting assignments as an example of support, and of "building up to" a five-page paper. But Heather sees the jump from two to five pages as such a significant and unfamiliar demand that it outweighs other resources. And she interprets it as an example of her teacher's "not knowing what your background was." This "not knowing" seems to have an emotional weight separate from the specific academic problem of how to develop a two-page draft into a five-page draft. For Heather, this instructor's teaching is a demand, separate from and adding to the academic demands of the coursework itself. As a single instance of the large number of mentions of the instructor and classroom as influences, Heather's story suggests that literacy is always "regulated," in Brandt's terms, by subsidies and demands, inside the classroom as well as outside it.

Like the instructor and the social world of the classroom, students' families and friends regulate their literacy. Students in my sample gave many examples of family and friends providing academic help:

> If I'm working with my friends who are in the same class, they kind of know the style better than me. So I'll ask them questions on the format of how to write it. But if I'm alone, then I'm like "whew, I don't know if this is right."

> Peers working on [the project] . . .helps me a lot. I'd rather have them and not need them, than need them and not have them.

> Interviewer: Who helps you with your writing? Student: I guess my Dad. He kind of, he's a good writer, so, he kind of looks it over with me sometimes, and gives me advice.

> After I write something I usually give it to my Mom to look over and then we'll discuss it after that.

> My sister's probably the most helpful. I think she takes it more serious than my friends do sometimes.

> At home, with the family. . . that's how I get my ideas.

Students described their social connections as both supporting their work and making other demands, sometimes simultaneously. Consider Madalyn's account of the demands she experienced in her first semester:

> Yeah. I was working at a pizza place, that I had worked at for three years in high school, and I was nannying for a family and going to school. And college . . . I thought it was going to be easy. Like I did it in high school, I can do it in college. No. College, I have to study, I have to work on everything, there's . . . it's not just doing the homework, I have to understand it, so when I'm in class, I get called on, I know what I'm talking about.
>
> So I was running back and forth from here, and [another town, 18 miles away] for classes and work, and then I decided to move on campus, because I thought "Oh, if I just go to class, come home, do my homework, I'll focus." I wasn't focusing when I was at home. I was working, and my mom was home, and I was talking to everybody else, and nothing was getting done for school.
>
> And so, I moved here . . . I just kept one job, and school, and I'm not as stressed out anymore. I have time to sit down and do my homework. And living on campus has helped that. Like being able to go to my dorm room—it's quiet—and focus on my homework. No distraction, no family, friends around at the time.

This passage describes a series of different demands: more difficult academic work, commuting, work for pay, family interaction. Home, in Madalyn's account, is not a good place to write, not because the family is conflicted or stressed, but because they are close—they all talk to each other. In this way, family and friends demand attention and energy from Madalyn. The resources she draws upon come from the institution's physical space, a quiet dorm room. Together, family, friends, and the institution subsidize and regulate Madalyn's access to literacy.

Other students described family commitments that took them away from the campus and from class. Brittany explained,

> I go to a Christian women's meeting with my grandmother on

> Monday nights before I came to school. So, I haven't been able to do that, so, a couple weeks ago I had to make the decision to either stay in my class the whole time, or go to the meeting.
>
> Interviewer: And which did you decide?
>
> Brittany: I decided to go to the meeting.

Like Madalyn, Brittany clearly has a close relationship with a family member that provides significant emotional (and spiritual) support. In this case, however, it also demands her time and attention during hours when the university requires her to be in class.

Courtney's anecdote presents a more difficult example of a family member calling upon a student's time and attention:

> We had a class but I volunteer over at [a therapeutic horseback riding center] and my Dad wanted to go with me in the morning 'cause I do the barn tours in the morning on Thursdays every once in a while. And he actually wanted to go with me for the first time. So I was wicked excited about that. And then I had a doctor's appointment after that. And I had class at 1:00, and I just didn't feel like going to class, and I didn't go to the class and we went out to lunch and it was my Dad and I and we don't have the best relationship, but that day we had a lot of fun. . .
>
> Interviewer: Did you have anything due for the class?
>
> Courtney: It was just a reading, so it wasn't too bad, but. . .
>
> Interviewer: So, let's say if you had. . .a big paper due or something.
>
> Courtney: Then I would go to class.

Courtney describes an opportunity to grasp a positive moment with her father. Because they "don't have the best relationship," she must expend time and attention to maintain it. I do not present Courtney's story to argue that families are an irrelevant distraction, or that students should choose academics over social commitments. Instead, stories like Courtney's

can help us reframe the question "What is a basic writer?" In the passages above, Madalyn, Brittany, and Courtney describe "other problems," rather than particular academic needs. From their teachers' perspective, however, all three students had needs that were primarily academic—all had been put in the "needs more" group in the early weeks of the semester. This mismatch between the teacher's perception and the student's account of her resources suggests a problem in my classification scheme, which mirrors the larger debate around basic writing about whether "need" is in the students or in the larger society. In separating out academic need from social resources, we have not been able to focus on the crucial interaction between the demands a student must meet and the resources the student has for meeting them. The importance of subsidies from family, employers, and friends is supported by other studies of students who stop out of college. Barbara Maroney identifies school-leavers as students facing more demands than they can meet. Kai Dreckmeier and Christopher Tilghman's multi-institution study found that finances and difficulty managing multiple commitments far outweighed academic reasons for leaving school (5; see also Sulllivan and Nielsen 326). Looking at this research in the context of my analysis suggests that subsidies outweigh aptitude in their influence on students' eventual performance and persistence.

All these patterns together suggest that we should characterize students in terms of the resources upon which they can draw. Doing so gets us away from the problem of whether the "basic writing" quality is in the student (cognitively or culturally) or in the institution or larger society. It is the interaction that matters. Thinking about the interaction between resources and demands also suggests practical steps forward for programs. The answer to our dilemma is not "more basic writing" or "faster basic writing," but rather "successful students need multiple resources, calibrated to meet the multiple demands they face." Institutional programming, whether it is curriculum, pedagogy, or a retention initiative, should be perceptible to the student as a resource, and should be congruent with the other resources the student is drawing upon. In the case of our program, the curriculum and pedagogy of mainstreamed basic writing provided enough resources for only some of the students. For another group, our course was not enough.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

How should instructors, writing programs, and institutions interpret these results? If studio or mainstreamed first-year writing is not enough,

what else do students need, especially as, in Amanda's words, "I don't think the school did much"? Her comment indicates that students do not see the institution's programming and support the way I do—as a smorgasbord of opportunities to find mentors, get tutoring, join clubs. Instead, the perspective that emerges from these interviews puts the classroom front and center, surrounded by students' friends and home communities. If we look at students' writing development in this framework of classroom and community, we can derive recommendations for instructors, writing centers, and institutions.

For Instructors

Instructors are important. Their words and practices dominate all other influences on student writing in these interviews. To fortify their own influence by drawing on the other important subsidies in students' lives, instructors can integrate a wider network of family and friends explicitly into classroom work. Below are some suggested practices that draw upon the influence of both classroom and community.

- *Community Peer Review Activity*. Along with considering the comments of their classmates, students can be encouraged to discuss, share, and reflect upon the comments they get from others: How are your Mom's comments on the paper different from your classmate's or your teacher's? What does that mean about "good writing," or process, or this topic? When you talk with your friends about their papers, what do you find yourself noticing/doing that doesn't happen in class? What does that mean about ideas and audiences?
- *Resource Assessment*. Instructors can help students chart out the resources that they draw upon, identify gaps in their resources, and try out new sources of support. If their family and friends are not resources for them, who might serve that role in their lives? What physical spaces support students' writing, and who or what helps them get to those spaces when they need to be there? Who or what helps them tune out distractions and interruptions? Students could create a visual representation of these resources to accompany a literacy narrative.
- *Writing Environment Journal*. Assign students to try writing in different physical spaces and at different times of day, each day for a week. Students can note how long they were able to write, and

why they stopped. How many times were they interrupted by a person? By a device? By internal distractions or worries? This assignment could be integrated with other process assignments or self-assessments.

- *Emotional and Metacognitive Classroom Work*. Because emotional difficulties with instructors, classmates, friends and family appear as demands in this data, they can have a significant negative impact on students' experience and success in writing courses. My analysis supports the ALP emphasis on the non-cognitive elements of college work. For example, Katie Hern recommends "[p]edagogical practices [that] reduce students' fear, increase their willingness to engage with challenging tasks, and make them less likely to sabotage their own classroom success" (8). One way to include affective material in a writing course is to include learning about metacognition and self-regulation. Specific strategies for incorporating emotion, self-awareness, and self-regulation into classroom work can be found in Raffaella Negrettti's study and in Angela Rounsaville, Rachel Goldberg, and Anis Bawarshi's 2008 article "From Incomes to Outcomes."

For Writing Centers

In the picture of student writing experience derived from these interviews, classrooms are in the foreground, surrounded by students' friends and communities. Because writing centers are located in neither place, finding and using them can easily become a demand for students. My analysis supports embedded tutoring, writing fellows, and other models that integrate support into the structure of the classroom as students see it. Steven J. Corbett advocates such projects that "synergistically bring writing classrooms and tutoring programs closer together" (10). His book describes several models, while also investigating how tutors work, and how students learn to work effectively with peers. The embedded or classroom-based tutor approach is also endorsed in articles by Lori Ostergaard and Elizabeth Allan and by Mark McBeth, which provide detailed models and evidence of their positive impact.

From the perspective of resources and demands, these program models draw upon resources that students mention most frequently in my data set: their instructor, classroom, and classmates. The students are already spending time and effort getting to know this group of people in this

space. Embedding the tutor in the classroom brings support to a place and a group of people that students see as resources. In my interviews, students mentioned tutoring 40 times. Of these mentions, 36 described tutoring as a demand, or as something for other people: "I have no clue where to go"; "I don't have the time, and I want to work on my own." I do not see this pattern as evidence of problems with the tutors or tutoring center. Instead, the scarcity of descriptions of tutoring as a resource suggests that going to a writing center or learning commons is experienced as a demand, one that must be outweighed by resources for students to be successful.

Mutiara Mohamed and Janet Boyd address the demands of seeking help by making a visit to the writing center a requirement in their course serving multilingual students. While there is debate about such requirements in Writing Center studies, as is clear in Eliot Rendleman's annotated bibliography, Mohamed and Boyd show how such a requirement could help students experience writing center visits as a resource, rather than a demand. Because students get credit in their writing class for the assignment, the work of the visit fits into the framework of classwork and can be understood as part of the help provided by the teacher. The time demand and the emotional demands of entering a new space and new relationships, as well, are part of the work of the course and less likely to be experienced as "extra" by already burdened students.

Rachel Rigolino and Penny Freel take the "embedded" model further and locate writing workshops in residence halls. These meet twice a week, with composition instructors (58). In the interviews I analyzed, residence halls are a resource, a place where students are "comfy," where they have friends and classmates to work with, and where they don't have to travel. Thus Rigolino and Freel's model exploits a resource students are already drawing upon, rather than making a separate demand. A corollary here, unfortunately, is that this model might prove more demanding for commuter students, who are not already on campus and in residence halls. Thinking about resources and demands in relation to embedded support and commuter students suggests an area for further research—how can we build upon the resources that commuter students are already using? If they are drawing upon spaces and relationships in their communities, how can instructors and programs learn about and ally with those spaces and relationships?

For Writing Programs and Institutions

The overall message of my results for institutions is that they should support instructors, support students, and design programs that are informed about, and complement, the other subsidies in students' lives. Instructors are the most available and visible resources for students. For many institutions, graduate students and adjunct faculty represent the institution in students' first crucial months. Thus, providing resources for basic writers requires providing professional development and basic writing expertise for these instructors. This is an up-front cost that is often difficult to justify to administrators, who can balk at the idea of professional development for adjunct faculty or graduate students. Calculating cost-per-completer, rather than cost-per-student, as in Katie Hern and Myra Snell's 2014 analysis, can be rhetorically useful in this context. Allying these instructors with support services and publicly recognizing their important role is likely to amplify the support they already provide.

For basic writing programs, my results suggest that choices about mainstreaming and acceleration should be based on rich information about the specific student population a particular program sets out to serve. An inventory of the demands faced by an institution's student population should inform program design, so that structures built for support do not turn into demands. Knowledge about basic writing students' subsidies, at many institutions, will quickly reveal significant financial problems. This issue has been one thread in conversations about basic writing for many years: Susan Naomi Bernstein points out that the NCTE published a "Resolution for Motivated but Inadequately Prepared Students" in 1974. It states, in part, "We believe that all colleges and universities, by the act of admitting students, become responsible for creating conditions that will permit those students to exercise their own right to learn." Bernstein fleshes out this recommendation by naming "financial aid counseling" as a crucial support. Some colleges are beginning to develop such resources through partnerships with community nonprofits. The recent volume *Becoming a Student-Ready College* describes

> [partnerships with] state and local workforce investment boards that offer specialized funding and counseling resources for low-income students, veterans, and adult students, . . .partnerships with financial institutions to provide financial coaching and access to resources such as Individual Development Accounts (IDAs). . .[and] Partnerships that provide on-campus access to legal assistance, car

repair, and tax preparation services (121).

It is important to note that the last sentence includes car repair. To think of car repair as an aspect of literacy is to understand how fully Brandt's idea of a "subsidy" underpins an assessment of whether a student is "ready for college." Students who can reliably get to class are more engaged and college-ready than students who cannot, whatever their other cognitive or academic resources. Healthcare, housing, and food play similar roles in students' daily lives, and institutions which connect students with benefits are subsidizing their academic work. Wendy Erisman and Patricia Steele describe programs such as Single Stop that connect eligible students with "a range of public benefits, including food stamps, subsidized child care, Medicaid or Affordable Care Act subsidies" (28).

Together, these recommendations for instructors, writing centers, programs, and institutions all treat students' resources as central. Such a perspective supports Powell's argument that the term "integrate" is used in a very one-directional way in our current retention discourse. We think about integrating "a student" into "the academic community," but we do not imagine integrating multiple communities: the college and the family, friends, workplaces, and neighborhoods of the students (94). Integrating home and college communities is particularly relevant for students who attend college near home, as the majority of US college students do (McNair et al. 118). For instructors, writing programs, and institutions, the crucial question of how to support basic writers should come back to an assessment of the relation between resources for students and demands on students. This assessment should include factors inside and outside the institution, heeding Powell's call to consider the "conditions of communities" in which our students live, mingled with their families, friends, and the consumer culture of their devices (94). The concept of literacy subsidies provides an analytical tool for this consideration. Colleges create new demands and new resources; to do so equably, we must learn about and work with the other demands and resources in students' lives.

Notes

1. Unfortunately, we did not ask students whether they were residents or commuters. This would have been helpful information for interpreting comments about the influence of contexts inside and outside the university.
2. All student names are pseudonyms.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the 49 students who shared their lives through these interviews, and the teachers who kept records and allowed their classes to be interrupted for the project. Thanks also to the wonderful undergraduate research assistants who did the interviewing: Jennifer Brezack, Katherine Connelly, Nicole Densmore, Nicole Dunton, Briana Garside, Mallory Grobe, Ashleigh Hamilton, Elizabeth Powers, Philip Shelley, and Conor Treacy.

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe what you do when you sit down to write the papers for this college writing course. Where are you? Who is around? What do you do first? After that? (Follow-up: Is this different from how you did your work before you came to college?)
2. Who do you talk to about your papers? Have you helped anyone with their papers? Does anyone help you? (For people who say they don't talk to anyone about their papers: What do you think would happen if you did?)
3. Who at the University has helped you most with your college writing class?
4. Do you write better with people around, or alone? How do you decide where to go and who to be with when you are writing?
5. What's the easiest thing about college writing? What's the hardest thing about college writing?
6. Of all the things you spend time on in an average week, which is the most important to you right now? School, family, work, children, sports, friends?
7. Some students get into situations where they have to choose between schoolwork and their families or jobs. Maybe you have a paper due and your boss calls and says it's an emergency and they need someone to cover a shift. Or maybe your Mom calls and says her car broke down and she needs someone to pick up your sister from work. Have you ever been in a situation like this? What did you do and how did you decide?
8. What do you think the university could do better to help students succeed in this writing class?