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INTRODUCTION

Questioning the Impact of the First-Year Writing Requirement

Perhaps no other postsecondary field has experienced the same sustained level of anxiety and curiosity about the impact of its teaching than composition. This may be because, on many campuses, a composition course (sometimes two) is the only requirement universally shared—though not universally loved—by all students. While there may be other general education requirements, they can often be fulfilled by a menu of courses from which students can select to match their interests.¹ Since its storied beginning in Harvard's English A (Crowley, 1998), the required composition course has been laden with high hopes and dread. Instructors' and stakeholders' expectations for the outcomes of this course have varied over time and synchronously, with some mix of goals from a dream of error eradication to the development of critical consciousness being more or less dominant at different times and in different programs and individual classrooms (Berlin, 1988; Faigley, 1986; Fulkerson, 2005). Critics of the requirement have called into question whether such outcomes are feasible in one semester in a generic course required of everyone, especially given the varied genres and contexts for writing that await those who complete the course (Petraglia, 1995; Russell, 1995; Smit, 2004), but also given the logistically daunting realities of staffing such a course (Crowley, 1998).

As composition's teachers turned into researchers, they turned anxiety and curiosity about impact into disciplined inquiry using a variety of research methodologies. They have used ethnographic methods to conduct longitudinal research to trace the afterlives of a semester of first-year writing in students' subsequent years of college and beyond (Beaufort, 2007; Carroll, 2002; Haas, 1994; Herrington & Curtis, 2000; Johnson & Krase, 2012; McCarthy, 1987; Sternglass, 1997; Wardle, 2007). They have used pre- and post-test forms of experimentation to assess the immediate impacts of a semester of composition on students' attitudes, knowledge, and writing (Driscoll et al., 2020; Neely, 2014). They have used surveys and interviews to elicit students' retrospective accounts of what the course meant to them and what they learned in it (Bergmann & Zepernick, 2007; Jarratt et al., 2009; Yancey et al., 2018, 2019). And researchers have analyzed the texts students produced in and after a first-year composition course (Connors & Lunsford, 1988; Donahue & Foster-Johnson, 2018; Hansen et al., 2015; Haswell, 1991, 2000; Kitzhaber, 1963; Lunsford & Lunsford, 2008).

The news has not always been good, with early longitudinal studies, like those by McCarthy (1987), Haas (1994), and Beaufort (2007), finding that students tend to compartmentalize instruction, leaving composition behind in the composition classroom rather than drawing from insights on writing process and practice gleaned in the course when writing in other courses and contexts. Carroll (2002) demonstrated how students may transfer "basic" techniques practiced in a first-year writing class related to "research, style, audience, and analysis" (p. 74), but not the expert process strategies such as revision and peer review that a first-year writing course attempts to introduce when either motivation or conditions do not encourage the investment in time that they require. Hansen et al.'s (2015) investigation of college-equivalent writing courses in high schools found no statistically significant differences in the ratings of the writing students produced later in college between students who had taken a required first-year course and students who had not yet taken that course. Driscoll (2011) found students' faith in the transferability of knowledge from first-year composition to other courses and scenes of writing decreased from the start to the end of the semester. Retrospective student interview studies, such as those by Bergmann and Zepernick (2007) and Jarratt et al. (2009), which asked students to look back on first-year composition from a later vantage point, added further support to findings that students tend to compartmentalize or dismiss first-year writing instruction. In these studies students explained that they associated their composition

instruction with English studies and questioned its relevance to their work in other disciplines.

Further studies complicated the earlier findings, however, offering some evidence of the efficacy of first-year writing instruction, though the nature of that instruction can vary considerably from institution to institution (Ruecker, 2014) and instructor to instructor (Carroll, 2002, pp. 64–65; Fulkerson, 2005). Subsequent studies of student writing have added more promising support to Carroll's (2002) finding evidence of transfer of learning from the first-year course. For instance, Johnson and Krase (2012) documented how students can transfer the use of claims and evidence practiced in a first-year writing course to courses in other disciplines, and Donahue and Foster-Johnson (2018) demonstrated that students carry over text features such as placement and type of thesis from a first-year writing course to a first-year seminar course. However, Johnson and Krase (2012), like Haswell (1991), Carroll (2002), and Beaufort (2007), found that students' writing skills may appear to have “stagnated” and even “regressed” (p. 42) when they later encounter new, diverse genres in the context of the disciplines. Thickly descriptive case studies such as those reported by Herrington and Curtis (2000) point to the entwined nature of “personal” and “academic” writing in students' lives and the role that a first-year writing course can serve in supporting students' developing identities.² Neely (2014) found that after a semester of a first-year writing course, students' beliefs shifted from an absolutist epistemology to a more contingent view of knowledge as they came to embrace a view of writing that was more process based and communicative and to see greater value in exploring and acknowledging multiple perspectives in their writing (p. 149–150). Such impacts for one course taken in the first year of college are not insignificant and could be life-changing for many, opening the doors to seeing oneself in the projects of academic writing. A number of studies demonstrated that students may come to understand writing as rhetorical and epistemic long before signs of these views emerge in their writing (Haas, 1994; Penrose & Geisler, 1994; Sommers & Saltz, 2004), suggesting that a first-year course can plant seeds that may not bear fruit until years later.³

Adding to our understanding of the complexity of investigating and designing learning experiences that promote high impact, recent important work has examined what students bring with them into a first-year writing course and how these dispositions, habits, and prior understandings contribute to shaping what is possible in that course and what students transfer from it. For instance, the students in Reiff and Bawarshi's (2011) study who

embraced a novice identity were more successful “boundary crossers,” more likely to engage in high-road transfer of knowledge from high school to college because they were less likely to assume that they had already fully mastered writing and more likely to meet genres new to them with curiosity. In contrast, the students in the study Reiff and Bawarshi describe as “boundary guarders” tried to fit new genres they encountered in their first-year writing course into what genres they already knew from high school; their assumption that they knew all the genres they would need encouraged only low-road transfer and actually inhibited their development as writers. Sommers and Saltz (2004) described similar findings as they began to track students’ writing experiences from their first year at Harvard; those who embraced a novice identity early on grew more as writers. Additional work examining students’ dispositions, such as their tendencies toward preferring (and their past educational experiences promoting) “answer-getting” versus “problem-exploring” approaches to knowledge acquisition (Wardle, 2012), or seeing their work in a first-year writing course as “connected” or “disconnected” to their future goals (Driscoll, 2011), or seeing themselves as capable of and valuing what they do in the course (Driscoll & Wells, 2012), or their ability to regulate their emotions around writing (Driscoll & Powell, 2016), further revealed the profound role dispositions play in shaping students’ experiences in first-year writing courses and with writing beyond the course, likely regardless of their instructors’ approaches to teaching writing.

The uneven findings from longitudinal and retrospective studies coupled with writing studies scholars’ provocative calls for abolishing the course requirement have recently motivated calls to innovate and radically change the pedagogies and aims typical of the course (Adler-Kassner, 2012; Bawarshi, 2003; Beaufort, 2007; Downs & Robertson, 2015; Downs & Wardle, 2007; Hayes et al., 2018; Yancey et al., 2014). Some of the findings tracking the results of these innovations have shown promising initial results. For instance, Wardle (2007) found that students from her first-year course taught as an “introduction to writing studies” (or a “writing about writing” approach) carried with them a “meta-awareness about writing, language, and rhetorical strategies” (p. 81), though they did not subsequently engage this awareness primarily because they were not asked to write much in the years after their first-year writing course. Yancey et al. (2014) demonstrated how a first-year course curriculum focused on “teaching for transfer” by developing students’ theories of writing through reading and reflecting on key terms in writing studies such as *genre*, *audience*, and *discourse community* supported students’ productive use and

adaptation of these concepts in different concurrent (Yancey et al., 2019) and later contexts (Yancey et al., 2018). A first-year course designed by Driscoll et al. (2020) to increase students' genre knowledge produced measurable improvements in students' written performances, with their reflective writing pointing to their increased genre awareness as a source of this improvement.

As the literature reviewed in the preceding paragraphs demonstrates, longitudinal studies examining the afterlives of a course in writing are characteristically interested in exploring the transfer of learning (Perkins & Salomon, 1988), what learning students appropriately (and inappropriately) transfer and fail to transfer from one context to another—even as the term “transfer” has been widely recognized as profoundly imperfect to describe the transformation, recontextualizations (Nowacek, 2011), repurposing (Wardle, 2012), integration (Smith et al., 2021), wayfinding (J. Alexander et al., 2020b), and negotiation (Baird & Dilger, 2023) that occurs when students draw from writing knowledge acquired, confirmed, or honed in one educational context and used in another. Further, rich case studies employing cultural historical activity theory like those conducted by Prior (2018), Roozen (2009b, 2010, 2016), and Rounsaville (2014, 2017) have shown us the complex, multilayered, and nonlinear nature of the writing knowledge that individuals draw upon and repurpose across their lifetimes. These studies importantly remind us that seldom is a writer's development a simple matter of transferring knowledge wholesale from one course or discourse community to another in a linear progression and as if starting from a tabula rasa. Individual experiences accumulate over lifetimes in ways that make generalizations about “transfer” experiences across different individuals and contexts difficult to make. I agree with these criticisms, such as the suggestion that the term “transfer” implies a wholesale, unchanged use of knowledge from one setting to another rather than a repurposing or integration that involves agency, creativity, and expansion of knowledge. And yet like so many others interested in documenting and analyzing this phenomenon, I use the term “transfer” throughout this book because it has clearly become the term scholars in writing studies use to signal to one another that we are in shared conversation.⁴

Comparison to a “Control Group” and Broadening the Writers Represented: How This Book Contributes to Longitudinal Research on College Writers

What previous studies investigating the impact of first-year writing have lacked, for entirely understandable, ethical reasons, is the ability to ask

what would happen if their participants had not taken a composition class at all or a comparison to a control group.⁵ For reasons I will explain below, I stumbled into a situation where such a study would be possible. Once I recognized that I was presented with a unique research opportunity, I moved to design, approve, fund, and conduct a study where I could compare the experiences with writing over time of students at the same institution, at nearly the same time and in otherwise nearly identical conditions, who had and had not taken a required composition course. Though new, the required composition course introduced at this institution was in many ways comparable to other first-year writing courses offered at similar institutions, drawing as it did on design principles articulated in several decades of composition scholarship while supporting instructor autonomy (but eschewing some of the more recent innovations that emphasized writing studies and rhetorical genre theory briefly reviewed above). Chapter 2 presents the results of my comparative study of the college writing experiences of students who took this new course and students who matriculated at this same institution before the initiation of this new course requirement.

Another gap in the longitudinal research of college writers has been the lack of representation of public institutions and the diverse student bodies they serve. Sternglass's (1997) early study stands out for its attention to students for whom attending college is a great challenge and sacrifice. The first-generation college students in her study of the student writing culture in CUNY's City College in the early 1990s juggled multiple jobs and family care obligations while attempting to navigate a writing assessment regime that held many of them back from progress toward their degrees.⁶ Their experiences stand in stark contrast to those of the participants in the majority of the subsequent large-scale longitudinal studies set in institutions of marked privilege: Pepperdine (Carroll, 2002), Harvard (Sommers, 2008; Sommers & Saltz, 2004), Stanford (Fishman et al., 2005; Lunsford et al., 2013), Dartmouth (Delacambre & Donahue, 2012; Donahue & Foster-Johnson, 2018), MIT (Lerner & Poe, 2014), and University of Michigan (Gere, 2019). Though certainly not all the participants in these studies came from privileged homes and high schools, their experiences of writing in college were shaped by the expectations, traditions, resources, and support that encircled them at these institutions.⁷ The story emerging from places like Harvard, Stanford, and Pepperdine, in the 30 years since Sternglass's study at CUNY's City College, is one of undergraduates writing a great deal, in a diversity of genres and media for a range of audiences, and conquering progressively greater writing challenges that stretch

their abilities and produce real growth personally, intellectually, and in sophistication on the page. For instance, findings from the Stanford study of writing (Fishman et al., 2005; Lunsford et al., 2013) show us that while students' confidence in their writing may drop on entering Stanford, their experiences with writing for public audiences and in legitimate disciplinary contexts (often leading to publication) greatly legitimizes their identity as writers, which in turn enhances their willingness to commit to writing as a process and markedly improve as writers. While this is an inspiring and hopeful story for our field, we should be alerted by Melzer's (2014) nationwide study of assignments across the curriculum that not all college writing experiences are as interactive, rich, and productive of deep learning as these longitudinal studies have to date documented.

With my study, I set out to complicate our emerging story of students' college writing experience by selecting as a research site an institution of notably less privilege, notably fewer resources, and serving students who routinely juggle the kinds of competing demands and economic hardships that Sternglass (1997) documented in her groundbreaking study. My research site is a mid-sized public regional university that has experienced decades of cuts to its funding, which is set each year by the state legislature. It boasts an extremely diverse student body with many students the first in their families to attend college and most applying for financial aid. Most come from urban or rural home communities of lower- and lower-middle-income households. The research site for this investigation provides, then, a decidedly different, and I dare say more typical, educational context in which to consider the effects of a first-year composition course than recent longitudinal studies of college writers have provided. Chapter 1 presents my contribution to the burgeoning longitudinal studies of student writers and their transfer-of-writing practices and knowledge with examination of a population not often enough centered in this literature.

If longitudinal studies of college writers have tended to inform us about the experiences of students attending institutions of privilege, they have also tended to tell us about the experiences of students who feel some ease and pride in writing. While as teachers we may have a good deal of experience with students who are uncomfortable with or resistant to writing, as researchers we have found it very challenging to recruit such students to participate in our studies, especially longitudinal and qualitative studies that require a good deal of commitment and time from participants. As a result, most of our findings reflect the experiences of students with some facility and

interest in writing. Concern that those who tend to volunteer to participate in this research are likely individuals “predisposed to appreciating the value of writing in their lives” led J. Alexander et al. (2020a) to call for studies that “seek to document and account for less positive affects about writing” (p. 588). In an attempt to do just this, I cast my net wide, did my best to signal an interest in hearing from all students, including those who dislike writing or have felt a lack of connection with writing assignments, and crossed my fingers. I had no reason to believe I would have any better luck in avoiding volunteer bias than previous researchers, and I suspect I have not entirely—most of the participants in this study feel some facility with writing and can express themselves in writing with relative ease. But I did have a chance to sit and talk with several students who distrusted writing teachers, sought to avoid writing, did not identify as writers, and sought out majors and professional paths that they hoped would ask them to do very little writing. Their candor with me was welcome and illuminating, and I pay special attention to what they have to teach writing instructors and administrators in Chapter 5, adding to the few smaller studies such as McCarthy’s (1987) and Knutson’s (2019) that listen to students who do not view themselves as efficacious writers.

Thus, the overarching research questions the study presented in this book set out to investigate are:

- How do the experiences with writing at a public, regional research university serving a diverse student body, with many first-generation college students who frequently come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, compare to the experiences with writing documented in longitudinal studies of writing at institutions with far greater privilege and resources? In other words, how do class, race, and ethnic background and institutional prestige and resources affect students’ experiences with writing in college? (Chapter 1)
- How do students at this institution who have taken a required first-year writing course experience, understand, and perceive writing as compared to students in the same institution who have not taken such a course? In what ways are their experiences with writing in college similar and in what ways do they differ? (Chapter 2)
- What are the immediate and long-term impacts of a first-year writing course on students’ experience with writing in college? Do students transfer knowledge gained in the course to other appropriate contexts in the years after its conclusion? What are the long-term influences of the course, positive and negative, on students’ experiences with writing? (Chapters 3 and 4)

- What can students who do not see themselves as strong writers teach us about their responses to writing instruction, their views on writing, and possible interventions that may support their development as writers? (Chapter 5)

Researcher Positioning

These research questions emerge in part from my acting upon the happenstance development of circumstances at my research site and in equal part as a progression from my previous scholarly commitments and perspectives. Those commitments include understanding writing as a complex sociocognitive phenomenon, a negotiation and dance between an individual's past experiences, identities, embodiment, and cognition and larger, contextual social expectations, histories, material spaces, and exigencies. This understanding drew me to (and was informed by) empirical research using methods suited to explore writing from multiple angles: the perceptions of writers and their readers, process tracing, the effect of process interventions, textual analysis, and tracing community textual practices over time. My previous research (Wilder, 2002, 2006, 2012) sought to contribute to writing in the disciplines (WID) research by studying a disciplinary discourse community's entrenched, expert textual practices and the experience of introductory students at the periphery of this discourse community where traditionally these practices play a significant yet implicit role in oral and written discourse and in evaluation standards. My perspective on writing is informed by writing studies' robust debates and research on theories of discourse communities, genre, rhetorical invention, tacit writing knowledge, transfer of writing knowledge, and the efficacy of explicit genre instruction.

Like many WAC and WID researchers, the questions I have pursued have been motivated by concern for those historically excluded from access to disciplinary authority and power through discursive gatekeeping: minority students, especially Black and Latinx students; students from lower-class backgrounds; students who are the first in their family to attend college; and women and gender-nonconforming students.⁸ An imperative turn in writing across the curriculum (WAC) scholarship has called for not only more explicitly naming this concern but also more directly engaging racial, ethnic, class, and gender difference in WAC/WID scholarship. Indeed, I am as guilty as those cited by Anson (2012) and Poe (2013) in not foregrounding this concern in my past work, even as I felt it as centrally motivating. For instance, you won't

find this rather muted articulation of the concern until page 111 of my book-length treatment of literary studies as a disciplinary discourse community:

The sense that complex social circumstances likely support the development of some students' apparent special "knacks" for intuiting the implicit rhetorical instruction of the disciplines motivates many arguments in favor of explicit rhetorical instruction on the grounds of social equity. Recognition that the discourse practices of the community of school more closely match, indeed stem from, the discourse practices of the white middle class leads many to claim that students from other backgrounds are placed in distinct disadvantages in this context, especially when instruction makes no attempt to acknowledge and bridge different discourse community practices. (Wilder, 2012, pp. 111–112)

My concern that the privileging of white discursive practices is historically embedded in what we widely call "academic discourse" in its many variants animates this project as well. But as a white, cisgender woman whose parents both held graduate degrees, I have humbly learned in the interim so much more about how knowledge of Latinx and Black rhetorical and linguistic traditions might animate writing pedagogy and promote code meshing (Baker-Bell, 2020; Banks, 2011, 2016; Carey, 2016; Hinojosa & de León-Zepeda, 2019; Newman & García, 2019; Perryman-Clark, 2013; Richardson, 2004; Sánchez et al., 2019; Young et al., 2014) and heard Kareem's (2019, 2020) and Baker-Bell et al.'s (2020) criticism of composition and WAC's apparent silence on naming these as learning outcomes. I wish to take care now to foreground rather than murmur these concerns.

Research Site, or How I Am Able to Approximate a Control Group in the Study of the Impact of Required First-Year Writing

The research reported in this book was conducted at a regional state research university with an unusual history of writing instruction: In the mid-1980s it followed through on the provocations in composition's literature and abolished first-year composition. Beginning in the mid-1980s, many four-year colleges and universities opted to supplement their first-year writing course requirement with WAC programs that moved to distribute the site and responsibility for writing instruction across disciplines and across all years of students' classwork. This embrace of WAC came as a response to the growing understanding, supported by then burgeoning WID and longitudinal research, that writing is contextual and developmental and that one generalized course is

insufficient (or incapable) for helping students meet all the challenges of writing in diverse majors and professional tracks. But in contrast to the trend of WAC programs then being built to buttress and build upon a first-year composition course requirement, in 1986 the faculty of the university where the research reported here takes place was persuaded by their writing program colleagues to rescind their first-year composition course requirement then housed in the English Department and replace it with a WAC structure of two required writing-intensive (WI) courses offered by many departments, one a lower-level course and one an upper-level course (Brannon, 1995).

This new approach to college writing instruction, devoid of first-year composition, was clearly intended to support students' development as writers over their years of study and to introduce them to writing conventions and practices in their major field of study. I understand that, when instituted, the structure was supported with faculty commitment, oversight, and WAC professionalization, features that were originally well-funded. But as has happened to WAC programs at other institutions (White, 1990), funding eroded over time, and subsequently so did the faculty outreach, oversight, and perhaps finally faculty commitment, which held on unevenly across departments and was no longer coordinated. This left the two-course requirement as something students continued to fulfill, but in courses where instructors' commitment to and training in writing instruction could vary widely. At a bare minimum, this meant that students could only reliably be said to have written a certain number of pages in their WI courses, and even this requirement received little oversight. A wide variety of courses fulfilled the WI requirement, from introductory creative writing to large lecture courses that allowed some students to enroll in a WI section that asked them to write some additional papers but provided no writing instruction. Anecdotally, I learned a number of students waited until their senior year to take the two WI courses, undercutting the developmental goals of the original WAC program. Some departments did not offer sufficient WI courses, sending their majors to fulfill the upper-level course requirement in other departments, undercutting the original goal of supporting students' acquisition of writing skills and knowledge in the context of their chosen field.

Growing recognition that the original goals of the WAC structure were not being met motivated a provost to institute a committee to investigate and propose an alternate approach to writing instruction. In a "back-to-the-future" development, the outcome of this committee's work was to propose a new first-year course requirement. The aim of this development was to

ensure that all students had a similar early college experience with writing. A continuing but seemingly toned-down commitment to WAC was maintained in a further requirement that all major programs identify how at the upper level they support students' acquisition of writing practice and knowledge in their fields.⁹ The first class of students to take this new, required first-year course matriculated at the university in 2013.

As I watched these curricular developments from the sidelines,¹⁰ I realized I was witnessing a rather remarkable development in the early 21st century—the return to a required composition course after all the potent critiques this requirement has buffeted (Brooks, 2002). It also presented an opportunity not usually available in longitudinal studies of students' experience with writing in college—the ability to compare the experiences of students on the same campus in near identical circumstances with the one variable difference of participation in a first-year writing course.

Implementation of my hastily designed study faced some delays. After receiving institutional review board (IRB) approval, an initial attempt to recruit participants in spring 2014 failed to yield sufficient participation—only two students volunteered. After determining the culture of research participation on this campus led participants to (justifiably) expect compensation, I secured funding for this purpose (as well as for support with interview transcription).¹¹ Thus in spring 2015, 2.5 years after the launch of the new first-year composition course requirement, my study began. A downside to the delay in launching the study is that my longitudinal engagement with students who had not taken a first-year writing course was necessarily truncated to either their last 2 years of study as college students or their final year and 1 year post-graduation. In other words, by the time I started interviews, participants who had not taken the new first-year writing course were in either their junior or senior year of college. An upside to the delay, though, was that I ended up not tracking students emerging from the very first year of the new first-year writing course program but instead from the program's third year. This way the faculty who taught this course, all of whom were newly hired and most of whom were new to campus, had some time to establish the new course before I sought to track its possible afterlives.

This institution serves a very different population than those represented in many recent large-scale longitudinal studies of student writers. The public, regional research university where the present study was conducted enrolls annually approximately 13,000 undergraduates, most of whom come from the surrounding region in the Northeastern US, which includes large urban

areas like New York City and rural areas like upstate New York. Approximately 40% are first-generation college students; 82% apply for financial aid and, of those, 46% come from families whose annual income is less than \$50,000. In response to identified needs, in 2019, spurred by a faculty and professional staff union initiative, the university launched a food pantry open to students, faculty, and staff, and a free exchange for students to obtain gently used professional clothing. The student body is racially and ethnically diverse, with 43–45% of the student population described as belonging to a racial or ethnic minority. At the time of the study, the largest of these minority populations (17%) identified as Black, though in recent years the number of students identifying as Latinx has surpassed this figure.

In my own advanced undergraduate writing studies courses at this institution taught in the years before the new first-year writing requirement I had regularly assigned articles emerging from the large-scale longitudinal studies of writing at institutions of far greater resources and privilege, such as Harvard (Sommers & Saltz, 2004) or Carnegie Mellon (Haas, 1994). The reactions of many of my students upon learning from these articles how much students are asked to write and how seriously faculty in a wide range of disciplines engage with student writing at such institutions have included shock and even anger. They recounted their own early college writing experiences in very different terms, describing lower expectations in many ways, including simply lower expected page counts. It was evident to me that the anecdotal experiences of these students, in the time since Sternglass's (1997) groundbreaking work, were underrepresented in this line of research and begging to be heard. My research set out to offer a needed corrective at the same time that it set out to take advantage of a unique opportunity for comparative study.

Interview Methodology

I set out to conduct a longitudinal, interview-based study with a comparative component in the footsteps of previous longitudinal studies of college writers. I determined that interviews would be the primary mode of data collection because, as with other longitudinal studies of student writers, I wished to analyze and compare experiences with writing that would likely vary a great deal. Simply collecting students' writing from different courses and majors without the context of their experience would leave me to compare vastly differing genres and assignment goals that would not tell much about students' experiences with or abilities in writing. Perceptions of self-efficacy,

motivation, and general dispositions have been shown to be tightly tied to student writers' performance of writing (Driscoll & Jin, 2018; Driscoll & Wells, 2012; Pajares, 2003), making them the root beliefs we need to study as much or more than any individual written performances. Further, a number of studies demonstrate that students come to understand writing as rhetorical and epistemic long before signs of these views emerge in their writing (Haas, 1994; Penrose & Geisler, 1994; Sommers & Saltz, 2004), meaning we may miss important learning about writing if we only focus on students' writing.

I wanted to hear from as many students as possible and recruit a large number of participants in order to consider diverse experiences and attempt to avoid volunteer bias, particularly as it relates to participants' willingness to discuss the sometimes-sensitive subject of writing. This can be an area where survey methodology is better than interviews, especially when the primary investigator has no research team or assistants. But I knew from conducting large-scale survey studies (Adsit & Wilder, 2020), and from reading and participating in them, that there was no way surveys could account for the nuances and complexity I hoped to be able to learn about. Furthermore, surveys suited for quantifiable analysis require that the researcher predetermine responses for participants to select from, and since the institution type and population I hoped to study were underrepresented in previous longitudinal studies of college writers, I wanted to allow participants the freedom to determine their own responses and work on the back end, in coding and analysis, to attempt to determine trends in findings rather than assume that trends in the existing literature applied to my research site.

Yet a limitation of interview as a research methodology is its ability to only document what participants consciously recollect about the subject at hand. Writing is a process that is notoriously difficult to fully and accurately recollect after the fact. Writing researchers have documented that a good deal of expert writing knowledge is tacit knowledge, which bearers do not recognize that they possess but which powerfully guides many of their regular writing practices (Flower, 1989; Freedman, 1993; Olinger, 2021; Rymer, 1988; Tomlinson, 1984; Warren, 2011; Wilder, 2012). And writing researchers have recently learned that a good deal of transfer of students' newly acquired writing knowledge and skill to new contexts is invisible to them and often unavailable for conscious reflection during an interview (Brent, 2012; Driscoll & Cui, 2021). Writing researchers have also learned that because emotions around the topic of writing can for some be strongly positive or negative, interview participants' ability and willingness to fully recollect their experiences with

writing can be impacted. Jarratt et al. (2009) and Dipardo (1994) have reflected on this limitation, arguing that students' memories can become particularly cloudy or even repressive when asked to reflect on writing experiences they found uncomfortable. According to Jarratt et al. (2009), questions about writing present some students with painful reminders of previous "insecurities, and sometimes resentment about the writing requirement" (p. 63), and students' answers may only become vivid when recounting experiences that they see as pleasant or directly related to their own specific goals.

In an effort to diversify my sources of data and to lessen these limitations in interview methodology, I asked participants to bring to each interview a piece of writing they felt "represented their recent writing," a qualification that I asked them to explain their interpretation of each time. I collected copies of these samples and reread them as I coded interview transcripts. In addition to providing a window into the types of writing and assignments participants experienced, these samples played an important role during interviews when I used them in attempts to stimulate participants' recall of their process of writing them. I drew from composition research methods designed to prompt participants' memories and place them back in the position of making process-based decisions about their writing such as the discourse-based interview (Odell et al., 1983) and stimulated recall (Dipardo, 1994). The writing samples they brought to each interview were pieces we looked at together as I asked them questions about the process steps they took to write the sample. Wherever possible, we examined together specific portions of these texts, and I asked questions about choices made in composing them and sources of knowledge and experience they drew from while writing them. Thus, as much as possible, I aimed to move participants away from discussing "writing in general," which could produce vague, inaccurate, or wishful depictions of this complex phenomenon, to discussing particular and recent writing events. That said, readers should be aware that even so these writers' representations of their writing can be inaccurate, with the automaticity of many writing processes (Anson, 2015) making them inaccessible to writer's recollections. Further, our regular meetings to discuss their writing may have come to shape and inform the very phenomenon I set out to describe and understand. But inaccurate or not, I and many qualitative writing researchers argue that writers' representations of their process matter a great deal, perhaps as much as or more than what actually transpires during a writing session. Each time we met, participants and I reflectively coconstructed representations of their writing (Roozen, 2016), with my questions

serving as prompts to help them make sense of what they already do and know. Their understanding of themselves as writers and their writing processes, even if not fully accurate, may inform their actions and choices the next time they sit down to write, like a working script, and this is why their own representations, or theories of writing (Yancey et al., 2014), matter and are important for us to study.

My interview protocols drew many questions from previous studies so that I could compare my findings with theirs (see the Appendix for the interview questions I used). In particular, because they were publicly available at the time I began my study, I drew questions from the Irvine (Jarratt et al., 2009), Pepperdine (Carroll, 2002), City College (Sternglass, 1997), Florida State (Yancey et al., 2014), University of Hawaii (Hilgers et al., 1995), and Stanford (Lunsford, 2010) studies of writing. I also reused some questions from my own smaller longitudinal interview study of students emerging from experimental and control sections of a writing about literature course because I had found them productive in encouraging students to discuss what they recalled from a writing course (Wilder, 2012). My questions were designed to elicit students' views on a wide range of issues related to writing. I asked about their recent writing, their positive and negative experiences with writing, their sense of themselves as writers, their previous experiences with writing in and outside of school, their advice for other writers and for their teachers, their writing processes and habits, their use of technology, and their preferences for environments in which to write. I asked nearly the same questions annually in order to compare their responses over time, though I sometimes did not have time to ask all questions every year, and the sequencing of questions could change as I attempted to follow participants in the topics they wanted to discuss or offer what seemed at the time like a logical follow-up question. As Gere (2019) did at Michigan, I set out to compare the experiences of two different groups of students. Whereas Gere (2019) and her collaborators compared the experiences of writing minors with students who did not pursue this minor but who still did fulfill a first-year writing requirement, I set out to compare the experiences of students who had never taken a first-year writing course with those who had. Students who did not take the new required writing course were asked to reflect on their experiences in courses they took to fulfill the lower- and upper-level writing-intensive course requirement in place for them. Students who took the required first-year writing course were asked at first to describe their expectations of the course and thereafter to describe their impressions and memories of the course. In the final

interviews of this study, I asked students to reflect on what participation in the study had meant to them or how it affected them. Before each interview, I reviewed transcripts of previous interviews and planned follow-up questions to supplement the scripts that appear in the Appendix.

In total, 58 students participated in this research, and I conducted 143 interviews over 5 years. Generally, the racial and ethnic demographic distribution of these 58 participants reflect the larger population of undergraduate students attending this school, with 45% identifying as a belonging to a racial or ethnic minority. However, in comparison to the larger population at this school, Black students are overrepresented (26% of participants) and Latinx students underrepresented (5% of participants). I identified students to invite to participate from the two groups I wished to compare in slightly different ways. The campus Office of Institutional Research helped me create a randomly sampled list of students who had not taken the new first-year writing course and who were thus in their junior or senior year by the time I contacted them.¹² I emailed invitations to participate to 200 them, and 25 of them responded and arranged a first interview during the spring 2015 semester. In the following spring 2016 semester 19 of them returned for a second interview. With the assistance of the new writing program director, I created a random sample of 200 students enrolled in the new first-year writing course during the 2015–2016 academic year and sent them a similar invitation. Responding to this request, 31 students participated in an interview in the first days of the semester during which they enrolled in the first-year writing course (16 in fall 2015 and 15 in spring 2016), 22 returned for a follow-up interview during the final days of their first-year writing course semester, and 19 students returned for an interview during their sophomore year,¹³ 13 for an interview during their junior year, 9 during their senior year, and 5 in the year following their graduation.¹⁴ Nearly all interviews were conducted in person, digitally recorded, and transcribed.¹⁵ However, as some students transferred, graduated, or studied abroad, some interviews were conducted by phone or video conferencing, and the final five interviews of graduates of the new writing course conducted in their post-graduation year were all conducted using video conferencing due to the then new COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, most interviews were conducted in person, in my campus office, which is across campus from the new writing program's offices. Students knew me, or grew to know me, as a white, cisgender woman researcher considerably older than them and interested in their experiences with and perceptions and feelings about writing. They recognized and sometimes commented on the fact that

my office was in the English Department but that I used research methods they were familiar with from other disciplines. Each interview lasted around 45 minutes but ranged from 30 to 60 minutes depending upon the time the participant had available and their interest in talking at greater depth.

In presenting my analysis of the transcripts of these interviews throughout this text, I identify participants by a unique number, 1–58. When quoting a transcript, I indicate which student I am quoting by this number as well as indicate in what year of school the student is (first-year, sophomore, junior, senior, or post-graduation) and from which interview with them, 1–6 or 1–2, the quotation is drawn. I regret the impersonality of using numbers to refer to these very human, very lively and diverse participants. When I began interviews in some haste, I did not ask participants to select a pseudonym, and inventing pseudonyms for them seemed unwieldy and inappropriate. I used the numbers you see here in my record keeping to anonymize my data in keeping with IRB protocol and promises I made to participants in the consent process. The size of my participant pool proved a challenge to me not only during the intense years of arranging and conducting interviews but also in finding ways to share my findings that preserve the intimacy of their qualitative character while also discussing larger trends within groups big enough to support such claims. Please know that the numbers consistently refer to the same participants, and please excuse their impersonality.

Analysis and Coding of Interview Transcripts

Analysis of the interview transcripts was a recursive process and one for which I followed the guidance of writers on qualitative research methods in the arts and humanities (Saldana, 2015) and on grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). In previous research I have used similar methods for coding interview transcripts (Wilder, 2012), but not at this scale in terms of number of interviews and number of participants. This project undoubtedly suffers by being the work of one researcher—as someone who has collaborated on research in past projects I know very well the benefits of collaboration, especially in the fuzzy, interpretive work of coding—but I do hope it may benefit in a consistent, single (though not always focused) mind making uncountable judgments from interviewing procedures to coding and interpretation. Initial coding followed closely the topics of the interview questions I imposed on our interactions, and thus could be described as deductive and largely aimed at organizing the data for purposes of comparisons across interviews that were loosely

structured, and during which related topics could be circled back to many times. Subsequent coding is better described as inductive, with the recursive readings of sections of the transcripts on similar topics next to one another telling me what subtopics or sentiments I ought to keep track of through coding. In other words, in the second round of coding I let participants' responses guide the coding; I provided coding labels to facilitate clustering together and counting similar responses when participants would speak of similar experiences but often use different terms to do so. As much as this round of coding enabled me to see similarities and trends in responses, it also enabled me to see and tabulate all the different responses generated to the same question over time or by different participants.

For all this coding work I used NVivo software. NVivo proved invaluable in helping me keep track of responses from a large number of participants. While my analysis was primarily qualitative, with NVivo assisting me in tracking themes that emerged in interviews and allowing me to locate relevant responses quickly, NVivo also facilitated some quantitative analyses, making it possible to tabulate different types of responses and make quantitative comparisons of different groups of students or the same group of students over time. However, one important limitation of the quantitative data presented here is that my interviews did not always proceed as planned; sometimes I was unable to ask all my prepared questions during every interview because I ran out of time or because I departed from the planned order of questions to follow my sense of a participant's train of thought and then, due to human error, I forgot to return to all questions. Anytime I did not ask a question meant a topic I coded for may not have come up not because the participant didn't have anything to say on it but because I didn't bring it up.

The New First-Year Writing Course

A first-year writing course launched in 2013 had the benefit of decades of composition theory and research to draw upon in its design. But I don't think this made the task of design any less daunting. This body of knowledge provided compelling evidence for some pedagogical practices, such as peer and instructor interventions in students' writing processes, but left open to debate which from an array of overall objectives the course can and should pursue: Civic engagement? Development of writerly voice and agency? Rhetorical and genre awareness? Digital and multimodal literacies? And no new writing program administrator could claim ignorance of the critiques of

labor practices in composition. On both pedagogical and labor fronts this new program faced daunting constraints. As a state institution receiving most of its budget from tuition rather than state funding, struggling to remain affordable to low-income families and individuals while buffeted by political will, the institution had obvious financial limitations. This presented immediate obstacles to easily implementing fair and ethical labor practices that are generally understood to be advantageous not only to faculty but to student learning. Adding to the already imposing pedagogical challenges of shaping a 21st-century introductory writing curriculum was the campus's immediate assignment of several general education requirements beyond but related to writing to the course, such as oral discourse and information literacy, each with a list of learning outcomes and assessment schedules in use across the statewide university system. And familiar though faulty stakeholder expectations for the course—that it eradicate student errors in writing or decrease the need to teach writing across the curriculum—arose with new gusto on a campus that had removed its first-year writing requirement so long ago that stakeholders could forget, or never knew, that such unrealistic expectations were reasons why.

Nonetheless, a director was hired and work begun to hire 16 full-time instructors. Some advantageous pedagogical and labor conditions were secured early: the class size was capped at 19 students and, while not tenure-track, instructors were full-time, teaching three sections of the course each semester, on three-year renewable contracts, working conditions modeled after the by-then well-established writing program at the University of Denver.¹⁶ Though constrained by the expectations of the committee's vision, which proposed the course and numerous general education learning outcomes, the director had a fair deal of autonomy in designing the course's common curriculum.¹⁷

The director opted to draw most prominently from pedagogical theory and research on fostering student voice and inquiry, a line of thinking with expressivist roots in Macrorie's (1988) *I-search* papers but also framed by social and cognitive understandings of writing as epistemic, conceptions of writing sometimes painted as conflicting (Berlin, 1988; Faigley, 1986) but which the director's own scholarly commitments and contributions sought to braid together. Care was also taken to make the common elements of the course adaptable so that individual instructors could draw on their own expertise and approaches to pedagogy in shaping plans for their own sections of the course. The writing faculty had a great deal of autonomy in adapting

common course objectives to pedagogical practices and exploration of topics and themes related to their expertise or interests. While individual sections of the course could explore different topics and themes and practice different genres, all were to share common curricular goals, methods such as conferencing and instructor and peer feedback on drafts, and three core assignments that instructors adapted to work with their chosen topics and themes. These writing assignments, adapted from the composition program at the University of Wisconsin, Madison (Weese et al., 1999), emphasized inquiry by supporting students' personal exploration of an academic issue, analysis, and original contribution to a scholarly conversation. For Essay 1, students wrote to explore their own experiences and to identify a relevant issue for close analysis in Essay 2; the focus of Essay 3 was to develop an argument that contributes to a scholarly conversation about the subject of Essay 2. Instructors were expected to treat Essay 3 as an analytic essay that engages with sources, a type of essay frequently assigned as a capstone to a first-year writing course as it brings together research and analytic skills practiced throughout the term. In practice, some sections focused on a common theme all semester while others explored a variety of topics or asked students to select their own individualized topics for inquiry across the semester.

The instructors of the course all had previous experience teaching first-year writing courses, but their experience and areas of expertise varied. Some had MFAs in creative writing and were active writers; others had MAs or PhDs. The vast majority of these were trained in English departments, with expertise in various areas of literary and cultural studies. Only one instructor specialized in rhetoric and composition. A few held PhDs in other areas such as history or anthropology. Coming together in this new writing program, all understood they were expected to participate in ongoing professional development activities focused initially on fostering a shared understanding of the course's learning objectives and the nature and purposes of the assignment sequence.

What I want to emphasize is the many ways the above description of the course and its teaching staff are typical of the way required first-year writing courses are taught in postsecondary institutions across the US, especially at public research universities similar to my research site. As a qualitative researcher, my first impulse tends to be to emphasize the particular and context-specific of situations I describe, and there are many important variables pertaining to the institution and experiences I describe in this book that are particular and not generalizable to other settings. But those interested in considering the ways in which my findings on the impact of first-year

composition may be applicable elsewhere should look first to this description of this particular first-year course for the ways it may match similar courses elsewhere. Instructor expertise rooted in graduate training in creative writing or literary studies is very common for instructors of this course (see Adsit & Wilder, 2020; J. H. Anderson & Farris, 2007; Bergmann & Baker, 2006; Smit, 2004; Wolfe et al., 2014). Some degree of instructor autonomy in shaping such a course around shared objectives and assignment types is also quite common (see Carroll, 2002, pp. 64–65). And while I know the director of the course often described the course in opposition to “traditional composition,” by which I understood him to mean a current traditionalist focus on grammatical correctness and formal features of writing, I think it is fair to say that many other first-year writing programs have moved away from this focus also, especially at research universities where rhetoric and composition has a scholarly presence, even as individual instructors and stakeholders also continue to uphold standards and practices labeled as current traditional.¹⁸ Recent critiques of “themed” sections of first-year composition would suggest that this practice is widespread (Adler-Kassner, 2012). And Fulkerson (2005) has pointed out the ubiquity of treating writing as a process in the ways this program does with emphasis on peer review, draft feedback, and revision.

Overview of Chapters

Before attempting to describe the impact of this new-yet-familiar first-year writing course on students’ experiences at this campus, *Tracing the Impact of First-Year Writing* begins by comparing students’ experiences of the overarching culture of writing across the curriculum on this campus with those documented in longitudinal studies of writing conducted on campuses of notably greater privilege and resources. Chapter 1 aims to broaden and diversify the types of institutions and students documented in longitudinal studies of college writers. In doing so, it challenges generalizations that might otherwise be made from this literature about the prevalence of writing in students’ college experiences. While this chapter continues to document the critical role writing plays in students’ learning across time and across disciplines, it also shines light on concrete inequities across institutions. It reveals how access to writing as a means of learning is one way privilege is delimited rather than shared in higher education.

Chapters 2–4 offer my analysis of the impact the new first-year writing course had on students’ experience of writing at my research site. These

findings are summed up in the subtitle for this book, *Identity, Process, and Transfer*. While the course may not have all the lasting impacts its stakeholders would hope for, it does seem to have significantly affected the way many of its graduates see themselves as writers and engage in writing as a social and epistemic process while helping them carry these views and practices into future contexts appropriately. These impacts are far from trivial and stand to benefit students in years long after college. Chapter 2 specifically compares the experiences of and views on writing of students in their junior year who had previously taken the first-year writing course and students who had not, documenting statistically significant differences related to their reported identity as writers, their writing processes, and their moments of writing knowledge transfer. Chapter 3 traces the impact of the course over students' 4 years of college and beyond. And Chapter 4 presents more fully fleshed-out case studies of three students who in part are representative of others in their cohort and in part illustrate how each student's experience of the course and of writing across their years of college is unique and hard to reduce to generalizations. Specifically, these case studies seek to exemplify how the first-year course was powerfully enabling for some students but also how it left lasting negative associations with others, including impressions that it policed academic honesty in unfair ways and that it was overly intrusive into students' personal lives.

Lastly, Chapter 5 shares my findings from my years of interviews with participants who did not come to identify as writers and whose confidence in their ability as writers remained low across their years of college. For these students, the first-year writing course appeared to have little lasting impact—and even produced few lasting memories. My goal in listening intently to students whose affective response to writing is largely negative was not only to diversify the findings of longitudinal studies in which such views tend to be underrepresented but also to propose recommendations for first-year writing so that it may better reach other reluctant writers like them.

It is my hope that that the research presented in these pages contributes to broadening the representation of institutions and students in longitudinal research on college writers. I hope many readers recognize the experiences of the students recorded here as relevant and useful to the work they do as writing instructors, administrators, and researchers. I hope student writers find their and their classmates' hard-earned successes and their many frustrations accurately depicted and validated. The three key terms the title of this

work highlights—identity, process, and transfer—emerged from what participants shared with me about how a first-year writing course affected them. These terms, which were among many I used to code interview transcripts, ended up denoting noteworthy differences between the ways students who had taken a first-year writing course and those who had not talked about their experiences with writing and the effects writing had on them. At my research site, a first-year writing course held the real potential to encourage students to embrace writing as part of their identity, to alter their writing processes in social and epistemic ways, and to transfer useful writing knowledge into new and appropriate contexts.