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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

*“I don’t know who you blame. I don’t know if you blame the school. I don’t know if you blame the system. I don’t know if you blame the teacher . . . it doesn’t seem to me that students are coming out with the ability to communicate at all sometimes, you know, either spoken or written.”*

—A first-year composition instructor on why students were not coming to college prepared

In El Paso, Texas, the largest port of entry from Mexico into the United States, transition is a way of life. Every day, people line up on the arched bridges spanning the Rio Grande, coming by car, bike, or on foot to the United States to shop, study, or work. Looking across the border from the University where part of this study took place, one sees hillsides of dilapidated houses, many home to workers at *maquiladoras*—factories run by US corporations in Mexico to take advantage of lower production costs. At the time of this study, drug violence rates in Mexico had skyrocketed, with Ciudad Juárez, just across the border from El Paso, having the highest murder rate in the world. Conversely, El Paso consistently has one of the lowest crime rates among large cities in the United States (KVIA 2013). Crossing the bridge into downtown El Paso, one enters some of the poorest neighborhoods in the United States, where 62 percent of residents live below the poverty line and almost 80 percent lack a high school diploma (Ramirez 2011). Moving away from here, one passes through middle class neighborhoods before coming across communities with large manicured lawns and swimming pools, both luxuries in the desert. In transitioning from the city center to suburbs, one passes from neighborhoods where people only know Spanish to ones where many only know English. On the University campus, hearing conversations in both languages, including the variety of Spanglish spoken in El Paso, is the norm.

The uniqueness of El Paso’s setting as the largest port of entry to the United States initially drew me to the region. Soon after arriving, I came across applied linguist Linda Harklau’s (2000) “From the Good Kids to

the Worst,” which focused on an important academic transition: high school to college. As the title implies, the multilingual students in her study grappled with very different identities moving through the two environments, labeled as excellent students by high school teachers but considered slackers in college. A search for work like Harklau’s (2000) closer to rhetoric and composition turned up little. Villanueva’s (1993) classic autobiographical narrative *Bootstraps*, gave us some insight into a Latino transitioning through various levels of the US educational system. Beyond that, most studies on transition have focused on writing transfer from first-year composition (FYC) to other university classes or beyond (e.g., Beaufort 2007; Frazier 2010; Leki 2007; Wardle 2007; 2009).

Instructors I talked with over the course of this study made comments like the one quoted in the epigraph above: we know there is a problem but who or what is to blame? I have often witnessed colleagues lamenting the writing abilities of their first-year students along the lines of those seen above. Recent articles in the flagship composition journal have called for our field to pay more attention to what happens before college (Addison and McGee 2010; Williams 2010). There have been similar calls in the flagship journal for second language writing (Harklau 2011). For many college writing instructors, what happens outside FYC classrooms is often a mystery. I rarely studied adolescent writers in my doctoral seminars yet taught students matriculating from the same educational system with varying writing abilities, English proficiencies, and many with seemingly little understanding of the basic conventions of academic writing. Students entered my class struggling to participate in discussions and engage in more complex writing tasks like rhetorical analyses. Their grades suffered or, even worse, they disappeared from class. Maybe they returned to another FYC class next semester. Maybe they delayed it until they were ready to graduate. Maybe they never returned to college.

With limited research guiding these initial phases and limited personal knowledge of what actually goes on in high schools, much less high schools in the borderlands of a state long known for a history of high stakes assessment in K–12 schools, I sought a way to begin exploring this topic. I drafted research questions oriented to exploring the challenges and successes students faced in making transitions as writers from high school to college. As I reflected on the study design, I realized that research on transitions between educational institutions were rare for a few reasons: after working closely with a participant for a semester or more, they may decide not to go to college or go to college out of town. Moreover, high schools are foreign environments to most university researchers outside of education departments. In such spaces, it

takes time to build trusting relationships where one is given access to observe classes or is able to form connections with adolescent students.

With these challenges in mind, especially the last one, I started slowly. The school site came fairly naturally as I wanted something unique to the border region. Samson High School (SHS),<sup>1</sup> the focal school in this study is located close to the border, which means some students would cross every day to attend school in the United States, this complex transition a part of their daily life. I initially became involved through a program called Gear Up, which placed volunteers in school to support teachers as they worked to prepare students for college. After a semester working with lower-level ESL classes, I began working with the senior English teacher, Mr. Robertson, because of a desire to find students interested in attending college. By regularly attending classes a couple days a week, my face became familiar to students and teachers. Thanks to informal interactions and observations that took place over the course of this first year, I was able to develop more focused research questions:

- How are the writing demands different at the high school, community college, and university levels and what contributes to these differences?
- What curricular and extracurricular challenges do Latina/o linguistic minority (LM) students face in making the transition between high school and college writing?<sup>2</sup>
- What resources do students draw on to support their college transitions?

Too often ignorance of student experiences in varied contexts leads to an endless cycle of assigning blame without sufficient knowledge, as evident from the teacher quoted at the beginning of this chapter. High school teachers blame students' home lives. FYC instructors blame high school teachers. University faculty blame two-year colleges. College professors in other disciplines blame FYC. This book helps break down these barriers by detailing curricular and extracurricular successes and challenges that seven Mexican/Mexican American students faced as they transitioned from high school to a local community college or university. The stories shared within reveal the complexities shared by some of the teachers above: the impact of social policies like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) on writing instruction, divides between the type of writing expected at different institutions, and home lives where students care for dependents, work full time, and speak a different language than is expected of them at school. In sharing these stories, I explore what writing teachers across institutions can do to support the success of increasingly diverse students, especially Latina/o LM students.

Given the integral role that writing plays in college and the almost universal requirement that students will have a writing class in their critical first year of college, it is essential that composition researchers and teachers gain a fuller understanding of the role we play in supporting and hindering students' transitions to college. This study is an attempt to build this understanding. It explores the disconnect between students' writing experiences in high school, community college, and the university while recognizing that our role in the lives of students making this transition may be smaller than we would like to think.

### **INCREASING LATINA/O STUDENT POPULATIONS**

In the past, composition teachers and scholars have held a "myth of linguistic homogeneity" and have largely ignored the diversity present in their classroom, at worst pushing an "English only" agenda that can serve to marginalize students (Canagarajah 2006; Horner, NeCamp, and Donahue 2011; Horner and Trimbur 2002; Matsuda 2006; Schroeder 2011). As Schroeder (2011, 201) noted, adherence to a standard English ideology throughout educational institutions as well as organizations like NCTE have framed "ethnolinguistic differences as educational obstacles to overcome rather than intellectual resources to exploit." It is time for composition researchers to pay attention to the dramatic demographic shifts taking place in the United States and transform the ways we teach writing.

Mexican American immigrants or children of immigrants, like the students profiled in this study, are contributing to a demographic shift in the United States largely precipitated by the growth in the Latina/o population. From 2000 to 2010, the Latina/o population in the United States increased from 35.3 to 50.5 million, accounting for 56 percent of the nation's population growth in this decade (Passel, Cohn, and Hugo Lopez 2011). While most Latinas/os still live in Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, New Mexico, New Jersey, New York, and Texas, their numbers are dramatically increasing in states where they have not traditionally been a significant part of the population, such as South Carolina with a 148 percent increase and Alabama with a 145 percent increase over the past decade, meaning that composition researchers and teachers at all institutions need to attend to supporting the success of diverse student populations. Accounting for over 65 percent of Latinas/os as of 2009, Mexicans and Mexican Americans (the focus of this study) play a huge role in this growth story (Passel, Cohn, and Hugo Lopez 2011).

As their population has increased, Latinas/os have become an increasing presence in the school system, comprising 23.3 percent of K–12 students as of 2010, up from 16.7 percent in 2000 (Fry and Lopez 2012). In Texas, the state in which my study was conducted, Latinas/os comprised 50.3 percent of the students in the K–12 system in 2010, accounting for over 90 percent of the enrollment growth in Texas schools over the decade (TEA 2011a). Latina/o enrollment at the college level has similarly surged, from 10 percent of total college enrollment in 2000 to 15 percent in 2010 (Fry 2011; Llagas and Snyder 2003). Although Latinas/os are entering the education system and graduating from college in greater numbers (Fry and Lopez 2012), there is a continued problem of retention and Latinas/os are still the “least educated major racial or ethnic group in terms of completion of a bachelor’s degree” (Fry 2011).<sup>3</sup>

A commonly referenced Lumina Foundation (2007) statistic notes that for every one hundred Latina/o elementary school students, fifty-two graduate from high school, twenty go to a community college, eleven go to a four-year institution, ten graduate from college, four of them earn a graduate degree, and one earns a doctorate. Unfortunately, Latina/o and other LM students often lack the resources to succeed. They often attend segregated, underfunded, and underperforming schools, are denied access to advanced coursework, have parents who do not possess the language skills and knowledge to help them with homework or navigate unfamiliar educational systems, and are viewed through a lens that sees their multilingualism as a deficit (Callahan and Shifrer 2012; Enright and Gilliland 2011; Harklau 2011; Llagas and Snyder 2003; Mosqueda 2012; Nuñez and Sparks 2012; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco and Todorova 2008; Villanueva 1993; Wolfe 1999). As a result, many students, despite coming from families with high aspirations for their education, never make it to college. Of those who do, many never graduate.

## **STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE**

The first year of college is generally regarded as the most critical point of determining a student’s likelihood to graduate from college, with the 2001 first-year retention rate at 73.9 percent at four-year institutions and only 54.1 percent at two-year colleges (Ishler and Upcraft 2005, 29). For instance, of the seven students in the study presented in this book, three dropped out and restarted classes their first year, with a few of these transferring to private technical colleges looking for a quicker path to completion. Looking further out, the commonly cited four-year

graduation rate is a goal consistently achieved by a minority of students nationwide (Chronicle of Higher Education 2013).

The last few decades have brought more first-year initiatives, more scholarship, and more collaborations between college departments to promote first-year success and student retention (Evenbeck, Smith, and Ward 2010; Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot 2005). However, while writing teachers have engaged in some of the best practices validated by this research, composition studies has been largely absent from these discussions. A notable exception has been relatively recent work by scholars in basic writing focused on examining the positive impacts of basic writing programs on student retention (Baker and Jolly 1999; Glau 2007; McCurrie 2009; Peele 2010; Webb-Sunderhaus 2010). This research has largely arisen out of the need to defend programs increasingly at risk in an era of shrinking funding for higher education, a challenge that all those involved in postsecondary education will face moving forward.

Tinto (1975; 1988; 1993; 1997) was one of the earliest researchers focusing on students' first-year experience and causes behind student dropout. In 1975, he proposed a dropout theory based on Durkheim's model of suicide, in which he divided the college into two components, the academic and the social: "This theoretical model of dropout . . . argues that the process of dropout from college can be viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person's experiences in those systems . . . continually modify his goal and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of dropout" (Tinto 1975, 94).

Under Tinto's (1975) proposed model, a student's likelihood to persist is based in part on how well they integrate into both the social and academic spheres of the campus. Starting with work by Elbow (1968) and Murray (1969), composition studies has a long history of connecting students socially and academically to the university through pedagogies involving group work and conferencing individually with students. At one of the focal institutions in my study as well as elsewhere (Barnhouse and Smith 2006), FYC classes have increasingly been part of learning communities, which promote student involvement in various academic and social activities (Tinto 1993, 1997). Composition teachers and researchers have long recognized tacitly that "choices of curriculum structure and pedagogy invariably shape both learning and persistence on campus, because they serve to alter both the degree to which and manner in which students become involved in the academic and social life of the institution" (Tinto 1997, 620).

Despite the popularity of Tinto's work, especially his retention model, he has not been without critics. Some have noted that his work might not be applicable for minority and non-traditional student populations. For instance, one study found that social integration does not predict the success of Latina/o students (Torres and Solberg 2001). Other researchers (Cabrera, Stampen, and Hansen 1990; Cabrera, Nora, and Castaneda 1993) noted that Tinto's model did not sufficiently account for external factors such as the ability to pay and that an integrated model combining Tinto's model with a greater consideration of external factors resulted in a "a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay among individual, environmental, and institutional factors" (Cabrera, Nora, and Castaneda 1993, 135).

A recent and important contribution to retention scholarship from composition studies is the work of Powell (2009; 2014), who has taken a critical stance on some of the retention literature and has advised composition teachers and scholars to look at the push to raise retention rates with a critical eye. In particular, she noted that colleges and universities need to undergo more radical changes than currently being envisioned to support student success and that in composition classes we should consider teaching students with the realization that not every student is going to finish their college degree. Nonetheless, as Powell (2014) emphasized, writing instructors are in a unique position because they work with the majority of incoming students in relatively small classes.

Another exception to composition studies' absence from broader conversations on first-year student success and engagement has been the CWPA partnership with the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). This partnership led to the creation of 27 questions informed by current research in composition that have been added to the NSSE. Because this survey is being administered at 584 colleges and universities in 2012 alone, this partnership promotes the importance of writing in the first year of college while providing invaluable data concerning students' writing experiences and its role in promoting engagement and success. The creator of the NSSE, George Kuh, has focused extensively on student engagement in the first year of college and some of his work is particularly salient to the study presented in this book.

Using two other surveys he created, the College Student Expectations Questionnaire and the College Student Experiences Questionnaire, Kuh evaluated whether or not students' first-year experiences matched their expectations. This analysis resulted in a rather depressing conclusion: "Students' expectations for college often surpass the academic demands they are presented. That is, students typically study less, write



less, and read less than they come to college expecting to do. The gap between expectations and experiences also extends to life beyond the classroom” (Kuh 2005, 106). While 87 percent of students say they will use support services like writing centers, only 56 percent have done so by end of the first year (92). These numbers reveal that students often come to college with high expectations and for a variety of reasons, these expectations are consistently not met.

Shilling and Shilling (2005) confirmed these findings about expectations, writing that students come to college expecting to work harder than they actually do, but work less than they initially expect. In a study focused on limited learning taking place at college, Arum and Roksa (2011, 69) found that 37 percent of college students report spending five hours or less per week on studying and class preparation. Only 42 percent of students reported substantial reading and writing assignments.<sup>4</sup> Students in my study came to college with expectations for much more work than high school and the reading demands in particular exceeded their expectations.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, outside of their FYC and history classes, students generally were assigned much less writing than anticipated.

Astin’s (1997) *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited* provides a number of findings that detail student and faculty traits and practices that promote student engagement and success. Drawing on data from more than 20,000 students, 25,000 faculty members, and 200 institutions, Astin found that students were more successful when they lived on campus and were taught by faculty at institutions with a teaching orientation. In addition, he found that student-student, faculty-student interactions, time spent socializing with friends, talking with faculty outside of class, and being invited to a professor’s home were all positively correlated with success. Of some of the most negative involvement factors, working full-time as a student, which many LM students do, and working even part-time off-campus, were seen as having negative effects on student retention. From the review of these various factors, Astin (1997, 197) concluded, “Practically all the involvement variables showing positive associations with retention suggest high involvement with faculty, with fellow students, or with academic work. Most of the involvement measures showing negative effects (working full-time, working off campus, commuting, reading for pleasure) represent involvements that take time and energy away from the academic experience.”

As I argue more fully in my concluding comments, the writing classroom is a small but important part of most students’ first-year experiences and a site with great potential to promote student engagement. By exploring research like Astin’s (1997), Kuh’s (2005), more critical takes

like Powell's (2014), and conducting studies like the one presented in this book, composition researchers can begin to shape writing programs and classrooms to better serve students on campus who struggle in adapting to college. These students may no longer match the traditional profile of a college student as a "primarily middle class, eighteen years old, single, fresh out of high school, studying full time, enrolled in a four-year college, living away from home for the first time, meeting traditional standards of academic preparedness, and graduating in four years" (Ishler 2005, 15). Instead, they may come to college with limited high school preparation, have to work part or full time to support their studies, struggle with aspects of academic English, or have a dependent or two to care for.

As noted by other researchers (e.g., Hrabowski 2005; Leki 2007; Merisotis and McCarthy 2005; Sternglass 1997; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova 2008; Valdés 2001), and present in the case studies throughout this book, it is clear that LM students face a number of challenges outside the classroom that impact the writing they do in and for the classroom. Too many institutions and teachers, writing teachers included, operate from a monocultural, mainstream US point of view, which means students' home lives, cultures, and languages are often ignored in the actual university classroom (Canagarajah 2006; Horner and Trimbur 2002; Matsuda 2006; Stage and Manning 1992; Schroeder 2011). The focal institutions in this study are no exception in this regard, as the vast majority of instruction occurs in English and, as will be discussed later, assignments rarely build on students' multilingual competencies. As a field, we have come a long way in realizing that our FYC students are not a "homogeneous" group (Matsuda 2006), but still have much work to do in transforming our practices and institutions into spaces ready for the twenty-first century student.

## THE STUDY

### Community Context

The study presented in this book was conducted in El Paso, Texas, a major metropolitan area on the US/Mexico border and home to approximately 700,000 people. The partner city, Ciudad Juárez, is right across the border in Mexico and home to around 1.3 million people. The two cities have been closely connected throughout history, as citizens from both have regularly crossed the border to work, shop, seek educational opportunities, and enjoy the nightlife. This exchange of people has been increasingly limited over the past several years due to the militarization of the border as evidenced by the construction of the border wall through

El Paso; as well as the increasing drug violence in Mexico. Because of the violence in Ciudad Juárez during the time of this study, many people from El Paso stopped crossing regularly unless necessary to visit family or attend to business. On the other hand, people who live in Ciudad Juárez, including one student in this study, regularly crossed into El Paso to shop, study, and visit relatives, some having emigrated there for safety.

According to data provided by Borderlands Community College (BCC), 82 percent of El Paso is Latina/o and 61 percent of the businesses are Latina/o-owned, which is well above the national averages. However, the median household income is \$35,637 and almost a quarter of all families are below poverty level. 18.4 percent of El Paso citizens have less than a ninth grade education, a rate three times higher than the national average of 6.4 percent. About 25 percent of citizens have some sort of degree from higher education (an associate, bachelor's, or graduate degree), which again, is below the national average of 35 percent. In response to these low education levels, the postsecondary institutions in this study have worked hard to serve the local community and foster educational attainment.

El Paso has a unique linguistic situation compared to non-border US cities of similar size, and most inhabitants are bilingual to some extent, some Spanish dominant and some English dominant. Knowledge of both Spanish and English is commonly expected of job applicants where people work directly with customers or clients, such as in banking, law, and more service-oriented jobs. While the majority of homes are Spanish dominant (US Census Bureau 2009), English, Spanish, and Spanglish are commonly heard in public spaces. The neighborhood where the high school was situated was very Spanish dominant.

### Academic Contexts

The first part of this study was conducted at Samson High School (SHS), which was an overwhelmingly Latina/o, low-income school of approximately 1,300 students, including a high percentage of limited English proficiency (LEP) students (see Table 1.1).<sup>6</sup> In classes, students generally used Spanish to communicate with each other when they worked in groups; however, as was common at this particular school, they would often switch between English and Spanish during their conversations. Teachers used English for the vast majority of instruction, only sometimes saying words in Spanish to help or connect with students. The English teacher who taught all the mainstream senior English classes did not know Spanish beyond a few basic words.

Table 1.1. Characteristics of Samson High School

<i>Student Characteristics</i>	<i>Percent of students</i>
Minority (overwhelmingly Latina/o)	99.5
Economically Disadvantaged	93.1
Limited English Proficiency	38.2
Immigrant	8.1
Migrant	4.5
At-risk <sup>7</sup>	80.1

Students, teachers, and administrators all felt extreme pressure due to state and national mandated testing, which came in the form of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), a test that every student needed to pass in order to graduate.<sup>8</sup> Because SHS had a high number of LEP students, they faced a particularly acute challenge in preparing students to pass since the instructions and problems for the test were all in English.

Borderlands University (BU), where four of the students from this study began college, was a publically funded institution with just over 21,000 students during the time of this study. Around 19,000 were undergraduate and 3,600 were graduate students, with the latter number increasing as the university strived to be a top research university. BU drew mainly local students, with 83 percent of the student body coming from El Paso County. An additional 8 percent of students were from Mexico, with these students primarily coming from Ciudad Juárez, just across the border. BU was overwhelmingly Latina/o, with 76 percent of students identifying as Hispanic and an additional 6.7 percent as Mexican nationals. Given that BU drew students largely from the local area, it is unsurprising that 40 percent of the students were enrolled part time as they maintained full or part time jobs while attending school. Also, the average age of undergraduates was twenty-three. When the students profiled in this study entered college, tuition and fees at BU were about three times those of Borderlands Community College (BCC), approximately \$2,600 for twelve credit hours.

BCC, where three students from this study began college, served approximately 30,000 students on five different campuses. All students attended the Colorado campus, which had about 4,500 credit-enrolled students. BCC's credit student enrollment was over 85 percent Latina/o, which was a slightly higher percentage than the university's Latina/o population. While breakdowns for individual campuses

were not available, faculty interviews confirmed percentage variances between campuses. For instance, the Colorado campus served many students from downtown neighborhoods, which were overwhelmingly Latina/o and low income. The tuition and fees at the College were much lower than at the university, approximately \$800 for twelve credit hours.

### Study Design

This study began its development about a year before collecting data, when I entered SHS as a volunteer through a college readiness program with a desire to conduct a study focused on students transitioning to college. Over the course of that first year, I came once or twice weekly as a volunteer—first in ESL classes and then in senior English classes, meeting students and teachers who later became part of the study. While taking part in various classes and having informal interactions with teachers and students, I refined research questions and developed interview protocols that would later be used in the more formal data collection stage. After spending a semester and a half at the school, I extended invitations to all students in SHS's senior English classes to join this study, explaining that the main criteria for inclusion was a strong intention to begin college locally the following fall. I then began to actively collect data from participants at the beginning of the spring semester, following students their final semester at high school and through their first year at college. I conducted follow up interviews with five of the seven participants at the end of their second year at college in order to see if their paths had changed since the conclusion of the larger study.

In conducting this study, I took an ethnographic case study approach, in which I immersed myself as fully as possible in the high school culture for an extended period of time while focusing on individual agents within that community. The ethnographic approach enabled me to develop a broader understanding of the educational environments students inhabited as it involved going beyond individual students to gain the perspectives provided by teachers, administrators, and institutional documentation. Combining this with case studies enabled me to look at the participants as individuals with different abilities and different sets of struggles connected with larger environments they inhabited, a focus that becomes prominent as I move into presenting their case studies.

A key element of ethnographic research is taking the stance of a participant observer in order to become more fully connected with

the culture one is learning from. Action research has a long history in rhetoric and composition, with researchers recognizing the value of being more integrated in a community (Faber 2002; Heath 1983; Moss 1992) as well as the ethical issues of traditional research in that it tends to benefit the researcher more than the researched (Bleich 1993; Brueggermann 1996; Cook 1998; Faber 2002). In the book *Community Action and Organizational Change*, Faber (2002, 13) criticized the traditional university/outside world, researcher/participant dichotomies, arguing that the researcher needs to play a more active, interested role in the community they are studying in order to understand it better: "I found that in order to fully understand change, I needed to play a self-conscious, direct role in change and fully experience the consequences, successes, and risks associated with change."

As an action researcher, I did not passively observe the classes I attended, but circulated separately from the teacher, supporting his efforts in giving individual students feedback on various writing assignments. I occasionally led activities, especially those building up to an analytical essay on *Lord of the Flies*. Being in this role helped me witness the constant challenges bombarding teachers at SHS: constant last-minute interruptions to class schedules for events such as pep-rallies, laptop carts where only half the computers worked, and a lack of books necessitating that students do all their reading in class. When occupied with helping students during class time, I would record observation notes between classes. Outside the classroom, I helped the study participants with scholarship essays and, in one case, wrote a recommendation letter for a scholarship. In college, I kept in touch with students via text messaging, MySpace, Facebook, and email. I exchanged texts with one participant on Friday nights as she was trying to figure out a thesis for an essay and with another one who was at the records and registration office struggling to register for her classes. I met with some students regularly at their request to give feedback on their essays. In one instance, I edited an essay last minute to help a participant avoid the wrath of a teacher obsessed with grammatical correctness. I kept in touch with the students who never started college, Facebook messaging them or texting them to see when they planned to go back and how I could help.

## Participants

Although attending the same high school, the students in this study came to college with differing abilities and resources to support their transitions. While some had low B averages, others were in the top 10

percent of their high school class. While a few lived in the United States all their lives, others came to the States as late as eighth grade. While most identified Spanish as their first language, one learned Spanish in high school. See Table 1.2 for an overview of participants.

Here, I will introduce each student briefly in anticipation of the detailed case studies featured in chapters 3–6.

### ***Bianca***

Although Bianca spent her whole life in the United States, she lived in a Spanish-speaking household and attended bilingual classes until about sixth grade. Bianca had exceptional challenges in her home life. Her mother was arrested and deported her junior year in high school, leaving Bianca to care for her younger siblings. As a result, Bianca was responsible for three children as she graduated from high school with a B average and transitioned into college, where she was supported by a scholarship program for children of migrant workers. As will be explored in her case study, Bianca was also a very active member of a non-denominational Christian church, which was a very important source of support in her life.

### ***Carolina***

Carolina was born just across the border from El Paso and lived there until the beginning of eighth grade when she moved to the United States with her mother after her parents separated. Carolina reported attending ESL classes along with a few other classes in English in eighth and ninth grades. Because she had not learned any English in her classes in Mexico, this was a difficult time for her and she reported understanding nothing in her classes at first. Although Carolina lacked confidence in her English and was very quiet when I met her at the beginning of senior year in high school, she was an exceptionally dedicated student. This dedication helped her learn English in a few years, graduate a year early from high school in the top 10 percent of her class, and have a very successful first year of college at BU.

### ***Daniel***

Daniel spent his whole life in the United States and was the only student in the larger study to identify English as his first language. Although his grandmother only spoke Spanish and his father was a native Spanish speaker, he did not really develop his knowledge of Spanish until high school. There, he felt pressure to learn in order to fit in with the dominant student culture. Daniel attended a middle school where he

Table 1.2. Overview of study participants\*

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

\* Due to IRB restrictions, this information was self-reported by the participants.

remembered speaking English all the time, which also had a lower percentage of immigrant students than the middle school that Carolina, Paola, and many other students at SHS attended. Daniel was different in other ways as he was the only non-first generation college student in the study, with his father working as a teacher and pursuing a master's in Education. Nonetheless, he struggled throughout the latter part of high school and especially during his first year of college at BCC.

### ***Joanne***

Joanne was a quiet, hard-working student when I met her in high school. Although she spent her whole life in US schools, she spent her early



years living with her parents in Ciudad Juárez. In order for her to easily attend US schools she lived with different family members on the United States side of the border. In high school, she lived with a boyfriend for a while with whom she had a child her junior year, but they separated and she moved in with her cousin who was attending community college. She started college at BCC and struggled to balance her dual lives of parent and student, dropping or failing most classes.

### ***Mauricio***

Of the students in this study, Mauricio came from the most affluent background. He had spent his whole life in Ciudad Juárez and continued to live there while he transitioned into the US school system in the first year of high school. He explained that he had come with no knowledge of English except for the alphabet, which his mother had taught him, even though neither she nor Mauricio's father knew English. While he reported having an English class in elementary or middle school, he said it was more like a free period and thus he did not learn much English there. Due to his language abilities, his grades suffered his first year at high school but he ended up graduating in the top 10 percent of his class. This remarkable achievement stems in part from his close relationship with his sophomore year ESL teacher, which went way beyond the classroom, as well as his parents, who aggressively pushed him to succeed academically. In general, he had a successful first year at college, but did not get the 4.0 GPA he hoped for.

### ***Paola***

Paola came to the United States in first grade with parents who immigrated seeking better opportunities for their children. She was in a bilingual program until fifth grade; however, like other students, she reported a tough transition into mainstream classes as the bilingual program was mostly in Spanish. Paola and Joanne were close friends, always sitting together in their senior English classes and helping each other with class activities. In high school, Paola was a bit of a hippie, carrying a hemp bag emblazoned with a marijuana leaf and wearing more casual and baggy clothes than the other female students in her class. She spoke English very well and was a strong writer, something likely supported by her deep thinking personality. She started college at BCC and earned a 4.0 GPA her first semester, but stopped out<sup>9</sup> her second semester as she became more involved in a relationship with a boyfriend across the border.

### **Yesenia**

Yesenia had one of the most active social lives of the students in the study (i.e., she liked to party), regularly bringing friends to interviews and talking about going out on the weekends. She came to the United States in fourth grade with her mother and older brother. She said she did not have a father, which may be taken to mean she did not know or remember him. After a failed attempt to settle in Denver, Yesenia's family returned to Ciudad Juárez before settling in El Paso. Compared to other students in this study, Yesenia faced more education-related challenges, possibly because she transitioned to the US educational system later than some of the others. She was in an ESL program from fourth through seventh grade, and transitioned to mainstream English in eighth grade. She graduated high school with a B average and was placed in developmental writing classes upon starting at BU.

### **Data Collection**

The primary and most important source of data came from interviews with the student participants in this study, which were held three times a semester. These interviews were semi-structured, guided by six questionnaires (see Appendix A for student survey and interview guides). I asked students questions that focused on their background and home lives, their favorite and least favorite writing teachers and practices, the writing experiences they had in high school and college, their attitudes and experiences with standardized testing, and successes and challenges they faced both inside and outside school. Before each interview, previous interview transcripts were reviewed in order to modify questions or, if necessary, formulate follow up questions. Student interviews provided the most personal view into the students' lives and helped examine how they view their development and how they reacted to the numerous contextual factors influencing their development as writers. The personal contact afforded by these interviews gave me an opportunity to build trust with participants that was essential in obtaining meaningful, honest, and helpful responses from them.

In addition to student interviews, interviews were conducted with the participants' writing teachers and, at the college level, a few other relevant teachers and administrators. During high school, I interviewed the senior English teacher I worked with, Mr. Robertson, as well as most of the English teachers at the school. At the college level, I interviewed the students' writing instructors, or in the case that a student did not have a writing instructor, an instructor from a class where they were likely to

do more writing such as a first-year seminar. Teacher interviews focused on pedagogical practices, types of assignments, hindrances to providing good writing instruction, use of technology, and opinions of the participant/s they taught.

Other interviews at the college level were conducted with the head of a scholarship program one student was involved in, history professors, and administrators who focused on improving students' first-year experiences. Administrator interviews centered on their experiences promoting student success and the history professor interviews focused on how and why they focused so much on writing in their classes. Protocols for teacher and administrator interviews are found in Appendix B.

Another important source of data came from classroom observations. As mentioned earlier, I took a more active role in the classroom at the high school level. For the students' last semester at college, I attended classes twice a week, alternating classes each week due to the block scheduling used at the school. Because of the nature of action research, observation notes were taken during down times in class or between classes, which led to fewer notes than I normally would have taken. At the college level, I took a traditional researcher stance in the classroom because of my familiarity with the perspective of a college instructor. Here, I focused on observing participants' writing classes and, in the case that they did not have a writing class, a related class where they did writing such as their first-year seminar. I observed three classes for each student each semester, and interviewed the teachers of these classes. These observations focused on what the teacher and my focal students said or did during the classes since the other students in the classes were not involved in this study.

I collected writing samples from students as they were willing to share them. With permission, I made copies of their senior English portfolios; however, some students had full portfolios while others had barely anything in them, preferring to keep work at home because of concerns that other students would take their work. I also made copies of at least two major senior year assignments for their English class. At the college level, some students actively came to me for feedback, emailing essays from not only their English classes but also their history class. In other cases, where students did not send me writing for feedback, I collected at least one sample a semester from students or their teachers, usually more.

Because of our close relationship, the high school teacher shared much of his teaching materials and lesson plans. For the college level English classes, I collected syllabi, and when students or teachers shared them, individual assignment prompts for essays. Since the BU

FYC curriculum was standardized, information about the assignment prompts were taken from the program guide. In addition to having FYC class assignments, a few BU students shared their history assignments as well (the BCC students did not write in history classes). In addition to class-related documentation, I collected materials such as school newspapers, announcements distributed in class, and other items that were relevant in better understanding the study sites.

### Theoretical Framework and Analysis

A number of researchers have critiqued how traditional academic research focuses too intently on the classroom, ignoring the importance of students' lives outside the classroom in determining their success (Arispe y Acevedo 2008; Cummins 2000; Leki 2007; Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora 2000). While what occurs in the classroom is important, data consistently show that characteristics such as family income level, parents' educational background, employment while attending school, and social connections on campus are correlated with success. Understanding that students' transitions to college—and their success in writing classes—are situated in a much larger context, I designed this study to examine both students' curricular and extracurricular lives and argue throughout that both need to be considered by researchers in studies on college transition and writing development. Bourdieu's theories of habitus, capital, and field<sup>10</sup> along with Yosso's (2005) theory of community cultural wealth, a reinterpretation of Bourdieu's theory of capital informed by Critical Race Theory (CRT), provided a theoretical framework that moved data collection and analysis beyond the classroom to help me situate the institutions and writing classrooms students passed through in a broader context.

Throughout the case studies, I include figures based on Yosso's (2005) theory of community cultural wealth. Traditional research has often used Bourdieu's theories of habitus and capital to focus on how LM students lack the habitus and capital necessary to succeed in schools (Oropeza, Varghese, and Kanno 2010; Yosso 2005). Understanding that Bourdieu's theories were being used unjustly (and, as I argue in chapter 7, inaccurately), Yosso (2005, 74) used a CRT framework to reinterpret Bourdieu's theories, which she said "refutes dominant ideology and White privilege while validating and centering the experiences of People of Color." Instead of perpetuating the deficit mindset, Yosso began with the premise that minority communities possess cultural wealth. In her study, she identified six types of community cultural wealth:

- aspirational capital—high aspirations possessed by community members for a child’s future
- linguistic capital—“the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style” (2005, 78)
- familial capital—extended family network, including immediate family, extended family, and close friends
- social capital—“networks of people and community resources” (79)
- navigational capital—the ability, with help of the social and familial network, to negotiate unfamiliar institutions
- resistant capital—“oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” (80)

In readapting Yosso’s model, I included challenges that the study participants faced in making successful transitions to college, understanding that it is important to account for these while avoiding the “deficit” mindset that Yosso criticized. The figures presented leave out resistant capital, since it was not a common theme among the participants.

As is typical for longitudinal studies like this one, data were analyzed recursively throughout the collection process. All interviews were transcribed, read recursively, and coded as the study progressed. Codes were developed inductively from the data, and separate sets of codes were developed for the instructor and student participants. Student codes identified attitudes toward teachers, fellow students, challenges and sources of support, and reading and writing assignments, among other items. Teacher codes identified themes such as philosophies about teaching, types of assignments given, and attitudes toward multilingual students as well as students in this study. I began to write the case studies while collecting data, revisiting previous data, incoming data, and the case study drafts, refining them through and beyond the data collection process. Data were triangulated throughout this process, with student and teacher interview data being compared with observational data. This triangulation helped me move beyond the bias inherent in participants selectively remembering experiences or wishing to construct a particular image of themselves and those around them.<sup>11</sup>

## PLAN OF THE BOOK

The next chapter begins by exploring why students decided to pursue a college degree and how they chose between attending a two-year or four-year institution. The remainder focuses on exploring writing instruction at the different institutions involved in this study in more

detail, drawing on institutional and observational data along with the interviews conducted with teachers at the high school and college levels.

Chapters 3–6 turn to student case studies that are grouped by how smoothly students transitioned into college. Like Leki (2007), I utilize secondary sources minimally in these chapters in order to focus on the students' stories. The case studies are all similarly structured, starting by detailing the students' backgrounds as well as the challenges and sources of support they found within school and outside of school. Joanne's and Daniel's stories are shared in the third chapter, "Struggling Transitions." The next chapter, "Difficult but Successful Transitions," focuses on Bianca and Yesenia who overcame great odds to have successful first years at college. Chapter 5, "Smooth Transitions," discusses the experiences of Maricio and Carolina, who excelled in high school and transitioned to college with relative ease. The sixth chapter, "An Unpredictable Transition," features Paola, who started out strong her first semester but dropped out early in her second semester because of personal choices.

Chapter 7 revisits the case studies in light of two theoretical frameworks, Bourdieu's analytical tools of habitus, capital, and field as well as Yosso's theory of community cultural wealth, and explores how students formed robust networks of capital to facilitate transitions to college. This is followed by a discussion that moves the discourse of student success away from student failures to a focus on how students are failed by institutional and other factors.

The final chapter concludes the book by offering ways that writing administrators, teachers, and researchers can facilitate institutional and societal transformations to more effectively support LM students as they write across institutions. I explore how teachers and administrators can assess student needs and redesign program and classroom curricula to engage and support the success of LM student populations. I suggest ways that writing administrators and teachers work toward curriculum alignment across institutions while developing stronger community engagement in writing programs. Finally, I call on researchers to rethink composition studies' processes of disciplinary knowledge construction in order to gain more credibility with institutional leaders and policy makers.

The book concludes with an epilogue based on interviews with five of the seven students at the end of their second year in college. It depicts how their stories are continually being formed and emphasizes the multitude of factors that come into play as students transition into and through college, explaining that while the first year is important in determining student success, much can happen beyond the first year.

## Notes

1. Institution names and all participant names are pseudonyms.
2. I use a few different terms to refer to diverse student populations throughout this book. The most prominent one is Latina/o. I prefer this term over Hispanic because of the politicized nature the latter has acquired through being an official census and institutional term. In using Latina/o, it is important to be aware of the work of Hall Kells (1999) and others who have explored the problematic nature surrounding the broadness of a label which treats first, second, and third generation immigrants who originally came from a wide number of different countries as a homogeneous group. In order to be more specific, I use Mexican American when talking only about the students in this study. In expanding the discussion to include multilingual non-Latina/o minorities, I refer to linguistic minority students, which Kanno and Harklau (2012, 2) define as “multilingual individuals who speak a non-English language at home.” Daniel is the only student who does not quite fit under this label, as he did not really learn Spanish until high school and speaks mostly English at home; however, Spanish was an important part of his home life, especially in communicating with his grandmother.
3. Throughout this manuscript, I prefer the term retention over persistence even though the latter is more commonly used among retention researchers like Tinto (1993). Retention focuses on the need for an institution to take action to help make students successful, while persistence places the onus on individual students to succeed. Consequently, as I focus on the need for institutional change in order to avoid upholding the tradition of looking at students through a deficit lens (i.e. they fail to persist), I prefer retention in this manuscript. In doing so, I do recognize a sense of mutual responsibility and that the primary goal of retention initiatives should be to help students persist towards graduation, not simply boost institutional retention rates. Similarly, I recognize Adelman’s (2006, 107) point that overemphasizing institutional agency has the risk of treating students as deficient and passive receptors of institutional interventions.
4. Arum and Roksa (2011, 71) defined substantial as twenty plus pages of writing in a class over the course of the semester and a weekly average of forty plus pages of reading. These expectations could be met in different classes.
5. As will be discussed later, even the highest achieving students in this study did not complete all the reading they were assigned, often choosing to skim the reading or not do it at all when they knew it would be lectured through in class. On the other end of the spectrum, some students did little to no reading assigned to them, in part because they were not held accountable for it.
6. Enrollment and, where relevant, tuition data for the three institutions were collected from district and/or institutional websites.
7. In 1988, the Texas legislature created an official definition for at risk students, which was defined as a student meeting one or more of the following conditions: “The student had been retained one or more times in Grades 1–6 based on academic achievement and remained unable to master the Essential Elements at the current grade level; the student was two or more years below grade level in reading or mathematics; the student had failed at least two courses in one or more semesters and was not expected to graduate within four years of entering ninth grade; the student had failed one or more of the reading, writing, or mathematics sections of the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS), beginning with the seventh grade” (TEA, 2006, 102). Interestingly, in the report from which this information was taken, the authors repeatedly grouped “at risk” with “immigrant,” “limited English proficiency,” and “migrant” when referring to “other student characteristics” (50).

8. The TAKS was the assessment used by Texas since 2003 but has recently been phased out, replaced for the 2011–2012 school year by the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR). The new test requires students to write two essays rather than one (TEA 2011b), so it may lead to better writing instruction as long as those two essays are from different genres.
9. Stop out is an alternative to drop out, as the latter and more commonly recognized term indicates that one is perpetually out of higher education after a moment of departure. Stop out on the other hand indicates that some students come and go for reasons such as saving money to pay for tuition, and that it does not mean they have given up on pursuing higher education. I prefer the term stop out to drop out throughout this book, because it is normal for non-traditional students to go in and out of college.
10. For those unfamiliar with Bourdieu's framework, field is the encompassing framework where habitus and capital are developed, and one can inhabit multiple fields. In this study, I considered the participants' home and educational settings as different fields and broke down the educational field by institution: high school, community college, and university. This was further broken down to the classroom level. Because this study was conducted on the border, I considered, along with the local contexts in both countries, the state and national context in the United States. One develops certain dispositions or habitus, based on the fields they inhabit. This habitus may be better aligned for success and capital acquisition in certain fields while not as useful in a different field or fields. Capital can refer both to economic and cultural capital, with certain ways of being and acquisition of tangible or intangible objects valued in different ways in different fields. Looking at the high school to college transitions of students requires one to consider how the habitus they developed in high school (and the associated capital that brought them to a particular high school and supported or failed to support their studies within) facilitates or hinders their transition to college.
11. This was particularly the case with Mauricio. For instance, he told me he would never speak Spanish in his English class, but observations revealed this to be different. He brutally chastised some of his first-year college instructors, and observations confirmed some of these critiques while dispelling others.