

When Access Is Not Enough: Retaining Basic Writers at an Open-Admission University

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ABSTRACT: The author describes the challenges of a four-year, open-admission institution where equality of access has not equaled equality of success for basic writers. While there is a good deal of scholarship on student departure by compositions and experts in student retention and persistence, some models of student departure and success offered by these scholars are inadequate; a more comprehensive approach that embraces the intellectual and social elements of student success is needed. This article argues that the field of basic writing must turn its critical gaze to issues surrounding the success, as well as access, of basic writers at four-year universities.

KEYWORDS: basic writing; retention; student success; higher education; support services

Over the past fifteen years, much has been written about the elimination of basic writing courses at four-year universities. For example, Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson discuss the creation of studio courses after the shuttering of basic writing courses at the University of South Carolina; Sugie Goen-Salter articulates the development of San Francisco State University's Integrated Reading and Writing program in response to the threatened elimination of "remedial courses," including basic writing; and George Otte describes the birth and death of basic writing at CUNY's City College. In many cases, this elimination has been mandated by state legislatures and boards of regents who deem basic writing as "remedial" instruction which forces taxpayers to "pay twice" for the same education—i.e., to fund the learning of material that presumably was taught at the high school level, an education that was financed with previously collected taxes. Further, all too often the purging of basic writing at four-year universities has

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been tied to the discontinuation of affirmative action and open-admission policies at institutions such as the University of Washington (Stygall) and the eleven four-year colleges that compose the City University of New York (Gleason). In short, many basic writing scholar-teachers are deeply troubled by the fact that immediate access to education at four-year institutions has been jeopardized for so many of our students.

I share these concerns, as I have had the misfortune of witnessing the end of open-admission policies and the elimination of basic writing at four-year universities that I dearly loved and that were formative influences in my professional development. In 1997, I entered the field of composition as a professional tutor in basic writing courses at the University of Cincinnati's former University College, a two-year, open-admission college on the university's main campus. During the two years I spent at my hometown university, I worked alongside professors in their classrooms and tutored in a writing center exclusively dedicated to basic writers; my decision to enter graduate school and become a professor was largely shaped by the mentoring and encouragement I received from the professors and students with whom I collaborated. Thus, it was crushing for me, both personally and professionally, to learn of the elimination of UCollege in 2003, four years after I ended my employment there to attend graduate school. The rationale for these changes, as explained by Michelle Gibson and Deborah T. Meem—who for many years taught basic writing at the former UCollege—rested in the administration's desire to move the university up the ranks of national research institutions (64).¹ While UCollege was replaced by an open-admission academic unit called the Center for Access and Transition, it too has been disbanded as of Fall 2010, leaving little, if any, room for basic writers at the University of Cincinnati. Later, as a Ph.D. student and basic writing instructor and administrator at The Ohio State University in the early to mid-2000s, I saw the end of open-admissions on the Columbus campus and the resulting decline of the Writing Workshop, Ohio State's basic writing program. The motivation for this change was similar: the new president of Ohio State hoped admission selectivity would raise the university's ranking into the top ten of public research institutions.

Having the opportunity to work with so many gifted basic writing instructors and students at formative stages of my professional development was the defining experience of my career, and it has been painful for me to see these scholar-teachers and student writers cast aside by their universities in a never-ending attempt to scale the rankings of Research I schools. Given this personal and professional history, it should be evident that I

am highly sympathetic to our field's concerns about basic writers' access to four-year institutions; I strongly believe that those of us who are invested in basic writing must continue to fight for the place of our students at these universities. However, after teaching basic writers at an open-admission university for the past five years, I have also come to the conclusion that we must expand our conversations about equality of access to include calls for equality of success. We must make room in our conversations about basic writing and basic writers for studies of retention and student persistence² and assert more forcefully that access is not enough. Drawing on scholarship of student departure by compositionists and experts in student retention/persistence, as well as my own critical insights gained through teaching and research conducted at my institution, I will argue that we as basic writing scholar-teachers must devote as much critical attention to offering basic writers equality of success as we do to offering them equality of access. It is time to discuss retention and persistence.

Why Access Is Not Enough: The Complexities of Open Admission

Since 2006, I have taught basic writers at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW); I also coordinate the basic writing program. IPFW is a joint, regional, four-year campus of two larger, Research 1 institutions (Indiana and Purdue Universities) and has approximately 14,000 students, most of whom are commuters. While the university does not advertise itself as an open-admission institution, all returning adult students (ages 26 and older) are admitted as long as they have a high school diploma or a G.E.D.; about 30% of IPFW students are returning adults (Office of Institutional Research). Many traditional-age students come to IPFW because they were denied admission to Purdue or Indiana, which have more selective admission policies, and were offered admission to IPFW instead. While IPFW is perhaps not technically open-admission for traditional-age students, fewer than 100 of these students were denied admission for the Fall 2008 semester (Office of Institutional Research). Thus, the university is perceived by faculty, students, and the Fort Wayne community as having a de-facto open-admission policy.

Open-admission institutions are known for having retention and persistence rates lower than those of more selective institutions. According to the most recent ACT data, four-year graduation rates at public, open-admission institutions that award bachelor's and master's degrees—in other words, institutions like mine—stand at 19.6%, fifteen percentage

points lower than those of more selective admission institutions. The six-year graduation rate is 37.2%, twenty percentage points lower than that of schools with selective admission policies. However, even when compared to similar institutions, IPFW's rates are disturbingly low. *The Journal Gazette*, a Fort Wayne newspaper, reports that students entering IPFW in 1999 had a four-year graduation rate of 4% and a six-year graduation rate of 18%. These rates are the second-lowest of any four-year public institution in the state of Indiana (Soderlund).

First-to-second-year retention rates tell a similar, though not as dire, story. The ACT data reveal that public, open-admission schools that award bachelor's and master's degrees retain 65.9% of their students after the first year, but once again, IPFW's rates are lower than those of comparable universities. According to William Baden, Senior Analyst in IPFW's Office of Institutional Research, of the Fall 2006 entering class, 60% were enrolled by Fall 2007. First-to-second year retention rates for basic writers at IPFW are lower still. For basic writing students who began their college education in the Fall semesters of 2003-2007, the retention rate was 56.7%; for first-year writing students, the retention rate was 64.6%.

As a teacher of basic writing, I know the lived truth of these statistics. My dean does not have to tell me that the basic writing course I teach currently has an average DWF (drop, withdraw, fail) rate of 31.05%. As the coordinator of the basic writing program, I receive phone calls and emails from instructors worried that so many of their students are disappearing; even the most cursory glance inside my own classroom can confirm that by the end of the semester, several students are either no longer enrolled or regularly attending class. My heart breaks each term as students—some of whom had been among the most promising performers—stop attending class, replying to emails, and turning in assignments, leading them to automatic failure of the course. Almost all of the students who fail my basic writing classes do so not because they turned in work of poor quality, but because they have not turned in any work at all.

Yet all of these students have had access to an education at a four-year institution. Further, since 2008—when IPFW instituted guided self-placement—all of these students have voluntarily placed themselves into a re-designed basic writing course built on the best practices and theoretical understandings of our field.³ On the first day of the semester, those of us who teach basic writing at IPFW no longer meet angry students who resent being placed in a non-credit-bearing course; instead, we welcome into our three-credit course students who have chosen to take the class and who often

view it as a fresh start, a place where they can have more time to adjust to a previous lack of writing instruction, an absence from formal schooling, or fears caused by writing anxiety. Our course is built on access, inclusion, equity, and respect for student knowledge—core values for basic writing scholar-teachers, values I share and embrace. But, quite simply, they are not enough for students at institutions like mine.

Equality of Access, Equality of Success: Social Justice and Basic Writing

Students like those I teach should have the opportunity for not only equality of access to the university, but also equality of success once they are there. In her plenary address to the 2010 Research Network Forum, Michelle Hall Kells described the experiences of Hispanic students at the University of New Mexico and contended that while these students have an equal opportunity for university admission, once they are there, they do not persist towards graduation at rates equal to those of their peers. As she writes in a 2007 article, “[T]he Lottery Scholarship in New Mexico mak[es] access to higher education tuition-free for every high school graduate with a GPA 2.5 or higher. However, the absence of support mechanisms across the curriculum for emerging college writers exacerbates students’ lack of preparation for the demands of college-level writing,” later adding that “more than a third of our first-year college students fail to finish their degrees and graduate” (90). In other words, while these students have equality of access to the University of New Mexico, they do not have equality of success.

I share Kells’ concerns and find them applicable to basic writing, particularly in light of Susan Naomi Bernstein’s “Social Justice Initiative for Basic Writing,” which describes the “unjust educational conditions for students [. . . that impede] successful matriculation and retention” among basic writers. In this article, Bernstein reminds readers of the 1974 NCTE resolution “On Support for Motivated but Inadequately Prepared College Students,” which reads:

Resolved, that the National Council of Teachers of English encourage college and university administrations, and legislative bodies, to allocate sufficient funds to provide individualized and supportive programs for students who are motivated but inadequately prepared for success in colleges and universities to which they are being admitted.

Bernstein argues that, in spite of the many years that have passed since the resolution, its goals have not been reached; thus, she proposes that the Conference on Basic Writing take specific steps to realize more fully the spirit of the resolution. Our field has come closer to meeting some of Bernstein's outcomes more than others. For example, many institutions, including my own, "provide basic writing courses that include college-level content." As described in the previous section, the basic writing program of which I am part was successful in "removing the label of 'remediation' from such courses" as well.

The other measures Bernstein lays out are more difficult to address. Some involve outreach efforts with community partners and taking public in some way the work our students do. Bernstein writes that the possibilities here include "consultations with K-12 language arts students and their parents, teachers, and administrators; multimedia texts including texts for the general public as well as for the profession; face-to-face presentations to conferences and to the larger community." Service-learning would be one such way for basic writing courses to "go public," and as a graduate student, I taught basic writing courses in which my students tutored third graders at local elementary schools in reading and writing. Although establishing and maintaining such partnerships can be challenging, the rising prevalence of service-learning suggests that our field is edging closer to enacting the public role Bernstein describes. Similarly, while it may be difficult to "link [. . .] our efforts for basic writing to social justice concerns for historically disenfranchised communities," this move is certainly not uncommon in our scholarly discourse about basic writing and the courses and curriculum many of us develop, such as summer bridge programs for students from culturally and economically diverse backgrounds.

Where our field has significantly fallen short is in the two areas most applicable to the argument of this article. Bernstein writes that the field of basic writing must work on "[p]ersuading college and university administrators, legislative bodies, and other stakeholders to allocate sustainable funding for programs that provide access and retention services to entering students" and "[e]ducating students about and providing students with necessary resources for obtaining an equitable education." These resources include "financial aid and academic and personal counseling," in addition to removing restrictions that force students to pass basic writing courses before taking classes in other subject areas, including the fine arts. The issues Bernstein delineates have been a challenge for many years, even before the implosion of the United States' economy in Fall 2008—which incidentally

is the same time Bernstein's resolution was published in *BWe: Basic Writing e-Journal*. I doubt that any of us can remember halcyon days in which the courses and additional resources needed by basic writers were fully funded and plentiful, as the needs have been critical for some time.

Bernstein's call has taken on even more urgency since its publication, however, as prospective and current students from the "historically disenfranchised communities" Bernstein references have been the most impacted by the "Great Recession." According to *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2009*, a report issued by the Census Bureau in September 2010, household income in 2009 was 11.8% lower for African-Americans than it was in the year 2000, and 2009 household income for Hispanics was 7.9% lower than it was in 2000 (8). Unsurprisingly, as household income decreased, poverty increased; CBS News reports that in 2009, "The share of Americans below half the poverty line—\$10,977 for a family of four—rose from 5.7 percent in 2008 to 6.3 percent. It was the highest level since the government began tracking that group in 1975." Economic stratification has also worsened. The level of income inequality in the United States in 2009 was the greatest of all Western, industrialized countries and had not been higher since the Census Bureau began collecting this data over forty years ago (Yen). Further, as Smeeding and Thompson write, "With over 8.4 million jobs lost in the recession, unemployment rates are in the 9 percent to 10 percent range and in double digits and higher for young and undereducated workers" (2)—and by "young and undereducated workers," the authors mean those workers without college degrees who are under 34 years of age (2-3).

These are the students who are currently flooding into many of our basic writing classrooms in an attempt to escape the ravages of this economy. Like most regional comprehensive universities, IPFW has experienced record growth every semester since Fall 2008, and my students fit the profile described by Smeeding and Thompson. These students have lost their jobs, their homes, and their certainty that they can provide for their families; according to data gathered by IPFW's Office of Student Affairs, 40% of IPFW first-year students "are between not at all and moderately confident that they can pay their monthly living expenses" (McClellan). These are the students who can least afford to take on additional debt, such as student loans, yet they do so because they believe that a college education is the answer to their economic woes. And when they leave the university before graduation, as so many IPFW students do, they will have accumulated thousands of dollars of debt for their abbreviated foray into the world of higher education—with

very little to show for it in terms of job prospects that will enable them to pay off those loans and support themselves, as well as others who may rely on them.

The disenfranchisement that drives these students to the university is all too often replicated in academe. Bernstein's caution against the "unjust educational conditions for students [. . . that impede] successful matriculation and retention" takes on even greater import in this age of misguided legislation and dramatic cuts to state funding of higher education. I understand the multitude of pressures many basic writing programs face. As the basic writing coordinator at my university, I was part of a team that created a new basic writing course after a state mandate outsourced so-called "remedial" education from four-year universities to community colleges; we are now preparing to fight a possible attempt by the state to remove *all* first-year writing instruction from four-year universities, and we are doing so while coping with significant cuts in state funding. Sadly, the path of immediate access to an education at a four-year institution has been—or soon will be—lost for too many basic writers.

While equal access is incredibly important, there is another issue our field must confront if we are to realize Bernstein's vision. That issue is student success. Though certainly not ideal, basic writers *do* have access to two-year colleges through which they can gain entry to four-year schools; further, some basic writers, such as those at my university, still have access to four-year institutions. In other words, basic writers *do* have a path—even if it is delayed—of access to four-year universities. Where is there an equivalent path of success for these students? That is the question we must seek to answer. As a field, we cannot in good conscience proclaim the importance of equal access to four-year institutions when many of the students who do have such access do not have equal success—not when the economic stakes are devastatingly high for so many of our students. In the interest of social justice, we must address access *and* success for our students.

Integrating into the “Invented” University: Retention and Composition Scholarship

Some scholars have already begun to problematize conceptions of access and argue for a renewed focus on student support and success. Pegeen Reichert Powell offers an overview of retention scholarship and calls for composition scholars to investigate which of our students persist until graduation and why, noting that “[w]hat retention research compels us

to do is to make sure that when we do argue for increased access to higher education, that the structures are in place to help all students persist” (674). Mary Soliday questions our field’s discourse of access, writing that there is “a dominant ideology in which basic writing is equivalent to access in ways that exaggerate, or at least simplify, the agency of programs and teachers,” further arguing “this influential ideology of access [. . .] tends to downplay or even exclude other factors—especially material or institutional ones—which affect students’ access to the BA” (55-56). These factors may include the cost of tuition, books, and housing and/or commuting; the availability of safe, high-quality, and affordable childcare; well-funded, trained, and staffed student support services, including tutoring, advising, services for students with disabilities, and personal and career counseling; the availability of financial aid; and the university’s location, particularly if it is readily and reliably accessible to those without a car or to students with limited physical mobility. In other words, these are the very same resources Bernstein reaffirms the importance of in “Social Justice Initiative for Basic Writing,” and without them, students will not be retained or receive the “equitable education” which they deserve.

Other scholars have written about revisions they have made to basic writing instruction at their institutions and the impact of those changes on student retention and performance, with varying degrees of attention to the issues raised by Bernstein. Beth Brunk-Chavez and Elaine Fredericksen examine retention and success rates in composition courses at the University of Texas-El Paso; their study, which found that low placement test and diagnostic test scores correlate with low grades, focuses solely on student performance within composition courses and addresses neither students’ persistence towards graduation nor the institutional resources described above. Similarly, in “*Stretch at 10*,” Greg Glau notes that students who take the Stretch first-year writing course continue into the next writing course at higher rates than do their peers who take the traditional version. Glau also recognizes a relationship between class size and retention, writing that “‘retention’ rates for students taking [the required writing sequence] are all higher than they were when class sizes were larger” (43); issues of retention rooted in needs beyond the writing classroom were outside the scope of the article. Finally, McCurrie describes a summer bridge program at Columbia College Chicago and how administrators, basic writing teachers, and students define success differently, further arguing that these differences impact retention efforts. McCurrie writes that today’s economic climate and its attendant impact on students have pushed his program’s instructors

to re-define access and earnestly reflect on the consequences of student failure, as “we must consider the potential financial and personal damage to students who are not likely to succeed at the college” (41). Without the type of reflective action and resources endorsed by McCurrie, Soliday, and Bernstein, we risk that access will become nothing more than an empty promise, as it sometimes feels at institutions like my own.

In addition to the research compositionists have done on retention and persistence, educational theorists and those working in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) have produced a large body of scholarship on issues surrounding student access and success. Among these scholars, arguably the most widely-known and influential is Vincent Tinto, whose theories about student persistence and departure—first published in 1975—are referred to as the “Tinto Model.” The model’s principles of effective retention are as follows:

- Effective retention programs are committed to the students they serve [. . . and] put student welfare ahead of other institutional goals.
- Effective retention programs are first and foremost committed to the education of all, not just some, of their students.
- Effective retention programs are committed to the development of supportive social and educational communities in which all students are integrated as competent members. (Tinto 146-47)

The Tinto Model has been widely accepted among retention scholars as a valid understanding of student departure, and its influence is seen in the rising prevalence of student support services and programs such as learning communities, intrusive advising, and academic support and success centers and their attendant programs. Many of these scholars argue that such measures improve student retention, persistence, and success, and research at my own university supports such a claim. For example, in her study of a learning community section of a basic writing course, Rachelle Darabi found that “82% of students enrolled the following year versus the overall retention rate at IPFW of 65%” (67). Additionally, students enrolled in this particular class had a DWF (drop, withdrawal, fail) rate of 25%, in comparison to the 31% rate for basic writing classes offered that term that were not part of a learning community. These data have prompted my university to offer an increasing number of learning communities each year.

However, Tinto’s theories have not been without their critics. William G. Tierney writes that the Tinto Model, with its emphasis on student

integration, has “the effect of merely inserting minorities into a dominant cultural frame of reference that is transmitted within dominant cultural forms, leaving invisible cultural hierarchies intact” (611). In other words, the Tinto Model suggests that if students will only assimilate into university life and adopt the values of academe, then students will be successful. The role of oppressive social forces such as racism, sexism, and classism in the academy are not accounted for, according to Tierney.

Ernest T. Pascarella has argued that the Tinto Model is limited to four-year, residential college students and does not address the experiences of students at two-year colleges; Pascarella, along with co-author Patrick Terenzini, would later write in *How College Affects Students* that this exclusion is a weakness of much retention and persistence research. The thrust of this argument is that since the needs of two-year, commuter, returning adult, and/or part-time students are quite different from those of students found at four-year residential institutions, these “non-traditional” students require a different model that recognizes their needs.

In response to these critiques, Tinto has returned to and revised these concepts multiple times, most notably in the second edition of *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, accounting somewhat for the experiences of students of color, returning adults, commuters, and two-year college students. However, these revisions are still inadequate because they fail to take into account students’ abilities, desires, and motivation to integrate themselves into full-fledged membership in the academy—or, to use the words of David Bartholomae, to “invent the university” for themselves. As those of us who teach basic writing well know, the students who are most at risk of not “integrating into” (Tinto) or “inventing the university” (Bartholomae)—first-generation college students, poor and working-class students, students of color—are the very same students who are disproportionately represented in basic writing courses. How should our curriculum and pedagogy work to help our students invent the university for themselves—or, more accurately, *re*-invent the university—as a space which better reflects their cultural norms? How do we likewise address the needs of students who don’t necessarily want this membership or who, for various reasons, cannot pursue it at this particular stage of their lives? Given the current economic climate, some students steeped in the literacy myths prevalent in American culture may be reluctant to commit their time and money, to take on the financial burden, and—in some cases—sacrifice personal, familial, and cultural relationships in the name of joining the academy when there is no longer any guarantee that doing so will result

in enhanced employment opportunities and economic status. How do we make higher education relevant for these students?

The question also remains as to how possible it is for all students to do the type of “integrating” or “inventing” which Tinto and Bartholomae claim is necessary. Bartholomae asserts that “the ability to imagine privilege enabled writing” from the students he studied (607), never questioning what this privilege means, how it works, and who does—and does not—have it. Further, as Harriet Malinowitz has noted, Bartholomae assumes that all students want to obtain this privilege and put it to use in their writing (83), a questionable assumption, at best. As alluded to above, many, though not all, basic writers experience conflicts between their schooling and relationships (especially with family and friends), work, and cultural identity (DiPardo, Mutnick, Rose) and may not want to “integrate” into the academy if doing so implies turning one’s back on loved ones and the community with which one identifies. Further, Mutnick argues that according to Bartholomae, “it is the individual’s failure to appropriate the knowledge and the discursive conventions of the academy that will result in his or her exclusion from it” (40). While it is certainly valid to claim that writers must understand the demands of the audience for which they are writing—and this general idea is one of Bartholomae’s claims in “Inventing the University”—at the same time, critical attention must be paid to the inequalities in which those demands, and writers’ abilities to meet those demands, may be rooted. And it is this area that is overlooked in “Inventing the University,” as Mutnick writes that Bartholomae “does not question the oppressive structures that undergird the [educational] system as a whole, nor the fact that those who enter universities start out in unequal positions determined by more than their familiarity with academic language” (40). In short, like Tierney’s previously cited critique of the Tinto Model, Bartholomae’s argument is one rooted in assimilationist tendencies.

It is virtually impossible to discuss persistence and retention without Tinto, as it is similarly difficult to theorize basic writing without alluding to the work of Bartholomae. These scholars continue to play an enormous role in theorizing the issues this student population faces, and as compositionists, we particularly need to be aware of the Tinto Model’s enormous power in fields other than our own. Yet Tinto’s and Bartholomae’s models have been thoroughly debated and tested over many years. Scholars have firmly established their deficiencies, as well as their strengths, including Tinto’s insistence on educating all students and his concern for community and student welfare. Similarly, Bartholomae’s work has forced us as compositionists to consider the connection between reading and writing; the importance of

assignment sequencing; and the role particular academic discourses play, whether for good or for ill, in students' acclimation to the academy.

While I am troubled by Bartholomae's lack of attention to the complexities of privilege and his emphasis on assimilation, what interests me most about his essay for the purposes of this article are issues that have been addressed neither by the field of composition as a whole, nor by the essay's detractors. As a field, we have argued that, in order to succeed in the university, students must somehow—whether through assimilationist or adaptive techniques—find a place for themselves within the university, but we have spent very little time exploring *how* actual students do so; or, to use Bartholomae's term, little scholarship investigates how real students go about “inventing the university” for themselves. We have spent even less time exploring how marginalized populations, such as basic writers, invent the university and succeed in it. Instead, we have tended to focus on how these students have failed to invent the university and, more commonly, how the university has failed these students.

We rarely discuss what enables the success of students like Nicole,⁴ a first-generation, working adult student in her early 30s who returned to school while single parenting her own two children and her orphaned teenage sister. Nicole earned an A- in my basic writing course and is on track to another excellent grade in first-year composition, while coping with the loss of her job, the foreclosure of her home, and the demands of higher education after fifteen years away from school. According to much of our research, Nicole is at-risk; stories of students like her have been told many times before, and they typically end in the same way: the student fails the course, drops out of school, or falls off the researcher's radar. My own scholarship tells some of those stories, too; they are, to some extent, unavoidable, and they touch on important issues for study and analysis. Our field would be remiss if we did not examine them.

Yet this emphasis has inadvertently led to a lapse in our scholarship: we have not sufficiently questioned how marginalized students find ways to succeed in the academy. If, as Bartholomae asserts, privilege enables writing, then what will enable basic writers to imagine the university, as many of them are, like Nicole, students for whom privilege may be so limited that it is difficult to imagine? What is it that enabled Nicole to negotiate *her* entrance into the academy? Her supportive classmates, many of whom were also single parents, strike me as one possibility; her intense desire to model perseverance and academic achievement for her children and her sister is another factor in my mind. Her connections with on-campus resources,

such as the writing center and IPFW's Center for Women and Returning Adults, were vital as well. I know from talks with Nicole that the basic writing courses' semester-long investigation into the transition to college was important in helping her figure out university life. But what about other curricular and pedagogical decisions I made in the courses Nicole and I shared? Most of all, what was the impact of Nicole's life outside the writing classroom, outside the university? What role did these factors play in Nicole's academic performance?

These are the questions we must seek to answer by constructing a model of student performance that goes beyond some of the dichotomies related to Bartholomae or Tinto, one that is as concerned with student success as it is student access, one that takes up the call put forth by Bernstein in "Social Justice Initiative for Basic Writing." What is needed is a theoretical and pedagogical framework that seeks to support and educate all students by supplying them with institutional resources and assisting them in developing and deploying, in Tinto's words, the "supportive social and educational communities" needed for academic success, while also being respectful of students' desires and goals and the conflicts inherent in any writing classroom.

Conclusion: Insuring Access and Success for Basic Writers

In their article "Powerful Institutional Levers to Reduce College Student Departure," John M. Braxton and Meaghan E. Mundy list forty-seven recommendations for decreasing student departure, classified according to Tinto's principles of effective retention. Their recommendations most applicable to basic writing teachers—or any teacher of writing—are as follows:

- Clarify institutional values and expectations early and often.
- Intentionally tie the curriculum to students' lives outside the classroom to bring students into ongoing contact with one another and with campus resources.
- Attend to the holistic development of the student [. . .] by promoting growth and learning not only in the classroom but in the university community as well.
- Promote student awareness of and access to appropriate co-curricular programs and resources—i.e. support groups, peer counseling, mentoring programs, faith-based groups, residential colleges, and community service groups—that connect and support students in their incorporation into the university community. (99-100)

There is clear overlap between Braxton and Mundy's recommendations and Bernstein's proposal, especially in regards to connecting students with institutional resources and community partners. These recommendations also build on the type of pedagogy basic writing scholar-teachers have enacted for many years. We teach classes that typically have fewer students than other first-year courses at our universities, which allows us to get to know our students better and establish the type of personal connection lauded by retention scholars; we routinely—if not daily—read our students' writing and hear them speak in the classroom, acts which can give us insight into their thought processes and feelings and once again contribute to the connection between student and professor; and the reading and writing processes emphasized in most of our classes give students daily practice in skills that are foundational for college success. While we can learn from scholarship on retention and persistence, as compositionists we already know a great deal about our students, thanks to the nature and values of our field.

That being said, retention and persistence are admittedly complex, multi-faceted problems that encompass issues far beyond the reach of the basic writing classroom—or any classroom. However, the decisions we make about basic writing program administration, curriculum, and pedagogy can impact our students' decisions regarding their educations. At my university, for example, over the past three years, we have initiated guided self-placement, a curriculum accessible and relevant to students, and the establishment of a peer cohort in some basic writing sections. While these administrative and pedagogical initiatives are not new and individually may not impact student success rates, together they can and have made a difference at my institution; basic writing DWF rates have dropped 15 percentage points since we instituted these changes, and retention in basic writing and first-year composition has significantly improved as well.

Under the right circumstances, these types of initiatives can improve retention and persistence rates. However, this strategy should entail multiple support structures that go beyond a writing program, including real commitments to the work of writing centers, advising, summer bridge programs, services for students with disabilities, and other support structures including childcare and financial aid. Students at my university would be more likely to persist if the support structures were better; for example, our writing center's funding is dependent on the dictates of the ever-changing student governance association, and the child care center was closed and its building sold to make way for an omnipresent drugstore chain. Without such resources, basic writers are being set up to fail, an unconscionable breach

of the trust—and the thousands of dollars—our students invest in higher education. This is yet another reason why the outsourcing of basic writing to community colleges, which typically have even fewer of these support structures, is a formula for disaster. Universities are less able to provide these resources to students in this economic environment; to think that most two-year institutions can do so is naïve, at best, and deliberately misguided and destructive, at worst. Today we face an educational crisis that relegates more and more of our students to the academic margins, the very place where they can least afford to be. We must remain focused on that fact as we continue to argue for the importance of research and support for practices that facilitate access *and* success for basic writers at four-year universities.

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Notes

1. According to the university's website, students who do not meet the university's increasingly selective admission policies or who are current students in an associate degree program will be forced to enroll at one of the university's regional campuses or at Cincinnati State, a community college.
2. Retention refers to the number of students who return for the subsequent academic term. Most studies of retention focus on first-to-second year retention, since this is when most students who will depart from a university do so. Persistence refers to the number of students who continue with their education until they attain a degree. While these two concepts are often conflated in general usage, scholars who study student departure typically differentiate them in this way; thus, I have chosen to follow their example here and maintain the distinction.
3. For more about the creation of the new basic writing course, see "The *Kairotic* Moment: Pragmatic Revision of Basic Writing Instruction at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne," co-written with my colleague Stevens Amidon.
4. A pseudonym.

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