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STUDENTS DESERVE ENOUGH TIME TO PROVE THAT THEY CAN SUCCEED

ABSTRACT: Public higher education, in particular, is being brought under intense political pressure to demonstrate that students are proficient in basic skills before they matriculate or by the end of their first semester. Through longitudinal research, it is possible to demonstrate that students acquire the necessary skills over time to succeed academically and professionally. A case study of a basic skills student at City College of City University of New York, who was followed throughout the six years of her academic studies, reveals that through persistence and instructional support, such students can successfully complete their studies and become contributing members of society.

Teaching in areas of language development is often a frustrating enterprise because the time frame for an individual instructor is frequently very short, most often one semester, occasionally a year. Because we know that language development is a long-term enterprise, we chafe over not knowing what will happen to our students when they leave our classrooms. We also want to know what kind of instructional support we can offer in their first-year writing classes that will be most useful to them in meeting the academic demands that will be made on them in succeeding years. A six-year longitudinal study that I recently completed at The City College of City University of New York can encourage us that under proper instructional conditions of support, our students can transform their potential for success into actual success.

In my book, *Time to Know Them: A Longitudinal Study of Writing and Learning at the College Level*, I bring together aspects of composition research not duplicated in any previous studies: 1) examining writing and learning from a true longitudinal perspective; 2) studying a multicultural urban population; 3) investigating the relationship between writing and learning by examining papers written over time for regularly assigned academic courses across a range of disciplines; and 4) taking into consideration non-academic factors that influence

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academic performance. The book presents an argument that, given sufficient time and support, students who start at basic writing levels have the potential to succeed and do succeed.

It is fitting but sad in a way that my book has been awarded a prize bearing Mina Shaughnessy's name by the Modern Language Association because my book makes essentially the same argument that *Errors and Expectations* made 22 years ago, that students who begin at basic levels of writing instruction do have the potential and the capability to succeed at their academic tasks. That we all have had to continue to fight this battle for such a long time reflects the resurgence of conservative educational and political policies that were so evident in the criticism of open admissions at City University of New York in the early 1970's.

Since that time, an extraordinary amount of evidence has accumulated that demonstrates that the open admissions students were successful not only academically but professionally and personally, but it took more than the conventional four-year time slot for the students to complete their studies. In a retrospective study of the first cohort of students admitted under the open admissions policy at CUNY in 1970, Lavin and Hyllegard found that "[n]early half [of the students] needed more than four years to complete their bachelor's degree, 10 percent needed more than five years, 8 percent took more than seven years, and 5 percent went beyond nine years" (57). Lavin and Hyllegard went on to emphasize that ethnic differences in the length of time required to graduate were striking. "Among the senior college-entrants, only 15 percent of whites but almost 40 percent of blacks and a third of Hispanic graduates needed more than five years....Among open-admissions students,...one quarter of Hispanic degree holders and almost a fifth of blacks went beyond nine years, compared with 7 percent of white open-admissions graduates" (57).

In 1998, Bowen and Bok cited research that 26 percent of all BA recipients and 32 percent of African American BA recipients earned their BAs more than six years after matriculation (Nettles and Perna, 277 cited in Bowen and Bok, 56).

The students in my study, carried out between 1989 and 1995 at City College, followed a similar trend. As of December 1996, of the 53 students who started in my study, with two-thirds enrolled in basic writing classes, 17 (32%) had graduated, 10 (19%) had transferred to other colleges, 18 (34%) had dropped out, and 8 (15%) were still enrolled in the college, seven years after they had begun their studies. What these somewhat dry figures reveal is that after seven years, 66% of the students in my study had either graduated or were continuing in higher education. Too often, students who transfer to other college are lumped together with the true dropouts, thus inappropriately inflating the dropout figure.

The significance of these extended years of matriculation is that they strongly suggest that a combination of factors slowed students' progress: beginning in basic level classes in reading, writing, and/or mathematics; changing majors, especially, for example, as frequently happened at City College when students discovered they did not have the requisite mathematics background for engineering or the sciences; and having to work from 4 to 40 hours per week, as the students in my study did, thus requiring more part-time study for students who were both economically and academically disadvantaged when they began their college careers. Recently, Wallace and Bell pointed out that an implicit form of racial discrimination occurs "if the educational experience offered to African American students in primary and secondary schools result in these students not being as well prepared for the demands of higher education as are other students" (313). Similarly, "the financial requirements of higher education may pose a greater problem for minority students who come from low-income households or who are first generation college students" (312). This is the reality for most students who begin their studies at City University of New York and many other public institutions of higher education.

In 1989, when I began my study, I felt that it would be essential to document precisely the ways in which students use the time frame to gradually acquire the skills they need to succeed academically. It was already clear to me in 1989, as Lavin and Hyllegard pointed out in their 1996 book, that increasing educational attainment and narrowing ethnic inequalities were not current priorities in the nation's agenda (240). And, clearly, the proposed educational policies for CUNY that eliminate remediation or limit it to one semester will most harshly impact the students who benefit from an extended time frame to demonstrate their capabilities.

For my study, I decided to teach three sections of composition in the fall of 1989, one section of English 1 (the lower level of basic writing), one section of English 2 (the second level of basic writing), and one section of English 110 (the freshman composition course). I asked the students in these sections if they would be willing to participate in my study, to let me interview them twice each semester, to collect or make copies of papers they wrote in all their classes, and to allow a research assistant to observe one of their classes each semester. I also collected copies of their transcripts each semester and copies of their attempts to pass the Writing Assessment Test and the Proficiency Test required of all graduates of City College. Of the 53 students in the classes who initially agreed to participate, 21 identified themselves as African-American, 26 Latino, 4 Asian, and 2 White. Thirty were males and 23 were females. Twenty-five were born outside the continental United States, including 3 born in Puerto Rico. At the end of the six years of the study, I had complete data for nine students and partial

data for the others.

There are two issues I would like to consider in this paper: the development of complex reasoning skills, but not in a neat, linear pattern, and the importance of appropriate instructional support at key moments in a student's academic journey. I think it will be best to examine these issues through the experiences of a real student as she encountered the demands of the academic setting. You will see from the case study I present that I am not arguing that the students in my study achieved the highest academic levels; what I am arguing is that they achieved sufficient expertise to become productive, contributing members of the society, and they acquired the self-esteem they deserved from their extraordinary efforts.

In his infamous book, *City on a Hill*, James Traub documented what he perceived to be a hopeless but well-meaning cause at City College, true educational attainment by students who started with extreme educational disadvantages. One of the chapters in his book was titled, "A Miraculous Survivor," and it was about one of the students in my study, an African-American woman I called Joan, who started in the English 2 class. (Traub had access to the work of the first four years of Joan's six years at the college.) Joan was truly disadvantaged in many ways: she had had a poor educational preparation for college studies; she was visually disabled, having lost 70% of the vision in her left eye as a result of an accident when she was two years old; and she was the youngest child in a single-parent household where most of her older siblings were addicted to either alcohol or drugs. She had not been taught how to take notes in high school, and her writing tasks had been mainly creative ones. In her college writing, Joan's papers were not laden heavily with grammatical errors, but she initially lacked depth in her responses to the academic demands, depending heavily on definitions and regurgitation of received knowledge. Traub denigrated her achievements in his book, stating that by his standards, Joan had not become an "educated person;" she had not developed "intellectual discrimination and she certainly knew virtually nothing of philosophy and history" (132). Some of his accusations may ring true from his Harvard-educated perspective, but Traub failed completely to recognize that as Joan gathered more knowledge in her major field, psychology, she became able to make connections between the insights of that field and other discipline areas and to apply her insights to real-world problems. Although she continued to struggle with abstract areas such as philosophy, she developed the capability to bring significant understandings from her own experience to the needs of others. Joan's writing over the years revealed that she learned from the instruction she received and she was able to apply new insights to both academic and practical problems. Joan's troubled family background gave her "empathy," in her words, with the people who came to the

methadone clinic where she first had an internship and then a permanent position after she graduated.

Joan told me in her first semester at the college that she found the college demands extremely different from the high school requirements "which made things a little difficult to adjust to, but I can say it was a challenge for me." She had not been asked to do much writing in junior high school. In high school, in her English classes, she had written summaries but not much else. She received 90's for her work. This led her to believe that she had been properly prepared for writing demands when she came to college. "But I really wasn't," she said.

In her writing placement test, Joan presented a traditional organizational pattern, an introduction, two paragraphs of development, and a conclusion. The best guess for the reason for failure, and her placement in English 2, was that there were a few grammatical and punctuation errors. Missed by the readers were Joan's thoughtful comments on the topic of whether students should be expelled from courses if they are late more than three times. Joan noted that students become disadvantaged when they are late because "most lessons given by teachers or college professors are started out with an aim which sometimes revolves around the lesson itself. By the student being late, he or she is totally lost because they have missed the whole meaning of the lesson which could be the beginning of the end for a student." Although the idea is not stated as clearly as it might have been, Joan had identified an important reason why students should be prompt in attendance, one unmentioned by most takers of the Writing Assessment Test (WAT). Joan easily passed the WAT at the end of her first semester.

In the English 2 course that first semester, Joan wrote several drafts of a paper comparing her experiences with those of an anthropologist in a foreign country. In her final draft, she wrote: "As I walked through the college doors, I began to feel more and more uncomfortable because I was surrounded by many people who were much different than me.... People sensed my fear as soon as I walked through the doors. They knew that I was a freshman who know nothing about college life." Reminiscent of the stage of "silence" in Belenky and her colleagues' *Women's Ways of Knowing*, Joan seemed strongly intimidated by the college environment. But, in an earlier draft of the paper, she had included a section suggesting a hope that she might be able to overcome these fears: "At City College, I also became angry and frustrated because I felt a sense of isolation and self-consciousness in the college atmosphere. Also I felt very afraid and lost. But, later on, I began to realize that as I learn a little more about college life at City College, it will be much easier to adjust." A pattern began to emerge in her writing that suggested that she dealt more fully with ideas and emotions in early drafts than in final papers. Perhaps she felt constrained to deal more narrowly or neatly with ideas in her final papers.

Admitted into the freshman composition course the next semester, Joan found the course not very helpful to her. She felt that too much time was spent on grammar rather than on discussion of the assigned readings. She also had difficulty understanding the comments made on her papers by her instructor, an adjunct in the English Department who at that time had little preparation for the teaching of composition. Although her instructor made copious comments on her papers, he used terms that were either too "jargon-laden" and complex for her to follow or that failed to lead her to develop the necessary insights. For one paper, students were assigned to revise the summary of an essay by J. Black on Kafka. Joan wrote: "'A Report to an Academy' by Franz Kafka is about an ape who wanted to become a human." The instructor wrote in the margin: "Why did either Kafka or Black state the ape's first wish was to become human?" This "why" question was a good comment, and if left alone for emphasis, it would have been useful to Joan. Joan's paper continued, supplying some reasons as follows: "Along with this, he wanted freedom. The ape did not want to be caged up. In order to become successful at being human, he had more steps to follow." The instructor's next comment was as follows: "You could take the first sentence of this, remove one, and by fiddling a bit with punctuation, transition words (conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs), sentence length (perhaps combining 2), and most of all sentence order, make this opening make sense. Try." The advice in reworking these introductory sentences was far too complicated for her to follow. At the minimum, the instructor might have rewritten these sentences to provide a model for Joan and to show her the possibilities. As a summary comment, the instructor wrote, "Overall, you really don't get at the essential problems with Black's essay in terms of the reasoning, though you do smooth out his grammar in some places." Extensive as the instructor's comments were, they did not address the specific places in the paper where Joan's analysis of Black's reasoning was lacking.

At the beginning of her second year, Joan told me that in the previous year she had learned to use writing to better understand the material in her courses by "taking notes in all classes, taking out the important terms from those notes, and using them as the basis for study." She underlined definitions and important terms in her books. This strategy of referring carefully to authorities was also implemented in her writing, where she underlined key terms. She had cut back her working hours to 13 per week so that she could try to get better grades.

In the writing in her sociology course, Joan's papers were full of definitions, with authorities for each carefully provided. Although this approach was initially successful for her, in examinations her instructor wanted more analytical responses, particularly when differences between concepts were asked for. Received knowledge could not carry

her very successfully when analysis was required. She received a "D" in this course. Citing authorities, providing definitions, and discussing causes of problems were more successful for her in her psychology class that semester. Joan liked the readings and found the class discussions helpful in clearing up ideas presented in the lectures. She received a "C" in this course. By the end of that semester, Joan felt that writing helped her remember ideas much more, the first phase of using writing as a way of learning. She said: "If I write when I'm reading, it sinks in more." Her work load had increased and she was working double shifts from 7:15 AM to 11:30 PM three days a week. "I'm tired," she said. She had learned the importance of planning ahead, and she "liked it when teachers gave a syllabus and advance notice." Clearly, such materials help students like Joan, who have time-consuming outside commitments, to handle the planning of their academic work in a better way.

Joan had more difficulty with courses that required multiple choice exams than those in which she could write papers. She found multiple choice exams difficult because the answers were "debatable" and she had difficulty choosing among the options. She was starting to plan ahead more for her courses and beginning necessary research sooner than she had in the past.

In the spring semester of her second year, Joan was taking a psychology course, an art course, a speech course, and the world civilization course for the second time. (She had dropped this course during an earlier semester.) The psychology course was the hardest one and she found the language "very technical with difficult words." She was concerned that she was having so many problems in understanding and carrying out the assignments since this was her major field, but she passed the course with a "C."

By the end of her second year at the college, Joan had passed three psychology courses, had started to fulfill the core course requirements of the college, and, of the three skills assessment tests in reading, writing, and mathematics, she still had the Reading Assessment Test and the Math Assessment Test looming before her. She had learned how to use periodicals for research, and she was committed to continuing at the college with a major in psychology.

In the fall semester of her third year, Joan felt that her writing in her psychology courses was improving. She was able to apply insights from a psychologist's model of child development to observations of a particular child, and the instructor approvingly wrote "very good" or "good" five times on her paper. She received a "B+" on this paper and the instructor remarked at the end, "Your thinking is rather scientific and systematic," an acknowledgment of the approval that received knowledge garners. But Joan was having problems with her world civilization and French courses. Having failed the first two pop quiz-

zes in the world civilization course (multiple-choice and objective questions), Joan finally asked for the official designation of “disabled” that she had avoided for so long. She realized that she needed to take more time for the reading in the world civilization course, and she was troubled because she “forgets what [she] is reading” and her “mind wanders in class.” She managed to pass both courses with “C” grades, but she received a “D” in French the next semester and eventually asked for exemption from the final required fourth semester French course on the basis of her disability.

Joan’s predilection toward presenting “received knowledge” in her papers prevented her from accomplishing her professors’ demands for more analytic writing. In the second level world civilization course, Joan wrote a paper on a novel by Chinua Achebe. The instructor commented on the paper that she had “recounted much of the novel rather than analyzing it.”

By the end of the semester, Joan said that having to work long hours had made her sluggish, and she was not eating well. The day before our interview, she had worked from 7 AM to 5 PM, getting up at 4 AM to fulfill all her responsibilities. But she had become more committed to her psychology major.

In the spring semester of her third year, Joan was writing papers in her abnormal psychology course that her professor liked, commenting, “Terrific job,” at the end of one of them and giving her a “B+” on the paper. But her grade in the course was dragged down by her performance on the two examinations that counted for two-thirds of the course grade, and she received a “C” in the course. Once again, where exams were weighted more heavily than papers, students who benefited from the reflection provided in writing were disadvantaged. The major writing assignment for the course was the review and analysis of pertinent articles in the field of abnormal psychology. Students were expected to apply theories learned in the course to the situations described in the articles. Joan’s paper for the course presented a variety of cases with psychological interpretations grounded firmly in research that she had studied. In her analysis of the first case of a doctor who inseminated his patients with his own sperm, Joan described this condition as “an individual having a superiority complex about his/herself. These individuals believe that they are so perfect that he or she has no thoughts or consideration of others. These individuals suffer from low self-esteem and may go through great lengths to demonstrate their self-worth by making themselves the center of attention.” Joan had clearly understood the parameters of this assignment and was capable of fulfilling them.

At this stage, Joan recognized that writing helped her understand where she stood “with theories and materials as well as grades.” She felt that exams do not show everything without writing assignments.

She told me, "In a writing assignment, a teacher can point out problems and misunderstandings." In other words, she could learn from the responses of her instructors to the writing. In exams, students only found out whether they were right or wrong but not always why.

That same semester, Joan was enrolled in the first level world humanities course. She was very much impressed with the professor, describing her as a "warm and worldly woman." Although there were stringent reading requirements, eight books during the semester, Joan did not complain about these assignments. There were no papers required for the course; the only writing was essay questions on the final examination. Joan said that she had learned to define a word in a sentence to help a reader understand her meaning. This professor appeared to become a serious role model for Joan. She received an "A" in the course.

Thus, at the end of her third year at the college, Joan had acquired a certain kind of academic competence. She could take insights from research and theory and apply them to individual psychological cases. She felt that responses to her writing assignments were much better guides to increasing her understanding of the materials she was working with. Simultaneously, her relationships with her professors had grown in the spring semester, and this had had a very positive impact on her.

In the fall semester of her fourth year at the college, Joan was taking courses in biology, psychology, the third level of world civilization, and the second level of world humanities. She felt that her most difficult course was the world humanities class, and she was having problems "shifting from one type to another type of reading." In a paper for this course, for the first time, Joan began to build relationships between what she was learning in one discipline to another. She applied concepts from psychology to her analysis of Voltaire's *Candide*. She wrote: "Pangloss inspired Candide's Optimism because he attributed what we would call in Psychology, a Halo-effect to every experience in life, meaning there is good in everything and everyone." In another paper, on whether Nora was entitled to divorce her husband in *A Doll's House*, Joan began a thoughtful analysis of the relationship "Torvald not only stripped Nora of her pride and dignity as a person, but he also assisted in the degrading of her character by taking advantage of her child-like ways." The instructor admired this insight and wrote "nice" in the margin. Joan had moved to the second stage of using writing as a way of learning, the analytic stage.

Joan had an acute sense of what she could pick up from her professors that would help her. She learned to use transition words from listening to her professors. She had discovered that professors love it when students mimic them. Because her psychology professor said "moreover" and "in that," Joan learned to use these terms in her writ-

ing. She also applied this insight to papers she wrote in other courses. She told me, "I understand something when I write it. I like writing because it gives me a chance to elaborate on a subject, not being limited in any way." Again she reiterated to me that she felt she was better able to explain and elaborate in writing than on multiple-choice tests, where she felt it was more difficult for her to show what she had learned.

At the end of the semester, Joan told me more about her family life. She and her mother (who was disabled and received supplementary social security funds) lived in public housing. Joan received assistance for books from the SEEK program at the college, a Pell grant to help cover her living expenses, and tuition support from the Tuition Assistance Program. Any spending money she needed, she had to earn. Clinical psychology had started to attract Joan, and she thought she would like to help troubled teens, especially those addicted to narcotics. She had promised herself that she would never turn out like her brothers and sisters. "Being at college is my life," she said. "I will not let anyone take it away from me."

The next semester, the spring semester of her fourth year, Joan was taking a required astronomy course, two psychology courses, and a course on U.S. society. Her first paper for a psychology course on theories of personality was not very successful, but the teacher's comments and suggestions provided the kind of help that Joan needed in order to improve her papers, evidence of the learning she felt could take place in response to writing that did not occur with short answer examinations. In the paper, Joan had attempted an analysis of a young man suffering from what she called "anti-social personality disorder." Joan had written that the subject's behavior "is demonstrated by this individual many times in the many schools and facilities where he was placed." Her instructor cited specific details from the case study that Joan should have considered and analyzed more carefully (e.g. "information that this [moving around] should have explained some of the truancy and misbehavior and alerted them to get the mother in and interview her carefully"). From these comments, Joan could see that she had not used the evidence from the case study to provide the required in-depth analysis.

Joan's next paper in the course was more productive, as she speculated on the causes of the behavior of the individual she was analyzing. In a paper titled, "The Man in the Shell," she combined her former predilection for citing authorities with her own analysis of the subject's problems. She wrote: "Here is a man with many negative thoughts, a slim build, and extremely low self-esteem. One does not need a scholar to figure out that this individual has an intense phobia or fear of people, activity, and/or pleasure." She followed this with a series of speculative questions about how the subject might behave in situations not

described in the case study data, in conditions that she postulated. Even though the instructor had a different view from the one expressed by Joan, Joan was not punished for taking a risk. She received a grade of 8 out of a possible 10 on the paper, and the instructor wrote "good" beside the grade marking. Whereas in the past, Joan had talked about writing primarily as a means of helping her remember the material better, now she saw writing as giving her an opportunity to elaborate on ideas and to give her personal opinion. She was also moving toward the third stage of using writing as a way of learning, the creation of new knowledge, new to the learner even if not new to the discipline.

In Joan's other psychology class that semester, Introduction to Human Development, the class observation revealed the instructor helping the students prepare for the mid-term examination that they would be taking at the next class meeting. The professor offered advice about how the students could best learn for the exam: "First read the introduction, second the summary, then, the chapter. Never read the whole chapter at one time. At the end of the chapter, take notes. Reading alone does not work." This was the only time in the 74 classroom observations made in 20 disciplines in this study that a professor explicitly recommended to students that they combine writing with reading as a way of learning.

By the end of her fourth year, Joan had finally passed all the Skills Tests required by the college. She had passed the Writing Assessment Test easily at the end of her first semester. She was given extra time to take the Reading Assessment Test after she received the designation of being disabled, and she passed that in her third year. But the Math Assessment Test had continued to bedevil her. She had a tutor for three weeks and she reviewed previous tests carefully. When she took the actual test, she managed to finish the questions five minutes early. Thus, at the end of her fourth year at the college, Joan would now be permitted to register as a Junior and would be removed from the "Skills Assessment Test-Warning" designation. It is all too obvious that if the proposed policies on passing the Skills Assessment Tests at CUNY are implemented, requiring students to have passed all the Skills Tests by the end of their first semester, students like Joan will never have the opportunity to proceed this far.

When asked in what ways she felt she was now a different person from the one she was when she started at City College, Joan said that she was really starting to understand that "business is business.... Now I am into concrete things that the college offers, like films, or things that will help me get extra credit for my classes." She knew that she had to get her grade point average up. She said, "I'm really here to obtain a degree and get a job. I started to wake up in '91 [her third year at the college]. My GPA was higher at first, but now I'm taking more difficult courses."

Recognizing that her visual disability slowed her down in undertaking complex writing tasks, Joan had learned by the fall of her fifth year at the college, when I collected a writing profile from her, that she had to try to start her assignments a week before the due date. If she needed to do research for the paper, she went to the library. If she already knew something about the topic and she was interested, she would do an outline and introduction. With what she called these "easier" papers, she wrote one draft and then made corrections. But if the paper was on a more technical topic, she found all the information she could and took from it what she needed. She then wrote one or more rough drafts. In these more technical papers, she had to be sure of the facts. These papers continued to reflect a strong reliance on outside authorities. Joan said that the writing process became distressing if she could not find the necessary information; she did not want to write from hearsay.

Joan wrote her papers at a night stand in her mother's room where the lighting was bad, using a blue ball-point pen. She said, "Black is blah and makes me uncomfortable." She used paper with big lines, probably because of her vision problems, but she said the "college ruled paper makes me feel cramped and prevents me from loosening up." She took her handwritten draft to a computer at the college and typed it in. She noted that as she was typing, "something may not sound right or I find a better way to say it. I do some changing at the computer or type in different stuff." So, although Joan may not formally call this process revising, this is what was occurring.

Although she had passed the Math Assessment Test, Joan found the required statistics course in her psychology major her most difficult course in the fall of her fifth year. In her world arts course, Joan talked with another student in my study who had also been in her English 2 class, Delores. Delores, a Latina student from the Dominican Republic, had been very successful at the college and had been accepted into the combined BA/MA program in psychology. Delores offered to tutor Joan in statistics. Joan managed to pass the statistics course with a "D" and her philosophy course with a "C," having made a conscious decision not to argue with the instructor when she found her own beliefs questioned. During this semester, she was working three days a week in an internship at a health center, doing counseling and clerical work.

Joan recognized that writing served to alert her as to how well she understood the material in her courses. She said, "I fear that if I don't get writing, I don't have a grasp of where I'm going in the course. I have had more trouble with courses that don't require writing." She was using mapping, a strategy she had learned in her basic skills reading course, to help her with her writing. She said, "Mapping helps me find my thoughts. I use one word and look for another word that

relates to it.”

In her writing during this semester, Joan once again drew on her knowledge of psychology to assist her in the analysis of materials. In a paper on the film version of *The Joy Luck Club* for her world arts course, Joan wrote: “The filmmaker wants us to empathize with the mother, by observing her, not as an antagonist, a victim of the circumstances, as she had no choice but to abandon her children, hoping that someone would have the heart to return them.” Had Joan taken this world arts core course earlier in her academic program, she would not have had these psychological terms and perceptions to assist her in her analysis. Her instructor was pleased with this insight and wrote “good” in the margin of the paper.

In the spring of her fifth year, Joan took the next level of world humanities required by the college. This course focused on Black American studies. Her professor, a woman, talked about slavery and stereotypes in the course. Joan had read a good deal in this field, so she did not find the course difficult. In one of her papers, Joan asserted a prime value of education for herself: “In closing, reading *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, one can conclude, education was, and still remains, the key element involved in overcoming oppression. One should never forget that knowledge is the one tool that can be used to overpower the white man.” Inside Joan, not evident in her quiet demeanor, resided the pride that had carried throughout the difficulties of her personal life and her college life to this point of achievement, within grasp of earning her undergraduate degree in the next year.

Joan came to another realization about the role of writing during this spring term. She said, “Writing helps me put ideas into my own words--makes me think how things can be put more simply than in textbooks sometimes.” This conscious realization of the value of putting ideas into her own language was a crucial insight for Joan. It was an insight mentioned by most of the students in my study, although the insight occurred at varying times in the students’ academic experiences.

Thus, by the end of her fifth year, Joan had successfully completed most of the required core courses. She was passing her courses with “B’s” and “C’s.” She had missed the final in her French course when she developed a throat and eye infection at the end of the semester, and she failed this course. Writing had become the way she kept her grades up, as she continued to experience difficulty with short-answer examinations. She was increasingly able to apply the insights from her psychology classes to readings and concepts in other courses.

In order to graduate, Joan needed to pass the English Proficiency Test, another writing test similar to the WAT but requiring higher writing standards. She took this examination in the fall of her sixth and

last year at the college. One of the options of the test allowed students to pick up a reading which would serve as a basis for some of the topics on the test. Students could select a question based on the reading or one of the other questions presented "cold" to them as had been the questions on the WAT. Joan selected a topic about the hardships facing arrivals in a new country either as immigrants or students. She wrote an outline, including in the introduction the three aspects she would develop in the paper. In her outline, she set out in the second section to consider why these were hardships, a significant cognitive move for her. This would be followed by a conclusion. In the exam paper, Joan focused on the hardships of Asian immigrants, drawing from the reading she had been supplied with. In each paragraph of development, she stated the point she wanted to make, established its significance, using words like "because" and "in order that," and concluded with an example to illustrate her point. These points were followed by a summary paragraph. Despite her difficulty with comma use and an occasional verb-form lapse, the organization and content of Joan's exam carried her to a successful conclusion. She had waited until her senior year, her sixth year at the college, to take this exam, and her exam book noted on the cover that she was a "graduating senior."

Passing the proficiency test was an omen of the generally good semester Joan was having. Although she was under a lot of pressure, she told me that she "didn't feel extra anxious." She said, "I go through motions one day at a time. I see other people with problems." During that semester, she was working 2 to 3 days a week in 4-hour stints at her internship in the drug and alcohol unit of the hospital that eventually hired her full-time. In the internship, she conducted group therapy sessions and she felt very dedicated to her field work. She was also working 10 to 14 hours a week at Radio City Music Hall. She was enjoying courses in family psychology and speech. In the latter course, she was polishing up her diction and articulation. She found it interesting to give presentations and the experience was useful to her when she had to speak to groups of individuals with drug and alcohol addictions in her internship.

By the time I saw Joan again at the end of the fall semester, Traub's book, *City on a Hill*, had been published. When Joan first read the chapter Traub had written about her, she was deeply depressed. Joan told me that first she had worried about her family's reaction to his dismissive comments about her achievements, but, she said, "they didn't have much of a reaction." She felt that her degree was confirming for her that she was capable of doing what she wanted to do. The most important thing she had learned from her experience with Traub was, "You can't just be nice to everybody. You can't trust everyone." She had been surprised by the book, apparently expecting a more sym-

pathetic treatment of her experiences and accomplishments. Furthermore, she told me that Traub had been inaccurate in some of the things that he reported about her life. Since the book was published so close to the time that Joan would be graduating, it probably had less of an effect on her than it might have had had it been published earlier. She had gained enough pride in her accomplishments that she could rather quickly overcome the immediate distress she felt when she first read the book.

In her last year, Joan was more conscious than ever of the ways in which writing had helped her to learn. She said, "I used to have trouble getting my thoughts together--how to get away from paraphrasing and putting thoughts into my own words. I stick to my concepts; it helps keep the thoughts well organized, in a structure. When I write papers, it helps me get better grades. I might have a mid-term 'C+,' but a paper gives me a chance to develop my own thoughts and prove myself more." This constant reiteration by the students in my study of how writing gave them a opportunity "to prove themselves" reinforced the significance of including writing opportunities that allowed students, first of all, to learn for themselves and, second, to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding to others.

In her last semester at the college, Joan struggled with the required experimental psychology course, in which use of statistics was essential. The course was evaluated on the basis of short laboratory reports and final examination. With a great deal of help from her professor and the laboratory assistant who corrected and commented on the lab reports, Joan passed the course with a "D."

Joan had not come to City College as a very confident student. Burdened with complex physical, family, and economic problems, she slowly strengthened her resolve to complete her academic studies successfully. In her early years of study, she depended on authoritative knowledge to support her assertions. While this approach brought her enough success to pass many of her courses, she increasingly found a demand for thinking that was more analytic. Like other students who had started in basic skills classes, Joan found that writing gave her better opportunities to demonstrate the learning she had achieved than did short-answer examinations. When given the opportunity to write research papers, Joan became able to apply psychological principles and theories not only to cases presented in her psychology classes, but also to literary works she was asked to interpret. Quantitative studies plagued her throughout her years at the college, and she struggled to pass required college skill tests and academic courses like astronomy, statistics, and experimental psychology. Because she had to work many hours at outside jobs to earn spending money, Joan forced herself to bring better planning skills to her commitments and to organize the time needed to fulfill her academic assignments more care-

fully. Over time, she came to see her professors as her allies, and she became comfortable seeking out their help. Writing became an essential means of learning, as she recognized that reading alone was not an adequate tool for understanding the complex materials she was encountering.

So, here was Joan, graduating after 6 years, hired as a full-time counselor in a methadone clinic, reveling in her achievements after long and difficult years of stress and hardship. She told me in a telephone conversation in September 1995 that she was earning \$ 25,753.36 (she knew this amount to the last penny) in a union job with full benefits, including 20 days' vacation, 12 sick days, 8 holidays, and 4 personal days. After 90 days, she expected to get a raise, and she would get annual raises after that. Her brother helped her realize that was "making more money than anyone else in the family has." She would be using the money to move her mother out of the projects and, for the first time, she said she would have "a room of my own."

After six years of arduous school responsibilities, work responsibilities, and family responsibilities, Joan was not a "miraculous survivor" as Traub had called her. There was no miracle that accounted for her success. Her accomplishments stemmed from hard work and dedication, her most important trait, tenaciousness, and the support and encouragement she had received from her instructors over the years. She has become a contributor to the society through her own efforts.

And that is exactly one point of this long retelling. Students like Joan are willing to put in the extraordinary effort to overcome the difficulties imposed by their poor academic preparation, and their difficult family and economic conditions. They do not want to become drains on the society; they want to become contributors. We must join together to persuade the political forces who want to deny such opportunities to students like Joan that it is in their interests, as well as the individuals' interests, to support CUNY and other institutions of higher education in their efforts to help students reach their full potential as contributing citizens.

Another point of describing this student's experience is to illustrate the benefits that can be derived from longitudinal research that combines in-depth interviews and analyses of written work to follow the conceptual development that occurs over the entire period of the undergraduate education. Such research emphasizes the critical role that writing plays in developing complex reasoning processes that allow students to bring personal experience and knowledge to bear on their assessment of "accepted" knowledge to foster a critical stance that incorporates their perspectives and that leads to re-thinking and re-shaping this "accepted" knowledge.

Longitudinal research is not easy to undertake nor does it lead to quick rewards or frequent publication. By its very nature, longitudi-

nal research requires patience and persistence, but the understandings gained from it cannot be replaced by any other methodology. For example, only through such an approach is it possible to document the growth in complexity of thinking and analytical reasoning that occurs over the college years. Instructors of basic writing courses and/or freshman composition often feel frustrated as they are confronted with the demands of teaching purpose, organization, audience, sentence structure, grammar, and revision in a one or two-semester course. To this is added the requirement to analyze complex texts so that readings are frequently incorporated into the writing classes. That excellence in all of these areas cannot be achieved in such a short time frame is evident, but the demand is placed there by the instructors in other disciplines as well as by the institutional tests that judge students' abilities to progress to advanced levels. When our field has enough longitudinal studies of students' experiences of different backgrounds and from different kinds of instructional institutions we will be better able to make the argument that these writing abilities develop over time and under the appropriate instructional prodding. Such demands imply that at all levels of instruction, whatever the format--sequences of basic writing classes, mainstreamed classes, or freshman composition--students should be practicing analysis of complex reading materials just as they are practicing the conventions of essay writing.

Seeing the students mature and develop increasing self-confidence over the years reinforced my view that it was essential to take a long-term perspective to evaluate the potential that they have for academic success. It seems appropriate to ask if this type of research is particularly meaningful for the perception of minority students and second-language students? My answer would be yes, because it shows how students who may not have had the requisite academic preparation when they began their college studies have the potential to succeed and do succeed when they are given the appropriate time and support. Competence does not occur instantaneously, especially for those who have not had the appropriate preparation, but over time students do reach their true potential. Research over time is an important way to validate that success.

There is a concerted effort at the present time to reduce the possibility of students who need basic level instruction to succeed at the college level through eliminating what have been called admissions preferences and then, in a more insidious policy, making it less likely that those who are admitted have the possibility of succeeding and continuing on with their education. Much of this latter policy is directed at the first semester or the freshman year as a make-it or break-it time. What I hope is that my research and the research of others that will follow will demonstrate that the freshman year should instead be looked upon as the first step in a succession of steps over the full years

of a college education. That first year should provide the opportunity for those students who have been inadequately prepared for the college experience to begin to acquire the skills and knowledge they need that will grow as they continue their studies. In order to demonstrate that this growth will and does occur, we must have more longitudinal studies that will provide the evidence needed to persuade the decision makers – administrators and politicians – to provide the financial and educational resources the students deserve. Time is on the students' side, but they need to be given the requisite time.

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