
Reviewed by Erin E. Doran, Senior Student Development Specialist, University of Texas at San Antonio

It might be easy to read this title and think that its sole audience is high school and college writing instructors, but in his book, Todd Ruecker speaks to issues affecting Latina/o students that will be of interest to a wide range of researchers and practitioners. More specifically, Ruecker analyzes the transitions to postsecondary education made by seven students following their graduating from the same high school, Samson High School, in El Paso, Texas. Four students enrolled at Borderlands University (BU), a public 4-year institution in the city, while three students attended the same branch campus of Borderlands Community College (BCC), also in El Paso.

As a scholar in rhetoric and composition, Ruecker focuses on writing as a crucial skill for students to transition to college-level coursework, not only in Freshman Composition classes but history, psychology, first-year college success seminars, political science, and even mathematics courses. Ruecker also includes the push and pull factors that positively or negatively affected students in their first year of college. Some of these factors are common in the research on Latina/o students and include how students built a strong support network around themselves, how they juggled their studies with their family responsibilities, and how they felt their high school writing experiences prepared or failed to prepare them for college. Since he also focuses on writing development and experiences between high school and college, the author also takes into account students’ enrollment in ESL programs in K-12 schools, their home language practices, and their confidence with academic writing conventions.

In Chapter 1, Ruecker explains to the reader the El Paso context and why it made for a fruitful place for conducting his research. He situates his study among several scholarly fields: the growing body of research on Latina/o students, a focus on students’ first year experiences, and how strong writing skills figure into students’ successes in college. In the next chapter, “College Decisions and Institutional Disparities,” Ruecker describes the three institutions students attended in this study with greater detail, as well as providing background on the factors that led to the students’ choices about where to attend college. As is common with Latina/o students, the participants in this study were concerned with the costs of college attendance and chose to remain local for a variety of factors, including their intention to live at home or starting at BCC to save money with the intention to transfer later.

It is also in this chapter that Ruecker draws comparisons across the institutions on writing. For example, he notes a disconnect between the type of writing students practiced at SHS, like narrative essays, which typically focused on preparing students for the state standardized test, and the writing students were asked to do at BCC and BU. Ruecker also points out that the type of writing students engaged in at BCC and BU differed, which could ultimately impact BCC students who transfer to BU.

The next four chapters present the bulk of the data Ruecker collected over a period of about 18 months as he followed students through their transitions from high school to college. Ruecker structures each chapter in the same way by introducing a participant’s background characteristics, an overview of their high school writing experiences, and a narrative describing their first and second semesters in college with a particular focus on the coursework they enrolled in and the writing they completed over the course of the semester. In addition to quotes from each participant about their experiences, Ruecker also includes testimonies from their high school and college writing teachers and short writing samples. After each narrative, Ruecker ties back to his discussion of academic capital, providing a lens to describe the factors that positively and negatively impacted students’ transitions.

Each of these chapters features at least one student, with some students grouped together for having relatively common experiences. For example, Chapter 3 covers the “Struggling Transitions” of Daniel and Joanne, two students who dropped out of BCC before the end of their second semester. Joanne, for instance, struggled to adjust to the independence of college life while also juggling life as a young mother without support from her child’s father. Seeking more help, she moved to Ciudad Juarez, just across the border from El Paso, to live with her parents, but the move also created greater distance between her and the BCC campus and ultimately led to her dropping out.

The students in Chapter 4, Bianca and Yesenia, also faced difficult transitions to college but were able to persist through the end of their first year. A key part of Bianca’s transition was in her ability to seek out and utilize sources of support such as a special program for migrant workers and their children called the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) at BU. Despite juggling the burden of raising her three younger siblings following her mother’s deportation and starting college, the support Bianca received from CAMP as well as her church community provided a holistic support
program whereby Bianca was able to adjust to her life as a college student. With Yesenia, Ruecker describes a student who struggled to adapt to college-level writing, but he attributes a large part of her success to her ability to seek out assistance and advice when needed and her own intrinsic motivation to improve.

Next in “Smooth Transitions,” Ruecker presents Carolina and Mauricio, two students with strong familial support who benefitted from strong personal identities as successful college students while attending BU. As explained in this chapter, Mauricio’s academic success was not a foregone conclusion; he received a 3.0 GPA his first semester—respectable but less than he needed, particularly to keep his scholarship—so Mauricio pushed himself his second semester and became a better advocate for himself in discussing his performance and grades with his instructors when needed.

Last, Ruecker calls Paola’s first year at BCC “An Unpredictable Transition” in Chapter Six. Paola received a 4.0 GPA her first semester at BU and appeared to be an engaged student with the potential to be successful in the second semester and beyond. However, Ruecker attributes her difficulties in the second semester and her ultimate choice to stop out to her choice to move in with her boyfriend in Ciudad Juarez over the winter break, thereby limiting her time on campus and her access to reliable internet service to do her homework.

After presenting these narratives of the seven participants, Ruecker moves into Chapter 7 with an analysis of the contexts that impacted these students’ lives. At the heart of this chapter is Ruecker implicitly asking how seven students of relatively similar backgrounds who attended the same high school and attend colleges in the same area have such vastly different outcomes? Ruecker returns to his framework based on Bourdieu’s work on capital and habitus and argues, “The results of this study might be sobering to adherents of the belief that all college students should transition smoothly to college and graduate in four years” (p. 145). He then challenges these traditional notions of college and success with critical race theory (CRT), which he uses to call into question how “success” is framed. He argues that institutions are traditionally constructed around the needs of the majority, and his research found that four of the students’ transitions to college were successful, regardless of how rocky, given how many systemic failures they encountered and overcame, such as a failure to adequately address English as a Second Language issues at both the K-12 and higher education levels and a focus on standardized testing at Samson High School that left little time to focus on the teaching of college-level writing.

In Chapter 8, Ruecker specifically addresses the role of the composition teacher, writing programs, and administrators in students’ transition to college and in better serving the needs of linguistically minority students. It should be said, however, that many of these recommendations are applicable to virtually every person who works with students transitioning to college. Ruecker calls for instructors, programs, and administrators to “learn about the students [they serve]” (p. 156). Throughout the student narratives, Ruecker refers back to local issues that impacted students’ ability to focus on their studies including immigration issues that led to Bianca’s mother’s deportation and violence in Ciudad Juarez that prompted Mauricio’s parents to impose an early curfew on him, thus limiting the hours he could spend at the BU library. He notes that small changes based on an understanding of students’ daily lives make a difference, explaining that while he taught in the El Paso area, he understood that certain circumstances, like a long line at the bridge between El Paso and Ciudad Juarez, are beyond students’ control. Ruecker concludes this chapter with a discussion on how reform efforts at the local level are connected to broader efforts to reform college readiness like the Common Core State Standards. Understanding that his study is one individual contribution, he consequently calls on researchers and practitioners to do more to inform practice, research, and policy that allows for the type of complexity and nuance he found in his study with seven participants.

The short epilogue in this book offers a brief update to the participants’ progress. Daniel, who stopped out of BCC before the end of his second semester, enrolled at a for-profit school to become a medical assistant, and Bianca’s second year was more difficult as she no longer had the support of the CAMP program. Ruecker ends Transiciones with a reminder that while broad, macro-level changes are needed to better support Latina/o students’ transition to college, he also pushes for the individual-level changes and advocacy in order to contribute to the success of all students.

Transiciones is a noteworthy contribution to the fields of writing and Latina/o college students because of its in-depth empirical nature. Though focused on writing, he also provides a holistic examination of students’ lives over a critical 18 months of their academic lives. He does not take a straight composition researcher approach by solely focusing on student writing samples and the feedback their instructors provided nor does he only give a higher education perspective by looking at student support factors and aspects of students’ lives such as their participation in raising younger siblings. He takes all of these and more into account as he tries to better understand how institutions, instructors, and other stakeholders can contribute to better serving Latina/o students.
As U.S. service members return home from military service abroad, higher education professionals grapple with how best to serve a community of student veterans that continues to grow in both size and diversity. Serving today’s student veterans requires both practical understanding and sensitivity, as student veterans often juggle unique goals and pressures. To this end, *Student Veterans and Service Members in Higher Education* provides a meaningful context for examining veteran and service member expectations, needs, and challenges as we work to help them navigate higher education.

The text is a finale for a team of authors that spent “two years collecting and analyzing data and writing results” (p. xii) and is part of the Key Issues on Diverse College Students series through Routledge publishing: Jan Arminio (Professor and Director of Higher Education at George Mason University), Tomoko Kudo Grabosky (Licensed Professional Counselor and Associate Professor at Shippensburg University), and Josh Lang (Co-founder of the Pennsylvania Student Veterans Coalition and Business Analyst at VetAdvisor Services). These authors have collaborated to provide sound theoretical perspectives and practical uses for higher education practitioners like me who continue to pursue strategies for improving service to student veterans and service members (SVSM). Their work addresses the growing need for higher education practitioners to gain familiarity with this specialty population and, in doing so, helps mitigate the underrepresentation of SVSM in academic literature.

The book consists of eight chapters that provide a historical and cultural context in which to view SVSM as well as theoretical frameworks, best practices, and future directions. In Chapter 1, “Historical Context of Student Veterans and Service Members,” the authors discuss veteran educational benefits in the U.S. and the events that prompted them. In this chapter, the authors made sense of the relationship between worthwhile benefits and an effective military, as well as the economic context and the public view of SVSM benefits throughout U.S. history. The authors also included helpful charts outlining post-Vietnam benefit programs, the year instituted, the program’s requirements, and an explanation of the benefit received by an SVSM (pp. 16-17). This chapter is