

Meet My English 93 Class

Patrick Sullivan

Statistics and numerical completion rates have come to dominate how we think about higher education in America today. This focus on bottom line metrics and “return on investment” is drawn from neoliberal economic theory, which suggests that a free market business model can find solutions to most human problems, if it can only be left alone to do what it does best. When applied to non-business-related endeavors like education and especially basic writing programs, this numbers-driven approach hides from view a crucial variety of complex contextual factors that play pivotal roles in the lives of many basic writing students. These include powerful social, cultural, and economic forces well beyond the control of any single individual. This essay seeks to resist and subvert this neoliberal formulation, now widespread across America, and replace it with a more local, individualized, student-centered understanding of success for basic writers. This essay seeks to enact this important work through the use of student-authored vignettes—basic writing students speaking for themselves to us about their lives, challenges, goals, and aspirations.

Stories as a Form of Wisdom

Tell me the facts and I'll learn. Tell me the truth and I'll believe. Tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever. —Native American Proverb

Although university scholars and civic legislators often speak with great conviction about two-year colleges and about basic writing and developmental education programs, many have never had the opportunity to meet an actual class of developmental students. Some may have met a basic writing student here or there—perhaps at a legislative hearing where community college students are invited to submit verbal testimony or at a public event in their community. For the most part, though, statistics and completion rates have had to speak for these students to scholars, policy shapers, and the general public (Adler-Kassner and Harrington; Sullivan *Economic*; Rose *Back*). This focus on numbers and statistical success rates is an example of how the economic theory of neoliberalism, which privileges the free market, bottom line metrics, and “return on investment,” has successfully positioned business-model thinking at the heart of the modern higher education enterprise (Adler-Kassner; Bousquet; Kroll; Mutnick; Saunders; Welch and

Scott). Higher education is, of course, *not* a business. Unfortunately, this free market ideological model has nonetheless come to shape public perception of higher education and developmental education in profound ways. This theoretical model privileges numbers and statistics—not people or students, not individual citizens embedded in unique communities and family circumstances, and not individuals with distinct personal histories, positionalities, and unique lived human experience. Since there is no easy way to bring legislators or four-year college professors into basic writing classrooms in two-year colleges, we have to find ways to bring our students and our classes to them. This essay seeks to enact this important work through the use of student-authored vignettes. We must position this kind of qualitative data—basic writing students telling us about their lives, challenges, goals, and aspirations—as an important form of wisdom, which has crucial things to tell us about literacy acquisition, open admissions, and the democratic ideal.

Perhaps by design and certainly by default, using numbers to speak for basic writing students makes it virtually impossible to understand the student experience at open admissions institutions in all its astonishing variety and vulnerability. A focus on numbers and success rates hides from view the complex variety of contextual factors that play such an important role in the lives of individual students, including powerful social, cultural, and economic forces well beyond the control of any single individual. These structural variables include economic inequality, globalization, poverty, basic needs insecurity (Goldrick-Rab; Goldrick-Rab and Cady; Goldrick-Rab, Cady, and Coca; Hope), gender, immigration, racism (Bateman, Katznelson, and Lapinski; DeLong et al.; Inoue “How”; Inoue *Antiracist*; Kendi; Whitman), second language acquisition (Suh), the soft bigotry of low expectations (Anyon; Rose, *Lives*), and the increasing precariousness of employment in the U.S. (Duncan and Murnane; Kalleberg). We must also

include political and economic realities from around the globe that we now often find present in the lives of many basic writing students in our classrooms, which have become marked by remarkable diversity and internationalism. These conditions include ethnic conflict, religious differences, limited access to higher education, repressive and tyrannical leaders and governments, war, poverty, and low ceilings of possibility in many countries around the world. Numbers conveniently occlude these powerful social and economic variables, and they hide from view the many challenges basic writing students face every day, at home, in the workplace, and in their communities. Were we able to bring these contingencies into view, they would significantly complicate any understanding of “success” at the two-year college (Crenshaw et al.; Delgado and Stefancic; Parisi; Sullivan, “Measuring”). As advocates for our students, as champions of basic writing programs, and as activists for social justice, we must fashion creative new ways to communicate this important information to stakeholders, civic leaders, politicians, legislators, scholars, and a broader public audience.

Family Income

Start with why. —Simon Sinek

A significant proportion of what we now describe as “success” in college and in basic writing classes is a function of economics and family resources. Building on landmark work by James Coleman and others (see J. Coleman; Duncan and Murnane), Margaret Cahalan and her research team at the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania have shown that bachelor’s degree attainment by age 24 tracks closely with family income (Cahalan et al. 60, 63, 67). Cahalan and her colleagues summarize the current state of affairs in higher education this way:

Whether we believe that higher education is a civil right, an essential element of a full

democratic society, or a fundamental requirement to enabling all to achieve the American dream, the *2016 Indicators Report* shows that higher education opportunity and outcomes are highly inequitable across family income groups. Moreover, on many indicators, gaps are larger now than in the past. The disinvestment of state funds for public colleges and universities since the 1980s and the declining value of federal student grant aid have aided in the creation of a higher education system that is deeply unequal. Once known for wide accessibility to and excellence within its higher education system, the U.S. now has an educational system that sorts students in ways that have profound implications for later life chances. More work is required to achieve the vision of ensuring all Americans have the opportunity to use their creative potential to realize the many benefits of higher education and advance the well-being and progress of the nation. (7)

State budget shortfalls across the U.S.—and the resulting austerity measures affecting many community colleges, basic writing programs, and support services on campus—have put the revolutionary mandate of the open admissions two-year college at considerable risk (Welch and Scott). This is a moral and social justice issue for basic writing teachers because lower-income students are more likely to attend public two-year colleges (Cahalan et al. 40).

For these reasons, we must actively challenge the neoliberal construction of the academy and resist a numbers-based understanding of the work we do as basic writing professionals. This is one way we can enact a public-facing activist agenda and embrace the practice of located agency. We must frame this work for what it is: social justice work done in the interest of the public good that strengthens our democracy and distributes opportunity and equity more broadly and fairly. We must also frame this work as an essential form of economic development and community building in America (see Goldblatt; McMahon, *Higher*). We must make the great

variety of economic and democratic benefits that proceed from higher education more widely known (see Goldin and Katz; Hacker and Pierson; McMahon, *Higher*; McMahon, “Financing”; Marginson; Newfield “End”; Newfield, *Great*). These benefits include, as Walter McMahon documents in his important book, *Higher Learning, Greater Good*, behaviors and attitudes that contribute to human rights, civil rights, and tolerance of other races (203-212); reduction of income inequality (213); reduction of crime rates (219); lower welfare, medical, and prison costs for states (220); a cleaner environment (222); the production of social capital and happiness (223); and the dissemination of new knowledge (224). These economic and democratic benefits help create more responsible and informed citizens, happier and healthier neighborhoods, and more productive workers and taxpayers. These benefits are transmitted across generations, as personal, social, civic, and economic gains accrued by attending college are passed down to children, grandchildren, neighborhoods, and communities (Attewell and Lavin).

Most legislators and university scholars have never spent a full semester working with basic writing students, getting to know them during class discussions and conferences, working with them on drafts of their essays, or sharing deeply human moments in their lives that invariably come up during the course of a semester. These can include triumphs and successes, of course, but they also often include challenges and problems involving work and family responsibilities, cash flow issues, unreliable transportation, and asymmetrical events that can arise unexpectedly in anyone’s life, like job disruption, food insecurity, illness, relationship conflicts, or a loss in the family (all of which came up in this English 93 class). These are conditions that make achievement, success, and completion problematic for anyone who is not insulated from such disruptions by strong social networks and family resources. I don’t wish to essentialize this cohort of students, but two-year college students in basic writing classes

typically live in very different worlds than students who have the great luxury of attending a traditional four-year residential college to earn a degree (Stuber; Sullivan, *Economic* 205-240). Students at such institutions are typically unencumbered by major work or family obligations for four uninterrupted years. By design and tradition, these are optimal conditions for completing a degree. Most basic writing students at two-year colleges are working within a very different, much less ideal model. This is also the cohort of students most at-risk from interventionist legislators and politicians, and the group perhaps most responsible for generating the growing impatience with completion and graduation rates (Bernstein; Fox; Sullivan “Ideas”).

Because basic writing teachers know basic writing students best, we must take responsibility for establishing a new public definition of success for this cohort of students. This definition must be less categorical and monolithic—and much more compassionate, open-minded, differentiated, individualized, and responsive to lived realities of life. As educators, we must always be trying to improve our graduation and program completion rates, of course, but our primary focus—and our operative understanding of “success”—should be helping each individual student make everything they can of the opportunity offered by open admissions institutions. Obviously, this will be different for each student, and a great deal will depend on variables beyond the control of any single teacher, any single college, or any single individual. These variables include family resources, work schedules, home environment, transportation, the quality and safety of neighborhoods (Rothstein *Color*), housing stability, local primary and secondary school systems, and food security (Hope), among many other things. Our definition of success must be built on the understanding that the vast majority of basic writing students are attending college while already leading very complex, demanding, and often fragile lives. Many basic writing students juggle a complicated variety of competing responsibilities related to work,

family, community, and school. For these reasons, it's vitally important that we get to know basic writing students beyond the numbers they represent if we hope to develop sound public policy to meet their needs and aspirations.

The Segregated Academy

You cannot represent a field if you ignore half of it. You cannot generalize about composition if you don't know half the work being done. —John Lovas

Part of our problem is a structural function of labor differences in higher education. Teachers at traditional four-year colleges and universities typically have light teaching loads, and they spend much of their time engaged in research and producing scholarship. Teachers at open admissions two-year colleges, in contrast, typically have much heavier teaching loads, and are therefore typically not expected to conduct research or produce scholarship. Many professors at two-year colleges are also contingent faculty who have no job security and very little institutional support (Kezar; Kezar and Maxey). Many are teaching multiple sections of writing courses across multiple campuses in order to make ends meet (Jensen, "Dispatches"; Jensen, "Freedom"; Klausman, "Not"; Klausman, "Two-Year"; Worthen). Producing scholarship is a time- and resource-dependent activity, so those with the most time and institutional support are consistently able to publish scholarship about a whole range of subjects, including the two-year college. It should not surprise us, then, that many of the authors of landmark scholarship about two-year colleges teach at four-year institutions. Here is a short list of some of that landmark work and where it has issued from:

1960: Clark, Burton. "The 'Cooling-Out' Function in Higher Education." *American Journal of Sociology* 1960 (65): 569-76.

Home institution: University of California, Berkeley

1976. Zwerling, L. Steven. *Second Best: The Crisis of the Junior College*. New York, McGraw-Hill, 1976.

Home institution: New York University

1989: Brint, Steven, and Jerome Karabel. *The Diverted Dream: Community Colleges and the Promise of Educational Opportunity in America, 1900-1985*. New York: Oxford UP, 1989.

Home institution: Yale University (Seven Brint) and University of California, Berkeley (Jerome Karabel)

1994: Dougherty, Kevin J. *The Contradictory College: The Conflicting Origins, Impacts, and Futures of the Community College*. Albany, SUNY Press, 1994.

Home institution: Manhattan College

2013: Cohen, Arthur M., Florence B. Brawer, and Carrie B. Kisker. *The American Community College*, 6th Edition.

Home institution: UCLA (Arthur Cohen), Center for the Study of Community Colleges (Florence B. Brawer), Center for the Study of Community Colleges (Carrie B. Kisker)

2015: Bailey, Thomas R, Shanna Smith Jaggars, and Davis Jenkins. *Redesigning America's Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015.

Home institution: Columbia University

Many of these writers candidly admit that they are puzzled by two-year colleges and wonder why these institutions can't have retention and graduation rates more like four-year colleges.

Much of the scholarship about the two-year college is, in fact, devoted to exploring precisely this question (Sullivan *Economic*; Hassel et al.). (A notable exception to this trend is Eli Goldblatt's book, *Because We Live Here: Sponsoring Literacy Beyond the College Curriculum*, which includes a very sympathetic discussion of community colleges and literacy acquisition [83-120].

Home institution: Temple University.)

This is not to suggest that scholars at four-year institutions can't produce thoughtful work about two-year colleges, of course, but there appear to be important perspectives and street-level

realities that scholars unfamiliar with the two-year college are simply unable to see. This is why graduate education and teacher training has become such an important issue in our discipline (Calhoon-Dilahunt et al.; Jensen and Toth; Toth, Jensen, et al.). A large part of this problem issues from the process of engaging this scholarly activity from the perspective of an “observer” rather than an “actor” (Jones and Nisbett; Steele). Observers predictably tend to understand social phenomena as a product of dispositional traits, like ability and motivation. Actors typically use contextual and situational contexts to explain behavior. An observer’s perspective makes it very easy to talk about personal responsibility, the limited value of second or third chances, and abstractions like statistics and graduation rates. An actor’s perspective makes this process much more difficult and complicated. When we see the world through the eyes of an individual actor, we are able to assess unique variables and understand the many contextual factors that shape individual human lives. Although most of the scholars listed here have not actually taught classes at open admissions institutions, their work has come to speak for two-year colleges that they often don’t know beyond statistical profiles.

This labor differential in higher education also helps explain why there is such a very short list of books authored by two-year teacher-scholars about two-year colleges. Only a few titles come immediately to mind, dating back to 1979: Mina P. Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations*, Marilyn S. Sternglass’s *Time to Know Them*, Howard Tinberg’s *Border Talk*, Howard Tinberg and Jean-Paul Nadeau’s *The Community College Writer: Exceeding Expectations*, and Mike Rose’s *Back to School*. A recent national TYCA survey reveals many different obstacles inhibit engagement with scholarship among two-year college English faculty (Toth and Sullivan). In addition to finding time to do this kind of intellectual work, these barriers include limited access to scholarly resources and research libraries, finding scholarship relevant

to two-year colleges, and navigating specialized terminology and conventions in published research (Toth and Sullivan 258-60). One also can't help but notice that the books on this list authored by two-year college faculty have a decidedly different tone and message than those authored by faculty who don't routinely teach at two-year colleges or teach basic writing classes. Teacher-scholars who have worked personally with two-year college students generally are not puzzled at all by the many kinds of challenges faced by these students, both in and outside of the classroom. The five books mentioned above, in fact, all speak with notable compassion and empathy about two-year college students. We obviously need to produce much more public-facing work written by two-year college faculty about students at open admissions institutions that is accessible to a general audience—so that the complex, often precarious world of basic writing students can be more broadly understood.

This labor differential is both historical and political. For decades now, the two-year college has struggled to earn legitimacy and respect in the world of higher education, the field of English studies, and in the minds of many citizens. Because the two-year college is not a “prestige” institution—and because it is engaged in gritty *high stakes social justice work* with the most at-risk cohort of students in higher education (Rose, *Back*; Shaughnessy; Sternglass; Sullivan, *Economic*; see also see Case and Deaton; Chetty et al.; Coleman et al.; Goldin and Katz; Rothstein *Class*)—it has not enjoyed the warmest of welcomes among scholars, citizens, and legislators. This problem was publicly and dramatically acknowledged by John Lovas in 2002 and reaffirmed by Holly Hassel and Joanne Baird Giordano in 2013, Darin Jensen and Christie Toth in 2017, and Carolyn Calhoun–Dillahunt in her Chair's Address at the 2018 4Cs convention in Kansas City. What we have, in some very real ways, is a segregated academy. John Lovas's comments about “the knowledge-building role of writing programs in two-year

colleges” (264) gives voice to frustrations borne from generations of neglect, disappointment, and exasperation: “You cannot represent a field if you ignore half of it. You cannot generalize about composition if you don’t know half of the work being done” (276). Hassel and Giordano reaffirm this claim and call on our discipline to actively embrace the work being done by writing teachers at the two-year college:

not enough has been said in scholarly conversations about marginalization of open-admissions and two-year campuses from professional dialogues even though such campuses are sites of engaging and essential work where almost half of all college students start their postsecondary educations. (117-8)

Much of this work, of course, involves basic writing. Jensen and Toth suggest that this “structural ignorance is also a *moral* failing, one fueled by an academic tradition of elitism that maps in shameful ways onto the relative class, race, and ethnic make-up of our institutions” (584). Calhoon–Dillahunt highlighted this thorny, longstanding problem in her Chair’s Address, and offered a list of suggestions to begin addressing it (see also Calhoon-Dillahunt et al.; Townsend and LaPaglia). This is one of the reasons why numbers have had to speak for students in basic writing students for so many years.

Given all this, two-year college teachers must find new ways to bring our students’ stories to legislators, the general public, and four-year college faculty and staff. One way we can do this is by including student-authored work in our scholarship and in our academic journals. As part of this ongoing work, I included fifteen student-authored essays about attending the two-year college in my book about community colleges, *Economic Inequality, Neoliberalism, and the American Community College*—seeking to provide a student-centered experience for readers in order to balance scholarly views with a variety of student perspectives and understandings. I

have also created a website and archive, [The Community College Success Stories Project](#), that seeks to bring the life-stories of community college students to a broader audience. This project invites students to share their journeys to and from the two-year college and talk about what the two-year college has meant to them.

The primary goal of this project, which was launched in May of 2018, is very simple: to build an archive of thousands of community college success stories that can be searched and accessed by new and returning community college students looking for inspiration, and by scholars and researchers interested in qualitative data about students who attend open admissions institutions. This project privileges writing by college students themselves, and therefore provides a unique, personal, and rare glimpse into the kinds of lives being lived by community college students. I cordially invite readers to invite their students to tell their stories for this project. (Directions for submitting work are provided at the website.)

“I Work 40 Plus Hours for a Printing Company”

While reading, we can leave our own consciousness, and pass over into the consciousness of another person, another age, another culture. "Passing over," a term used by the theologian John Dunne, describes the process through which reading enables us to try on, identify with, and ultimately enter for a brief time the wholly different perspective of another person's consciousness. When we pass over into how a knight thinks, how a slave feels, how a heroine behaves, and how an evildoer can regret or deny wrongdoing, we never come back quite the same; sometimes we're inspired, sometimes saddened, but we are always enriched. Through this exposure we learn both the commonality and the uniqueness of our own thoughts—that we are individuals, but not alone.

The moment this happens, we are no longer limited by the confines of our own thinking. Wherever they were set, our original boundaries are challenged, teased, and gradually placed somewhere new. An expanding sense of “other” changes who we are, and, most importantly for children, what we imagine we can be. -- Maryanne Wolf

One way we can help scholars, legislators, and the general public see beyond numbers and graduation rates is through qualitative research, including surveys and profiles. To explore what we might have to gain from this kind of research, I created a survey instrument for my spring 2018 English 93 class, which focused on gathering information about my students' lives outside the classroom. I was interested in having readers learn about each student's family history, personal triumphs and challenges, and work and family responsibilities (see Appendix).¹ My goal was to compile this information so that readers could "meet" a real basic writing class without having to teach one.²

English 93 is one of two basic writing courses we offer at my home institution, an open admissions community college in Connecticut. Both are different versions of the same course (see Sullivan "Ideas" for the history of these two courses). English 93 is a three-credit basic reading and writing class. Its companion course, English 96, is a six-credit version of English 93, with three-credits of additional embedded support and instruction. Students test in to this class by a combined Accuplacer Reading and Sentence Skills score. Anyone testing into a developmental course must take our challenge essay, which is a writing sample in response to a short reading and prompt that is evaluated by an English department member. This allows us to be in compliance with state law PA 12-40, which requires multiple measures for placement (see Hassel et al.; Sullivan "Ideas"). Although enrollment caps have been somewhat fluid over the years, the enrollment for Eng. 93 is currently 22. By the end of the semester, 16 students had completed the course and earned passing grades. A few students attended only one or two classes at the beginning of the semester and stopped attending. A few students had work and family-related issues, and they let me know that these issues kept them from completing the course. The rest worked hard and made significant progress as readers, writers, and thinkers. When I invited

the class to help me with this project, a large number were willing to fill out the survey and then put their responses together into a few paragraphs. I told them that we were working together to help broaden understanding of the two-year college. Many were eager and happy to help. These are the artifacts I am sharing with readers. Please note that these artifacts were written at the end of the semester and thus reflect a great deal of work that students put into improving their reading, writing, and thinking skills over the course of 14 weeks.

It gives me great pleasure to introduce readers of this essay to my great English 93 class. Here is what they would like to share with you:

Ayobamii Oseni

My name is Ayobamii Oseni and I am attending Manchester Community College in 2018. I took a gap year to decide what I wanted to do in life. Once I figured out that I wanted to become a sign language interpreter, I looked for community colleges that offered sign language programs. I chose a community college because I knew that it was less money than a four-year university. I would have loved to go to a university for four years, but I did not want to be in debt for several years. I always wanted to live the campus life, and party, but I knew with that came a lot of responsibilities. Even though students make college look fun, I know that there is a lot of homework and exams they have to study for. College is not easy, whether you go to a community college or a university.

I have to take the bus to school, and each way is 30-45 minutes. I do not work at the moment, but I would love to have a part time or full time job in the summer. When I go back to school in the fall, I do not know whether I should work, or just focus on school.

My mom has her bachelor's degree in communication, and to my knowledge my father never attended college. In order for me to become a sign language interpreter I need to complete

four years of college. I know this will be very hard for me, seeing how I am not necessarily a school person, but I know I can put my mind to it if I study hard and focus on my dreams and goals.

Raykwon Kerr

I love learning new things and I came to college with the hopes of doing just that and also to surround myself with people who enjoy the same things I do and study in the same major as me so I can draw inspiration from them and share ideas being creatives. This semester I'm taking 5 classes including this one and working as a freelance graphic designer in my late hours so it has been hard trying to find balance in my time but I am doing my best. The most important thing I've learned in English 93 is to take on challenges and to exercise my brain as much as I can, also to never give up and persevere. I'm from Hartford, CT in the north end not the best of places but I've adapted to my environment. I take two buses to get to school and it takes about 40 mins usually assuming I make it to my stops at the right time. The type of freelance work I do varies based on what I feel like doing. Most of the time I make digital portraits with concepts from my clients that can be used for about anything they want for example social media, websites, or even to be printed on about any product they want. Other things I do include designing flyers, banners, logos, emotes etc. Depending on what it is I'm doing it could take me anywhere from 1- 6 hours. I live with my mom and little brothers, both of them in school. My youngest brother is 8 and goes to Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School and my other brother is 19 and attends Capital Community College. Everyone in my family values education and we all hope to be successful in the future and to have our dream jobs.

Things I do for fun include listening to music and making music. My favorite song is "Moment of Truth" by Gang Starr a hip hop duo including Guru and Dj Premier. My hope for

the future is that everyone will prosper and become positive influences on the youth to bring up generations who care for one another.

Daron Hakim

Why did you choose to attend college?

I attended college because after I graduated from high school I spent the last 6 months in my house bored with nothing to do. I wasn't working or attending school, and I thought that going back to school again was going to suck, but I soon found out that being in my house all day with nothing to do is even worse. I have ADHD symptoms so I need something to do or else I'll go crazy. I was sad and lost because I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life and I wasn't planning on being in my mother's house till I'm 40. So I applied to college, and now I have a good job, bottom line is I came to college to have a better life and I don't want to go back to what I was doing before.

Why did you choose to attend a community college?

I chose to attend a community college so that I don't spend thousands of dollars on school. I didn't like high school so attending a university was a no, plus I don't think that you should have to pay that much money for education.

What other courses are you taking in addition to this class (if any)?

I'm only taking math. I don't know know if I'll take anymore classes though.

What is the most important thing you've learned in English 93?

The most important thing that I've learned in English 93 was as long as you believe in yourself you can accomplish things you probably thought that you couldn't, and I have also learned that I'm a very good essay writer.

What is your hometown?

My home town is East Hartford been living there my whole life.

How do you get to school?

I have to take a bus because I don't have a car or ride.

How long does it take you each way?

Probably 30-45 minutes

Do you work in addition to attending school?

Yes I do work, I work at Stop and Shop

What kind of work do you do?

My job is too stock groceries.

How many hours do you work each week on average?

I believe that I work 20-30 hours a week.

Please tell us a little bit about your family (about your Mom and Dad, their occupations, where you live, etc.).

I don't have much to say about my family, but I live with my mom stepdad and little sister.

What is a major turning point in your own life that has helped make you who you are?

Attending college and getting a job.

How do you feel about attending college?

Its ok still seeing if I enjoy college or not.

What did you find most challenging about coming to college? What is the biggest difference from high school?

You're on your own and there aren't teachers to be on your back about your work.

Kimberly Boisvert

Hello, my name is Kimberly Boisvert and I choose to attend college to get a better job. I chose MCC because of my budget and its location. I am only taking one course at the moment. The most important thing that I have learned from English 93 is that I now know that I can do this and succeed as long as I stick to it. I can see my progress from the beginning of the semester and it is great! My hometown is Ludlow, Massachusetts. I drive my car 30 minutes to MCC. I work 40 plus hours for a printing company. My mom was a deli clerk and my dad was an accountant. They are both retired. I now live with my boyfriend in Enfield, Connecticut. One key turning point in my family's history would be that my parents were divorced when I was 13. After that my mom, brother, and I moved around a lot. For some reason I do everything the hard way. It sucks but I learn from it and it's always quite the experience. I feel good about attending college and I am impatient to finish but I've just begun. What I found most challenging coming to college was actually getting the paper work done with registration and FAFSA. Keeping the motivation to finish the semester was challenging too. I feel the last three weeks of the semester were pretty brutal. I really just wanted a break and was feeling spent. For fun I enjoy sleeping, watching T.V. and having friends over for dinner and drinks. My favorite book is Queen of the Damned by Anne Rice. My favorite song is Me and Bobby McGee by Janis Joplin. My favorite meal is lobster and corn on the cob. My hopes for the future would be to get a degree in Graphic Design and get a better paying job. Financial Aid covered half of my tuition. The other half of tuition and books came out of pocket. I would like to thank my boyfriend Michael. I don't think I would have gone back to school without your love and support.

Christopher van Schalkwyk

My name's Christopher van Schalkwyk and I'm a community college student. I decided to go to college to gain knowledge in a field of my interest. I also wanted to learn more about the world,

so I decided that educational system would lead me in the right direction. I chose a community college for the same reason as many others, a stepping stone into a research institution. Many go to a community college to gain some credits and transfer into a RI since a RI is expensive and much more competitive.

At this moment I'm enrolled in Microeconomics, Philosophy, Chemistry, Oceanography and English 93. I've learned a lot throughout the semester, but I think what I'm going to use the most in the future will be "how to structure and think about papers in different manners."

I live in Storrs, Connecticut and drive to MCC Monday through Friday. It takes me roughly 35 to 45 minutes to get to school. I don't work in addition and try to focus my energy on school.

My genetic parents are divorced but still friends. My father lives in South Africa and is an electrical engineer. My mother lives in the USA, remarried to a professor at UCONN. At this point in time, me and my sister live with my mother and my stepfather. Me and my sister had a difficult decision to make on whether we want to come to America for a better, more educated life or not. We decided to come to America and it was the biggest "turning point" in our lives.

College is great. It's a happy, motivated place where you get to learn and be exposed to new thinking. For me it feels like a hungry man standing in front of a buffet not knowing where to dive in first. Even though it's so great, transferring from an Afrikaans high school to an English college is a very difficult challenge. A possible challenge though.

Even though we all work, we need a break as well. I'm usually active when I relax. Playing tennis, golf or going to the gym to lift some weights is my way of relaxing. Everyone active and I think the majority of people going to the gym listens to music. My favorite song at the moment is "I'll be There" by The Parlotones. Talking about all this energy wasting actions, I

build my energy levels up with my favorite meal; Steak, broccoli and cauliflower topped off with a cheese sauce. I also read from time to time and my favorite book is “What the Best College Students Do” by Ken Bain. This is because they talked about innate motivation and what role this plays in your journey.

Talking about my favorites, my favorite quote and something I would like to share with the whole world is from Bertrand Russell, a British Philosopher. “We know that the exercise of virtue should be its own reward, and it seems to follow that the enduring of it on the part of the patient should be its own punishment.” My hopes for the future is to be educated and to of great assistance in society.

Financial aid is great. I don’t have it at MCC, but I applied for it at UCONN. It doesn’t cover everything, but I feel that the gap is necessary for the student to lead them to work to make more money and get the experience of working with others.

Jessica Dupre

I am a 35 year old woman. I am a mother of 2 who has gone through a lot! I am a recovering addict of 5 years and going strong!! I am also a cancer survivor. My parents were together my whole childhood and got divorced when I was 28 or so. I have come back to school to better myself and be happy. I have a loving dysfunctional family probably just like most people. I am a very spiritual person, empathetic and compassionate. I am majoring in Recreational Therapy. I want to work with the elderly and eventually do something with hospice. I am also certified in Reiki and want to continue down that path as well. I enjoy helping others but have finally understood how important it is for me to help myself before I can help others. I am a waitress while I continue my education and work 20 hours or so a week as I am a full time student. I plan

on continuing my education after I graduate. I am still not 100% on what I want to major in in the future. I am open minded and look forward to my future.

Malik Golding

My name is Malik Golding. I'm 20 years old and I live in Hartford, CT. I chose to attend college because I want to further my education which will help me find a potential career in the future. I decided to attend a community college because I felt like MCC gave me a better opportunity to improve on my performance in school when it comes to coming to class, having homework and essays turned in on time, and being better prepared for test and quizzes. I felt that I lacked some good skills and wanted somewhere where I can move at my own pace while also challenging myself to improve. The only other class I'm taking right now other than English 93 is Intro to Macroeconomics. So far the most important thing I learned in English 93 is that I need to read to understand what I'm reading. Before I would read just to finish and I wasn't grasping all the important things to remember but now I take my time to fully understand and break down parts that aren't easy to understand. I get to school by driving. It's usually a 15 to 20 minutes drive from my house. I am currently working at Bed Bath and Beyond as a store associate while taking classes at MCC. I work about 20 to 25 hours during the semester. My mother is a nurse at Hospital for Special Care and my father is a chef for a food catering company. I think one thing that's important to mention about my father is that he's an immigrant from Jamaica. He was able to get his citizenship a few years before I was born and I feel that immigration is important to our country because they aren't all bad people. They come here for a better life for themselves and their families. A turning point in my life was when I was allowed to attend Granby public schools through the CREC open choice program. I started going to Granby in the 4th grade and graduated in 2016. I believe that this had a huge impact on my life because I was given a

opportunity to get a better education than what was being offered in the inner city where I live. I like that I'm working to improve my life by attending college because it's giving me the chance to learn and gain training for a career in the near future. One thing I find most challenging is that it can be difficult balancing your schedule. Going to work, school, and managing time to complete assignments while also having time to do things I enjoy can be a burden but it's manageable. I like to get together with friends and hangout if I want to have fun. If I'm relaxing I like to chill at my house and play xbox. My favorite game to play currently is Fortnite. I would like to tell people around the world that we're all the same and that we're stronger if we work together. My hope for the future is to be able to support myself and family. If I could thank anyone it would be my parents because they do a lot for me and they are pushing me to be the best I can with anything I do in life.

Ceaira Boyle

My name is Ceaira Boyle, and my hometown is Vernon/Rockville. I take public transportation to MCC every Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. It takes me one hour and eight minutes to home and back. I do not work in addition to attending school. I live with my Uncle Robert and his daughter Sarah. His girlfriend Tracy and her three devils she calls children. Adding to that I also live with my twin brother Zach. There are no key turning points in my life. There also are no major turning points either. I enjoy sleeping in on weekends and on days I have no classes, drawing and any other crafts, watching T.V. and YouTube. My favorite book is Percy Jackson series. My favorite song is Demons from the band Imagine Dragons.

I choose to attend college to further my education and do great things with my life. I choose to attend community college because it was cheaper and closer to where I live. My other classes that I'm taking in addition to Eng 93 are Aleks. Aleks is an independent computer based

math class. The most important thing I have learned in Eng 93 is to add more to my journal response. Attending college is ok, it doesn't feel anything different. I found most challenging is taking the bus. For me it feels like the bus is always late, and it always passes the MCC bus stop way too fast. I would like to say to the educators, politicians to stop making our world suffer because of your egos and stupidity. What I'm hoping for the future is there are no more wars, no more conflicts, and no more lives being taken away. The person I would like to thank is Trish Veo for helping me through the first semester of college. Financial Aid covered all of my expenses, including books. I didn't cover any expenses.

Greg Carrington

I chose to attend college because I wanted to brighten my future and get a degree in Graphic Design to be able to pursue a career in that field. The reason I chose to attend community college was to save money. I originally planned on going to the University of Hartford upon acceptance but couldn't due to financial problems. The most important thing I learned from this English 093 class was that reading will help advance your knowledge. Reading some of these stories and books helped me gain so much new information on things I had never known before. I am from Hartford, Connecticut usually drive or take the bus and it takes about 15-20 minutes to get here. I work retail 6-8 hours at GameStop while attending MCC. My family consists of myself, my sister, my mother and my step-father. Two key points in my family had been my grandmother beating cancer not once but twice :) and another was in September of 2017, my mother and step-father got married. A major point in life to me was just growing in general as a person. Attending college has been okay. The most challenging has been keeping up while also doing personal things at home/work. At home I listen to music and play video games. My favorite book is the Outsiders and my favorite song is Kendrick Lamar - Ignorance is Bliss. A quote that I relate too

is “If you don’t stand for something, you’ll fall for anything.” A favorite meal of mine is rice/beans/pork chops. My hopes for the future is to either become a musician or work in the Graphic Design field. Financial Aid covered a majority of my classes for Fall 2017 but did not cover books and necessities needed for classes in Spring 2018. I would like to thank my mother and grandmother for not letting me fall into the streets and becoming a statistic. I’d like to thank my step-father for taking the role of a father figure, and my best friends back home for being the most supportive people I can have around me.

George Tate

1. To get a good job and be successful in life.
2. Because I didn’t have good enough grades for a 4 year.
3. Math and music.
4. How to become a better reader and writer.
5. East Hartford
6. East Hartford
7. 10 mins
8. Yes
9. Strip Club Mynx
10. 35 hours
11. My mother name is Tracey Murphy and my dad name is George Tate Sr. and we live in East Hartford.
14. Good and stressful
15. Nobody forcing you to go to school.
16. Playing sports

- 18. Never cared G herbo
- 20. Breakfast
- 22. Life is very hard for an African American with a single mother.
- 23. NFL or oil driver
- 24. yup and nothing
- 25. My Mother

Christopher Johnson

My name is Christopher Johnson. I am 36 years old. I am the youngest of 3 children. I attend MCC to further my future, to be as successful as I can be. I've been through a lot in my life and I want to help people go through the struggles that I went through. From living on the streets to getting married my life could be a book for people who have no hope. To share my struggles and to show that you can do anything that you put your mind to.

So the best way for me to help people I started here at MCC to be a drug and alcohol counselor. Being an addict in recovery. I know all about the struggles with addiction and mental health issues. I grew up in Manchester, Ct. with 2 older brothers. My mom was a sales associate at sears, and my dad worked for a car dealership as a janitor.

When I was 11 my dad passed away. He was poisoned on the job and eventually led to his death. It was hard for me nowhere to turn to. My mom didn't know how to handle it. She to me just gave up. So I started being a real rebellious child getting into trouble, hanging with the wrong people. I was going down a bad road fast.

On that road I started using drugs. I was homeless at the age of 14. I was heading to my home and my mom was in the drive way with a moving truck and I said "what's going on?" She stated to me that she was moving and was telling me where she was going. I did know what to

do. I felt lost, alone, and no one there to help me. By the grace of God, my girlfriend at the time her mother liked me and let me stay there with them. This whole thing really affected who I was. I didn't care about myself, in middle school. I went to school maybe 30 days total. From 6-8 grade I was never there I was out doing drugs.

As I look back at that time now I was looking for someone to accept me, to love me, to fill the hole in my heart that I was so desperately trying to fill. Being young I didn't understand what I was subconsciously doing. Looking to be loved, to have a mother, never really even to this day have I gotten closure for my father's death. That's a whole different story to tell.

What I didn't realize is a gift I had and still have to this day. That people love talking to me. I'm a good listener. With my experiences, I understood people. The problem was, I knew what advice to give to others but I couldn't do it for myself. I thought that because it was stamped in my head that I was worthless to anyone. Nobody wanted me around so I did drugs to just feel accepted. In my heart I knew I was better than I was but didn't know how to get where I wanted to go.

One day in October 2002, I met this incredible woman. I was nervous to talk to her she had a good job, a nice car, and a place of her own. I was telling myself, what would she want with me? Why would she be even a little bit interested in me? She saw something in me that she knew I was better than the situation I was in.

From the day I met her I stopped using drugs. I was clean not getting into trouble. Staying out of prison, I felt great. We had a child and got married. We got our own place. I went back to school got my GED and eventually bought a house.

Unfortunately, we got divorced, I went through a lot of struggles. Which got me to where I am today. Like I previously mentioned I'm back in school pursuing my goals. I also work here

at the school. It is a great feeling to be back on the right track. I work about 12-17 hrs. a week which is good for me. I'm full time student. I am proof that anything is possible if you put your mind to it.

Mariah Ortiz

Why did you choose to attend college?

I wanted more for myself, education wise. Even though I'm not completely sure what my career is going to be, I didn't want to waste time and not go to college.

Why did you choose to attend a community college?

I wasn't ready for college as soon as I graduated high school, so I skipped the fall semester and enrolled in the spring.

What other courses are you taking in addition to this class (if any)?

1. Adults w/ Disabilities
2. Humanities 101

What is the most important thing you've learned in English 93?

To not only finish the material, but to understand it.

What is your hometown?

Manchester

How do you get to school?

I drive.

How long does it take you each way?

10-15 mins

Do you work in addition to attending school?

No

Please tell us a little bit about your family (about your Mom and Dad, their occupations, where you live, etc.).

My mom and dad are separated. My mom's side of the family is huge and my dad's is quite small. I live with my mom here in Manchester, dad lives in Hartford. My mom is an overnight stocker and my dad is a plumber and real estate agent.

What are one or two key turning points in your family's history that might be important to mention?

I would have to say a turning point in my family's history is when they split up. This stirred up drama and tension between the both of them.

What is a major turning point in your own life that has helped make you who you are?

When I graduated high school. This helped me to turn into an adult. During high school, teachers or counselors would call the house if I had cut class or something, but now it's different. No one was going to hold my hand. I had to step up and hold my own.

How do you feel about attending college?

I like attending college. Honestly, I like college better than high school.

What did you find most challenging about coming to college? What is the biggest difference from high school?

Probably the financial aid. I had to make trips back and forth to the financial aid office. I ended up paying the tuition out of pocket with the help of mom and dad of course. Biggest difference from high school and college is that in high school, I feel that everything was done for the students. But in college, the students have to initiate a meeting with professors or advisors to have questions answered and whatnot.

What do you enjoy doing for fun or relaxation?

I like to go out, watch Netflix, hang with family and friends.

What is your favorite book?

The Road by Cormac McCarthy.

What is your favorite song?

If I had to pick my favorite song as of right now, it would be *Nice for What* by Drake.

What is your favorite quote?

I don't know it exactly, but it goes like this. "If God can forgive you a million and one times, then why can't you forgive someone just once?" And I don't know who said it, I just seen it on twitter one day.

What is your favorite meal?

Ooh this is hard. I like pasta, doesn't matter what kind, it's all good to me.

What is one thing you'd like to say to educators, politicians, or anybody else in the world?

To be patient with your students. Students can feel nervous or overwhelmed, so to be patient with them would be good. And to remind them that "you got this." Sometimes students lose motivation or they begin to slack, so to tell them that "you can do it" from time to time would also be nice.

What are your hopes for the future?

That anyone who desires to have an education, can do so.

The people I would most like to thank are:

God, my parents, best friends, and family.

Conclusion

The world is not made of atoms. It is made of stories. --Muriel Ruykeser

A few additional notes about the students in this class: One of these students was in my office a few weeks ago at 3:00 pm in the afternoon, and he hadn't eaten all day. We had an ice cream social in class that day to celebrate the class's great work on a recent essay, and he wanted

to know if he could have the leftover ice cream. (He could.) This is one of the reasons we now have a food pantry at our school (Goldrick-Rab and Cady; Goldrick-Rab, Cady, and Coca; Hope). (Let us pause for a moment to consider what it means about our nation today when we need a food pantry on a community college campus.) Another student from this class came in last week carrying a package of rolls that he got from the food pantry (he told me this before offering the remaining bread to the class). I also received an e-mail from another student in this class about ten weeks into the semester indicating that illness had kept her out of work and away from school: “Sorry I missed class today. I was in the hospital 2 this weekend and because of that I missed work and had no gas to make it to school. I have \$ so I’ll be there the rest of the week.”

As we think about the important public-facing work we have before us as basic writing professionals (Adler-Kassner, *Activist*; Mutnick and Carter; Sullivan, “Shaping”; Sullivan, “Two-Year”), we must commit to doing a better job of championing the value of open-admissions colleges and sharing our students’ stories with a broader public audience. If we don’t do this work, others will do it for us, as they are doing now—using simplistic, regressive neoliberal metrics that hide from view what is so extraordinary and inspiring about our students, about our open admissions enterprise, and about our efforts to democratize American higher education.

Teachers who do not think of themselves as scholars or writers or feel they are too busy, can certainly embark on creating at least one short written or multimedia work that advances this important disciplinary endeavor, such as the work presented on the [Teacher-Scholar-Activist](#) blog. We must consider this a vitally important part of our professional responsibility as basic writing teachers. We must find new ways to tell our students’ stories because they typically have

no voice, no political power, and very few public advocates. Every story helps map uncharted territory in the public perception of basic writing and open admissions institutions.

There are a number of pragmatic ways we can begin to engage this important work despite being very busy with our teaching responsibilities:

1. Invite basic writing students to compose (or co-author with you) short, op-ed length narratives that allow them to describe their own experiences at college in their own voices and from their own perspective. As they do this, they can discuss the role that open admissions, basic writing programs, and local two-year colleges have played in this journey. These can be published in local newspapers, blogs, websites, and other print and electronic venues.
2. Following the example of Emily Schnee and her student Jamil Shakoor, co-author a scholarly essay with one of your students. Emily and Jamil's essay is a fascinating longitudinal study that demonstrates in very dramatic ways the great value of developmental education (see Schnee and Schakoor).
3. Have students write themselves into our scholarly conversation by having them contribute to the Community College Success Stories Project.
4. Invite students to contribute chapters to the books we write or edit (see Sullivan *16 Teachers*; Sullivan and Tinberg; Sullivan, Tinberg, and Blau *What*; Sullivan, Tinberg, and Blau *Deep*).
5. Create a multimodal work that tells a student story. I spent some time recently at the Brookings Institution website reading about the landmark sociological study, "Mortality and Morbidity in the 21st Century," by Anne Case and Angus Deaton. I've read the report, which is quite imposing and written for a specialized

audience, so I was very pleased to find a video featuring Case and Deaton at this site which translated their findings for non-specialists in very plain language in about three minutes. This video is a very effective way of using multimodal communication options to transmit—and make more accessible—vital research to a larger audience (Alexander and Rhodes). The video is located [here](#) (“‘Deaths of Despair’ Are Surging in White America”). I also recently served as a field reviewer for an excellent scholarly article submitted to TETYC that is the first multimodal scholarly article I have ever seen. This essay can help us seek new ways to communicate what we know to a larger public audience (Smith).

The basic writing classroom is a site where the most noble ideals of our democracy are tested each day. There is nothing easy or simple about this work. When the vast majority of students attended college at residential institutions and spent four uninterrupted years earning a degree, using graduation rates may have made sense for understanding the complex process of earning a college degree. This process, however, revealed certain truths while concealing others (Sullivan “Measuring”). But things have changed dramatically about the way most Americans attend college, and the old statistical model now serves primarily to hide from public view unpleasant truths about our nation and our democracy. We need a definition of success that respectfully honors the richly various lives that basic writing students typically lead and the family circumstances and material conditions that help shape what is possible for any given student. The more we can help the general public acknowledge structural contingencies in the lives of basic writing students, the more likely it is that we will be able to develop programs and policies that can help offset these contingencies and offer improved opportunities for success to our students and our local communities. Getting individual student stories and this kind of

qualitative research into the hands of legislators, scholars at four-year institutions, and the general public must be one of our top priorities.

Individuals coming out of graduate school will not be prepared for any of this. Social, cultural, and material conditions often help explain why students in basic writing courses miss classes, drop out, and sometimes don't complete homework. This kind of research needs to be a central part of the curriculum in graduate school for new English teachers (Calhoon-Dillahunt et al.; Griffiths; Jensen and Toth; Parisi).

The opportunity for a better future that we offer to students in basic writing classes embodies everything that is best about who we are and who we wish to be as a nation—our ideals, our ambitions, and our belief in the possibility of personal transformation. Let us work to bring these stories to a larger audience as we continue the liberating and ennobling work we do in the basic writing classroom.

Appendix

4.12.18

Dear English 93 Students:

I am working on a book about community colleges and community college students. One of the chapters is called "Meet My English 93 Class." My goal for this chapter is to help readers see the real students behind the statistics, and to provide a little bit of background information about students in classes like English 93.

I've put together this questionnaire that I am inviting you to fill out. Should you be willing to do so, your writing will be featured in this chapter of the book. My goal is to provide scholars and legislators with a fuller, more accurate understanding of community colleges and the students who attend them.

If you can type your answers that would be ideal, but you can also write them right here on this survey. Feel free to say as much as you want!

Thank you!

--Pat

Your name: _____

Date: _____

1. Why did you choose to attend college?
2. Why did you choose to attend a community college?
3. What other courses are you taking in addition to this class (if any)?
4. What is the most important thing you've learned in English 93?
5. What is your hometown?
6. How do you get to school?
7. How long does it take you each way?
8. Do you work in addition to attending school?
9. What kind of work do you do?
10. How many hours do you work each week on average?
11. Please tell us a little bit about your family (about your Mom and Dad, their occupations, where you live, etc.).
12. What are one or two key turning points in your family's history that might be important to mention?
13. What is a major turning point in your own life that has helped make you who you are?
14. How do you feel about attending college?
15. What did you find most challenging about coming to college? What is the biggest difference from high school?
16. What do you enjoy doing for fun or relaxation?

17. What is your favorite book?
18. What is your favorite song?
19. What is your favorite quote?
20. What is your favorite meal?
21. Would you be willing to include a photo of yourself with your profile?
22. What is one thing you'd like to say to educators, politicians, or anybody else in the world?
23. What are your hopes for the future?
24. The people I would most like to thank are:
25. Would you mind if I talked with you if anything is confusing to me on these?

Thank you for your answers!

Notes

1. This research received IRB review and approval.
2. This is vitally important information for *students* to be exposed to as well, because many of them are laboring under the impression that they are doing something “wrong” by making progress slowly or not following a traditional path to college (Gale and Parker). I have incorporated an assignment using the Community College Success Stories Project database into my own developmental writing class so that students can see that *anything is possible*--and that the traditional way that we think about attending college is now obsolete (American). There is no one single “right” way to do it.

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