Introduction and Rationale

OUR RESEARCH QUESTION

As faculty with a combined three decades of experience teaching first-year college composition, we recognize the importance of what Nick Tingle has called the “transitional space.” First-year composition is so often a crash course in navigating the twists and turns of the “academic terrain,” as Tingle puts it (4). Within the context of community colleges, the first-semester writing course is especially crucial, given the varied levels of student preparedness and the extent of work and family demands. So many students fail to persist when confronting this very demanding first semester of college.

To what extent does writing instruction play a part in acclimating students in that first semester or, indeed, in placing a formidable obstacle before them? Certainly, we’d been asking that question for a long time as we continued to revise our own composition pedagogy and as we, alas, witnessed students struggle to meet the demands not only of our own courses but of the many challenging subjects in their first year of college. But did we really have a handle on the specific nature of the writing challenges for these novice college students?

Both of us, fortunately, came to this study with extensive work in multidisciplinary writing centers and thus have a keen appreciation of the varied writing demands placed on college students, especially community college students. But we felt the need to research in a systematic way the nature and extent of those demands. What kinds of writing were being assigned both in the English composition classroom and the many subjects that first-semester students typically took? As community college faculty, we were intrigued by the speculation that in some way the rhetorical challenges placed
before these novice writers might reflect a tilt toward the career-based literacies, given the significant attention paid to career training at the college. Would students and faculty alike resist the conventional modes of academic writing in favor of assignments that explicitly prepare students for the workplace? Our research indicated otherwise: true to the college’s comprehensive mission to promote both workplace and academic literacies, faculty assignments aimed to promote what Russel Durst has called “reflective instrumentalism,” written forms that attempt to bridge the gap between writing for work and writing for the classroom (170). Perhaps not surprisingly, courses outside English were those most likely to engage students in such thoughtfully pragmatic work.

What role does writing have in engaging students? Does writing, as Richard Light’s study suggests, have a significant role in connecting undergraduates to their classroom experiences (55)? Conversely, does writing pose certain obstacles for students, especially those students unprepared to write for a variety of audiences and in a variety of forms? While first-semester composition aims to give students some sense of rhetorical knowledge (modeling questions such as, Whom am I writing for? What is my purpose in writing?), some have argued that the courses coming after this initial experience provide a deeper understanding of the writing process, deeper because the writing is embedded in the conventions of disciplines and employs the concepts and terms essential to probing complex issues. Students’ analytical skills are thus concurrently enhanced by their exposure to increasingly varied and detailed information. “Writers need concepts and knowledge to think with,” writes Lee Ann Carroll, concepts and knowledge drawn from the disciplines (116). We intend to discover how our students think through the writing they do in their first semester at college.

WHAT WE WANTED TO KNOW

While our experience working as tutors in a multidisciplinary writing lab offered a glimpse of writing instruction beyond the first year required course in composition, we realized that a systematic study needed to be done of that instruction. Of course, we also wanted
to know the expectations, experience, understanding, and practices that first-semester students brought to their college work. Would they, for example, have had prior experience revising their writing, guided by feedback either from peers or teachers? Indeed, would they have had experience writing extensively in subjects other than English or language arts? In other words, to what extent did faculty expectations match those of first-semester students? Core questions needed to be addressed, the foremost being

1. How much writing was assigned beyond the required basic and college-level writing courses? Were students prepared for the volume of writing required?
2. To what extent were students writing in genres other than the essay? Did students expect to write in modes other than the academic essay?
3. What role did revision have in writing instruction at the college? How did students’ understanding of this task differ from that of faculty?
4. When faculty assessed student writing, was the emphasis on higher- or lower-order concerns? Did faculty feedback match student expectations?
5. How extensive was faculty commentary on student writing? What purpose did that commentary serve? To explain a grade? To guide revision? Both? How did students process the commentary?

While our study focuses on students and faculty at the community college, we recognize the importance of these questions for all who have a stake in college writing instruction, at both four- and two-year institutions. It is our hope that others may see the virtue—indeed, the necessity—of investigating the challenges facing writers new to college and their responses to those challenges.

POSITIONING OURSELVES

“All researchers are positioned,” writes Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, “whether they write about it explicitly, or not at all” (115). Chiseri-
Strater refers here to researchers across disciplines and to all studies, whether qualitative or quantitative: the relationship between the researcher and the subject researched invariably affects the outcome of the study. Our study is no different. Who we are, who shaped us professionally, how we came to teach at the community college: all these matters we will share from the outset, especially as they affect the shaping of data. We make no claim to absolute objectivity. Indeed, over the time that we have worked with our cohort of students, we have come to know them more fully than we would as classroom instructors. For some, we served as mentors, advisors, tutors.

Howard Tinberg’s Narrative

Since both of us have worked in writing centers—as tutors and as directors—it seemed natural to offer our tutoring services to students participating in the project. Over the decade and a half that I’ve directed and tutored in our college’s center, I’ve found the opportunity to work with writers one-on-one to be one of the most rewarding aspects of my professional life. I’ve enjoyed being able to focus on the work of a single student and to engage in meaningful conversation with students about their work. And when I’ve had the opportunity to work with a student over several visits, I was fortunate enough to develop a working relationship with that student and to draw from my knowledge to gauge the writer’s development. At the community college, those students are likely to be older than a traditionally aged college student, often the first in the family to go to college, likely working at least part-time off campus, and with a family of their own—factors that invariably produce heightened motivation, if, at times, increased demands on their time.

Like so many of my students, my three siblings and I were the first generation in our family to go to college. And, again like so many of these students, we had little in the way of academic support at home since our parents, refugees from the European Holocaust (where they had lost everyone on both sides of the family), had no formal education and knew no English when they arrived but knew several other languages, including German, Russian, Polish, and Yiddish. We were working class, poorer than I had realized, insulated as I
was by parents who worked hard and saved as much as they possibly could. My father worked as a tailor, first in a department store—at minimum wage and paid by the piece. We lived for a time in Portland, Oregon, but moved south to Los Angeles—in part to restore my father to health, who, unknown to me and my siblings at the time, was dying of pancreatic cancer. Where but in paradise might a struggling tailor find health and economic happiness? Indeed, my father would eventually open up two tailoring shops, one in Hollywood where, to our astonishment, he began to count screen actors as his customers (“The Tailor to the Stars,” we’d later remark). Many years later, when reading Mike Rose’s memoir *Lives on the Boundary*, a book that moved me in a profoundly personal way, I came across Rose’s description of a similar journey, one that resonated deeply with me: “My father had moved to California with faint hopes about health and a belief in his child’s future, drawn by that far edge of America where the sun descends into green water. What he found was a city that was warm, verdant, vast, and indifferent as a starlet in a sports bar. Altoona receded quickly, and my parents must have felt isolated and deceived. They had fallen into an abyss of paradise—two more settlers trying to make a go of it in the City of the Angels” (13).

Here they were, my parents, true orphans after the war, trying desperately to build from the ashes—perhaps drawn, as Rose’s father had been, by what educator Lee Shulman, another immigrant’s kid, has called “visions of the possible” (212). At this distance, now many decades removed from my youth, I cannot pretend to speak for my parents’ hopes and dreams: they were in some ways mysterious even to us, their children. But this much I can say: each of us inherited a tenacious determination to succeed, no doubt buttressed by an equally tenacious fear of failure. When I see so many of my students at our community college working full time, taking a full-time course load, and expressing a determination to succeed at all costs even as they are bearing the burdens of past failures, I catch a glimmer of myself long ago. I do not grimace when my students tell me that they enrolled at our college to find a well-paying job rather than out of a desire to learn for learning’s sake. My mother had to
work as a school cafeteria worker after the death of my father because our family was stretched financially, so I can sympathize with my students’ aims. But I should add this: while my parents did not have formal education, all of my siblings were raised to grant education an intrinsic value, although my eldest brother, I am told, had to fight for the right to attend college rather than go out to “work.” I surmise, after the fact, that our religious upbringing—as observant Jews, we followed Biblical dietary laws, attended Hebrew school, received bar/bat mitzvahs—had much to do with giving us a respect “for the book,” for reading, and for the life of the mind. Who should be surprised, then, that each of us has a doctorate degree?

I arrived at our public community college with a PhD in British Romantic literature, having recently taught at a private university. I was still new to the field of composition and rhetoric and had not taught full-time at a community college. I had much to learn on both counts. From the vantage point of two decades later, I realize now that culture shock was unavoidable. Despite my own working-class background, I stood committed to the liberal arts, most especially to the transformative power of literature. Inevitably, that commitment clashed with the comprehensive and, as some have noted, contradictory mission of the community college to prepare students both for transfer to a baccalaureate institution and for the workplace. A creeping vocationalism at community colleges has been well documented:

When they first appeared at the turn of the [twentieth] century, community colleges were largely liberal-arts-oriented institutions, providing many students with the first leg of their baccalaureate preparation and others with a terminal general education. But over the years, this orientation changed radically. Community colleges added programs in adult education, community education, remedial education, and most importantly occupational education. Today, vocational education is the dominant program in the community college, enrolling between 40 and 60% (depending on the estimate) of community college students. . . . (Dougherty 191)
At my college, the increasing vocationalism has been most apparent in the proliferating number of certificate programs awarded for those interested in upgrading their job skills. But I see this enhanced vocationalism in the expectations of students and colleagues alike—hardly unique to the community college, as Durst has shown, but no doubt heightened by the difficult challenges faced by our students (51). Students expect to receive skills that they can market and apply in their careers. As I noted above, I can hardly diminish this reasonable ambition. I have over the years altered my approach to teaching (especially in composition) to accommodate the growing utilitarian culture of the college. Rather than focus on the writing of essays exclusively, I have my students write in a variety of genres: memoir, review, annotation, trend analysis, brochure, and journal web log (blog) as well as essay. Reading in my composition classes is limited to samples of genres, often done for popular magazines and Web sites. In contrast, when I arrived at the college, I had students read and write about strictly academic texts—drawn from David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky’s *Ways of Reading*. Taking my cue from the editors of that textbook, I encouraged the notion that reading difficult texts can be good for you. I saw quickly that no matter how hard I tried I could not get students to inhabit these texts. Reading challenging texts remains a problem for students in my British literature courses, which are typically underenrolled. My philosophy in those courses is to try to do more with fewer readings and to create thematic and historical connections among the readings. Drawing from process-centered approaches to composition, I’ve also attempted to place student writing at the center of my literature survey courses: through weekly reader response journals, which we share at the end of each week, and invitations to create imagined scenarios (composing a new ending for a novel or play, for example, or a Web-based poster). The sacred space once saved solely for published works of literature is now shared with the writings of my students. While I realize that such a move was done to accommodate the reality of my students’ abilities as readers, I want as well to state that this is for me an altogether admirable change. Rather than treating literature as objects of worship (I recall my Shakespeare professor bowing his
head in respect at the start of our discussion of *King Lear*), such works are presented as made by men and women, whose extraordinary work is derived from the writers’ often ordinary lives.

While my students’ insistence that I keep things “real” has affected me dramatically, I am no less affected by but what I perceive as similar demands from colleagues. In ways subtle and not so subtle, colleagues have sent messages that reading and talking about scholarly matters smack of elitism and irrelevancy. Outside of the writing center, which has hosted various summer workshops and staff meetings on writing and thinking in the disciplines, and departmental efforts at developing learning outcomes, I have rarely witnessed campus discussions on scholarly or theoretical matters. Meetings typically are taken up with procedural or logistical affairs (whether to enroll minors in our courses or award credits to students on the basis of prior experience in a field). All such meetings are geared toward serving students and institutions efficiently and practically. Attendance at professional conferences—not a given among colleagues—is often seen as distracting faculty from the real work of teaching students. Publication, not counting toward tenure or promotion at our college, is similarly viewed as precious and not really connected to classroom instruction, even though I and others make it a point to engage in classroom research for publication. Can research and publication enhance our teaching? I believe so. Can theory inform practice and practice shape theory? Absolutely. Community college faculty need to see themselves as pedagogical researchers—needing to understand their own students more fully, apprehend the impact of their own teaching practices on student learning, and thoughtfully revise those practices in the light of such research (Tinberg, Duffy, and Mino). We have nothing to fear from intellectual inquiry and everything to gain. This study, I hope, offers a model for such inquiry: rooted in sound theory, supported by the authentic experience of students’ writing.

Jean-Paul Nadeau’s Narrative
Both of my parents were educators, and I was consistently encouraged to achieve excellence both in and out of school. This encouragement
was explicit at times, though they also taught by example. While their official jobs weren’t all that exciting, as music teachers in an elementary school and a middle school, their singing talents had led them to some acclaim. They met, in fact, in the 1960s as Fulbright scholars in Germany where they performed opera together—not the typical love story. Once they’d returned to the United States and settled in southeastern Massachusetts, they became fairly well known, having played lead roles in numerous musicals and other performances.

Attending one particular performance of one of my parents was a special experience. Sitting in the loft of Saint Mathieu’s Cathedral in Fall River at midnight mass and hearing my father’s bass voice boom across every surface and into every heart gave me chills. This experience and others like it kindled my own desire to affect others in a meaningful way. While I could sing, I felt (and feel) that my talents paled in comparison, and that I’d need to discover what I had to offer—how I, too, could boom. Though I spent time in various choruses and even began singing solos myself at midnight mass, I felt a sense of urgency to discover my own special talent, my calling. Many of my students, I believe, long having heard what they aren’t capable of doing, are themselves on such a quest.

Other lessons emerged from hard work, in the form of manual labor at my father’s right hand. Together we built sheds, erected fences, tore down and built decks, finished basements, demolished walls, tiled floors, installed pools, shingled roofs, erected three-season rooms, painted interiors, planted countless gardens, chopped down trees, shoveled, raked, hammered, cut, tightened, leveled, cemented, and sanded for more than twenty years. Long, tireless hours taught me resiliency and appreciation for downtime. My layman status taught me humility and how much I had yet to understand. My father’s refusal to admit defeat taught me the value of persistence and to expect success. Goals were consistently achieved. Change was inevitable.

My secondary education, completed in 1986, emphasized the study of literature over writing, and when I was asked to write, I was required to complete a two-stage sequence. After a two-week segment of public speaking in high school, I was finally able to be
myself while communicating formally. I firmly believe it was the positive experiences during that brief time that excited me about delivering a message effectively. My classmates and I had to deliver several speeches, and I put a great amount of effort into selecting a topic, message, and the means by which I’d deliver that message. I cared how my audience would respond and loved that I could immediately garner their reactions. Here I began to bloom; perhaps this is why I am so eager to share students’ writing in class and to encourage verbal response.

Attending college wasn’t a decision so much as the next logical step in my education: fastening the deck treads to the floor joists, so to speak. By junior year, it was clear my deck would be safer with a railing: graduate school. My parents had both been there, so not an eyebrow was raised when I steered away from employment back toward academia. This made perfect sense to my parents and me. I now, of course, understand how different this experience is from that of many of my students for whom college was costly, not only in terms of tuition and fees, but in terms of delaying (or temporarily reducing) income.

Like most of my students, I worked while attending college. While I began with a modest fifteen hour per week schedule, I had soon cobbled together a few part-time positions that equated a full-time, forty-plus hour per week work schedule. My workday as a personal trainer at a local gym began at 6:00 A.M. From there it was off to school. Classes were followed by several hours working in a video store and then four more hours as a supermarket stockperson. Such a schedule required me to use my free time wisely, though my schoolwork suffered as a result of this juggling act.

In the early 1990s, fresh out of a master’s degree program in English, I considered myself lucky to be able to teach a college course—and woefully unprepared. I hadn’t taken a single course to prepare for teaching at any level. After teaching part time for a couple of semesters while simultaneously enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of Rhode Island, a position opened in Bristol’s Center for Developmental Education Writing Lab. I was truly fortunate to be hired in this position, where I worked as a full-
time writing tutor for students in the College’s Quest program for at-risk students. This work, as I will soon explain, greatly influenced the way I interact with students.

Having worked in writing centers and labs as long as I’ve been teaching, writing center theory grounds my pedagogy. To develop as writers, students need respectful readers of their work, readers attentive to the writing situation and the intent/goal of the author(s). My pedagogy is informed, as well, by writing center practice, specifically my own experiences as a writing center tutor. Though students, for example, often want to consider surface features of their text, time is often better spent diving deeper: into areas such as rhetorical strategies and genre-related concerns. Where to go next is a negotiation in a tutoring session and can (and should) be as well in a writing classroom or written response.

My most valuable professional development moments have involved on-campus discussions with faculty through the Center for Teaching and Learning and the Writing Center—here I gained deeper insight into students’ needs, teaching possibilities, and reflective practice in general. I change assignments significantly and often, in part because I believe my response to the subject matter will affect student response. My assignments also change in an attempt to engage students with relevant and meaningful subjects and genres. I can recall the assignments that engaged me as a student—those that allowed me to attain some measure of authority despite my youth and inexperience, those where I was able to connect with readers about a subject with which I was keenly involved. New assignments allow me to look at my students’ attempts at communication without comparing this class’s attempts with those of past semesters.

In class, I like to spend time looking in depth at student writing in progress. Together we debate strengths and possible areas for further development. In this context, my hope is that students will learn to better anticipate how diverse readers might respond to their work. While class time helps students reflect upon their own writing processes, it is through written feedback on drafts where I feel I do most of my teaching. I consider feedback a work in progress, as I am learning to respond to a changing audience—to listen more closely
and consistently—with each new semester and each new group of students. My success in this regard is gauged, in part, by students’ responses to the feedback offered, particularly their responses in the form of a subsequent draft. Brian Huot, Bob Broad, and Chris Anson are among those who have helped me to understand why those who teach composition need to examine carefully the way in which they assign, read, and respond to written work—whether as individual pieces or as a collective portfolio.

Looking back, I imagine it was in the developmental writing lab where I acquired an interest in the feedback method. In the lab, I was helping students meet their professors’ expectations for each assignment while I was also coming to terms with those expectations. I was able to experience, on a daily basis, the way another professor responded to student writing. As a new instructor, I found this useful, as I was eager to know whether my comments were “appropriate,” whether I was focused on the most important issues in student writing, whether I was saying enough in response to students’ written work. Was I being too demanding, or was I expecting too little from my students? Was I encouraging students to see their text as a whole, as Nancy Sommers reminds me to do, or was I creating a nonhierarchical list of errors? Was I allowing students to maintain ownership of their work? Through additional writing center experiences, both as a faculty tutor at Bristol’s Writing Lab and as the associate director of Bryant’s Writing Center, I gained further insight into the challenges involved in conveying expectations through assignment design and written feedback.

My teaching has also, more recently, been informed through my work at Bryant University (before I arrived at Bristol) as co-coordinator of a first-year success program, an experience that helped me better understand the challenges students face as they transition to college. What I learned from retention studies and psychological theory informed my teaching practice. One key change was that I brought challenges to the surface in and out of the classroom, letting students know that I was empathetic and eager to assist them with their development. I now, for example, suggest ways to avoid procrastination—and stress—by breaking up the work into manageable
units. After teaching the first-year success course that encouraged students to employ college-level study techniques, I quickly became aware of their resistance to changing the way they studied. After all, they were in college, had used those techniques to get here, and saw college as a continuation of high school.

Because expectations and the level of challenge are higher in college, I talk with my Bristol students throughout the semester about having the humility to recognize when a method isn’t working and make the necessary changes. I explain that engaging in the same activities will likely produce similar results. As we read and discuss new techniques, I ask students to give them a try and to recognize that proficiency comes with practice. By the end of the semester, most students are able to reflect upon the changes they made—including which did and didn’t work—in their portfolio cover letters.

Since I first began teaching writing, I have used a shared content model to form a basis for class discussion and group brainstorming. Early on I adopted a cultural studies approach, asking students to consider the ways their identity had been constructed by various social institutions. More recently I focus on the ways in which students have been constructed as students, with some assignments that ask them to consider their attitudes and behaviors relative to education. One such assignment, for example, asks students to write a letter to their next semester’s incoming class to offer them academic advice. This exercise asks students to reflect upon their own successes as well as to admit having made some less than ideal choices. Another paper, this one assigned in a basic writing course, requires students to tell the story of their first day on campus.

Such assignments are, in part, an attempt to get at students’ understanding of their new academic environment. Overall, students seem eager to discuss this challenging time in their lives, although many aren’t used to engaging in such reflection. This study allowed me to get a much broader and deeper look into the academic experiences of community college students. After listening to them, I am encouraged to continue to respect the individuals who inhabit my rosters and to continue to adapt my instructional methods, assignments, and feedback to a changing audience.
RESEARCHING STUDENT WRITING SCIENTIFICALLY

Systematic and wide-ranging research of student writing in a school setting began in the 1960s with Albert R. Kitzhaber’s report on the state of writing instruction at Dartmouth College. Kitzhaber claimed to answer some core questions. Did the students’ writing in the universally required first year of composition (in Dartmouth’s case, English 1 and 2, a literature-based and a theme-based course requiring research) improve when they took the courses? If so, in what way? How do we know this to be the case? What’s noteworthy about Kitzhaber’s study is that it regarded the close and rigorous examination of student writing (over 380,000 words of it) and teacher commentary as essential to evaluating what students learned in first-year composition.

Kitzhaber chose to focus on the written product, to which he applied formalistic categories of error, from focus and structure to punctuation and mechanics. He did not attempt to uncover the processes by which writers compose, nor did he gauge students’ expectations about the work. That process- and writer-centered approach was enacted in the next decade, with publication of Janet Emig’s study of twelfth-grade writers and of the Schools Council Project in the United Kingdom on the writing of eleven- through eighteen-year-olds (Britton et al.).

Emig’s study aimed to produce depth rather than breadth of understanding. Her case study of Lynn, a high school student in the top 5 percent of her class, shows us a writer engaging in a range of written forms (through a series of drafts), from a profile of an intriguing person and writer’s autobiography to a poem and critical analysis of Ahab in Moby Dick. Through interviews, logs, and composing-aloud protocol, Emig presents a thick description of Lynn’s behavior as a writer. Emig documents Lynn’s “profound concern for her reader” as well as Lynn’s sensitivity to stylistic nuance (64, 68). Lynn is a particularly adept student, articulate and self-aware regarding her composing processes. Through examining Lynn’s work and processes and those of seven other twelfth graders, Emig concluded that the schools do little to encourage what she refers to as “reflexive” writing, such as journals and diaries. Instead, too much
time in school is spent on mastering “extensive” forms, such as the five-paragraph theme, that serve a purely transactional purpose and are “other-centered” (97).

While recognizing the need to treat the writing of their research cohort as significant evidence of student learning, James Britton and his colleagues placed equal emphasis on process. Following Janet Emig’s study, Britton et al. aimed, like Emig, to externalize students’ thinking processes as they compose: through observation, through taped “thinking aloud” sessions as children write, and through interviews of children regarding the process of writing. Despite the shared emphasis on process, the results that were reported focus on what the products or writing samples reveal: namely that writing may be usefully categorized in terms of function (expressive, transactional, and poetic) and that function exists in a reciprocal relationship with the audience (Britton 88–90, 183).

The work of Emig and Britton sends a clear message to the profession: to understand the needs of student writers, we must spend time with the writing and the writer. Both also convey the view that such research can be and ought to be conducted on a scientific basis, while at the same time grounded in specific writing situations. A tension existed from the start, therefore, between the goal of producing replicable, well-designed research studies and the goal of reproducing the specific and localized scene of writing. As composition takes a social turn in the 1980s, the latter receives considerable attention, aided by the valuable work of sociolinguists William Labov and Shirley Brice Heath, whose work, respectively, on nonstandard dialects and community-based literacies, together with the pioneering work on Black English by rhetorician Geneva Smitherman, complicates and enriches our understanding of what our students bring into the classroom.

SHAUGHNESSY, OPEN ADMISSIONS, AND DIVERSE LITERACIES

That understanding had been assisted immeasurably by the groundbreaking work of Mina Shaughnessy, whose painstaking analysis of student placement essays led so many to regard the work of teaching
basic writers as a serious academic pursuit. Regardless of whether we regard Shaughnessy’s analysis as too focused on “correctness” (chapter titles include “Syntax,” “Spelling,” and “Common Errors”), her advice that we study the “logic” of student error resonates with our study and with that of so many others. Shaughnessy offers us wise guidance when she promotes in all teachers a “readiness to look at these problems in a way that does not ignore the linguistic sophistication of the students nor yet underestimates the complexity of the task they face as they set about learning to write for college” (13). We regard these as watchwords for our current project. We also take to heart Shaughnessy’s attention to underprepared writers, whose entrance during the “open admissions” experiment of the 1970s was so dramatic. As teacher/researchers working in an open admission, public, two-year college, we aspire to carry on Shaughnessy’s legacy.

While composition during the 1980s turned its gaze to communities outside of the classroom—for example, nineteenth-century women’s clubs in Anne Gere’s work or the three Carolina towns in Shirley Brice Heath’s ethnography—another group of teacher/researchers looked long and hard at the composing process and written products of undergraduate writers. Mike Rose employed a case study approach to study writer’s block and Andrea Lunsford examined hundreds of student essays to ascertain stylistic features and content characteristics of basic writers, while Linda Flower and John Hayes asked student writers to narrate aloud their planning process, allowing researchers to examine the role of cognition in composing. Nancy Sommers surveyed both student writers and experienced writers to gain access to the difference in revision strategies between the two. Sommers’ study ushered in a series of important studies of student writing in relation to the revision process (Beach; Flower, Hayes, et al.).

The impetus to examine student writing within naturalized settings led researchers in the 1990s to consider writers’ work in response to disciplinarily specific demands. The research of Barbara Walvoord and Lucille McCarthy merit special attention in that it attempts to capture the specialized demands of particular disciplines and makes an overarching argument as to what thinking and writing
are like in college. Working with “teacher-collaborators” in business, history, social science, and biology, Walvoord and McCarthy account for both the differences and similarities in faculty expectations among these four disciplines. A careful examination of writing tasks and students’ written products yields the observation that student writers are more likely to behave as “text processors” (summarizing or recapitulating reading or lectures) rather than defining a stance of their own; moreover, they might write without concern for an audience rather than shape their writing to an audience of peers as “practitioners in training” might–learning what it means, for example, to do the work of a biologist or historian (102, 153). Engaging undergraduates and faculty in a conversation about what it takes to think and write in the disciplines can only enhance understanding of teaching and learning, although disciplinary conventions are hardly static. In fact, as a recent empirical study has shown, such conventions are likely to be moving targets. Chris Thais and Terry Myers Zawacki report a “degree of contentiousness” in some disciplines regarding the use of alternative genres, for example (42).

The current study, while indebted to previous research on students’ struggle to find their disciplinary footing, focuses on the writing of first-semester community college students who, while having declared only a broad field of concentration (such as “business” or “communications”), are really at the very earliest stages of adapting to college writing demands and thus are likely not to have been exposed to highly specialized genres and audiences. It is also worthwhile to note that, given our short time frame of one semester, any claims of development need to be tempered. As Richard Haswell suggests in his study of placement essays of first-year composition students and advanced composition students, such claims need to be carefully thought through (Gaining). In fact, Haswell argues, we too often misinterpret the writing of experienced writers by applying standards applicable to novices only. While we attempt to chart the changes that students make over several drafts, our purpose here is primarily descriptive: we intend to account for the nature of students’ writing tasks at college—and the degree of success achieved in meeting the writing challenge.
THE FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE:  
THE VIEW FROM HARVARD

The first semester of college, which is the focus of this study, is that crucial period of time in which, as Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz observe, students experience the “paradox of . . . writing simultaneously as a novice and an expert” (132). Students are often asked to engage in the conventions of academic disciplines without a clear road map, or as one Harvard student tells Sommers and Saltz, “She was being asked ‘to build a house without any tools’” (131). The challenges are enormous: “Students are pushed to practice the new conventions of college writing: to consider questions for which they don’t have answers, or to write for readers who aren’t already converted to their way of thinking, and to accept their own minds as capable of synthesizing and making judgments about dense ideas” (133).

Prior writing experiences in a first-year composition class, as Lee Ann Carroll’s study of undergraduate writing at Pepperdine has shown, “do not directly transfer to students’ work in their major areas of study” (9). Yet it’s the very pressure of being a novice that leads so many students to achieve expertise and to see a “greater purpose in writing than completing an assignment” (Sommers and Saltz 139). Such progress stands a better chance of being realized when “faculty treat freshmen as apprentice scholars” and relieve “students of the responsibility of inventing the field for themselves” (140, 138). These conclusions are among many significant findings in the Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing led by Sommers and Saltz. Having followed more than 400 students in the Harvard class of 2001 through to graduation, Sommers and her research team sifted through considerable survey data, 520 hours of interviews, and over 600 pounds of student writing. The Harvard study, while committed to understanding what undergraduate writing says about student learning, is equally committed to telling students’ stories and allowing students’ own accounts of their journey from novice to experienced writer.

CONSTRUCTING THE WRITER

Our analysis, beyond being descriptive of the writing, will also attempt to construct the figure of the writer herself. We recognize,
as do researchers such as Marilyn Sternglass and Anne Herrington and Marcia Curtis, that a systematic study of undergraduate writing must take into account not only the writing practices of students but also a consideration of the life-world challenges that each writer faces. This is especially so with community college students, for whom the paths to success are so often blocked by formidable barriers. Many of the students whom we get to know in this study face the same daunting challenges as Marcia Curtis’s basic writing students: “In the essays of basic writers . . . , I often saw expressed—either implicitly through form or explicitly through content—much of the same fragmentation, isolation, alienation, helplessness, and anger that therapists reported their clients were bringing with them to their sessions” (Herrington and Curtis 25). But we do them an injustice if we construct these writers through deficit models only because these students’ stories often reveal considerable resilience and a determination to succeed.

Our study intends to give voice to students who have yet to be heard: community college writers. While article-length analyses of community college student writers have been published, most notably in the national journal *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, not one full-length study of undergraduate writing that we know of has included either the available scholarship on the subject or new work on these students. Kitzhaber is to be excused when in 1963 he gathered composition syllabi from ninety-five colleges and universities but noted the “absence of junior colleges” to his otherwise “fairly representative cross section of American institutions of higher education” (9). After all, the boom in community and junior colleges had not quite yet happened (although junior colleges had been in existence for over half a century). The greater shame is that today, with a near majority of undergraduates currently enrolled in community colleges, large-scale research focusing on student writers continues to neglect this significant population.

We hope to begin to fill that gap. We will do so, to a great degree, by letting these students speak for themselves. In so doing, we seek to avoid what Kurt Spellmeyer has called “profoundly dishonest—constructions of the student and the student’s language” (quoted
in Herrington and Curtis 43). Our students have stories to tell and we intend to let them tell those stories. Too often community colleges and the students who attend them are mischaracterized and reduced to simplistic stereotypes (students who cared little about high school and care even less about college or those who opt for community college because it poses few challenges). This is their time to set the record straight.