

Inez in Transition: Using Case Study to Explore the Experiences of Underrepresented Students in First-Year Composition

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ABSTRACT

This case study reports on the transition from high school to college writing undertaken by Inez, a first-generation Chicana undergraduate student. Through use of interviews, student writing samples, and research memos, the author illustrates how a seemingly smooth transition to college writing is actually complex and raises questions for WPAs about the ways students—especially underrepresented students—experience the transition to college writing. The author suggests that case studies, like this one, may benefit writing programs, via programmatic assessment and pedagogical modeling.

I feel like I'm doing good. I've done so much better. I am happy . . . Because you know at first I felt really, really bad about school in general. It was just like, "No, I don't belong here." But not until the semester has finished I feel so confident about it. I can take on more.

—"Inez"

Above are the words of Inez,¹ a first-generation Chicana² undergraduate student I interviewed for a case study of students in the transition between high school and college writing. Inez made this statement in December of her first semester of college. She had finished her first semester, completed her final exams, and was preparing to head home to spend the winter break with her family. Inez ended the semester on this positive note, confident in her academic performance from the first semester. Inez felt like she'd made it as a writer and as a student. She had learned to negotiate the institution and its expectations. She started to feel like she belonged.

In this article, I share the case study of Inez’s transition from high school to college writer. This study examines Inez’s perceptions and descriptions of her high school writing experiences, shares how she navigated and transitioned to college writing expectations, and describes her experiences in a first-semester composition course. On the surface, Inez’s transition appeared smooth with few hiccups along the way. However, as this case study reveals, writing transitions, especially for students from underrepresented groups, are often complex and political events requiring the writer to successfully navigate institutional policies and barriers, sometimes with support and other times without. For writing program administrators, the close examination of one student’s writing transition opens opportunities to consider the role of writing programs and first-year composition (FYC) classes in supporting students, especially first-generation and underrepresented students, in their transitions to college writing.

(WRITING) TRANSITIONS—INSTITUTIONAL AND PROGRAMMATIC

Broadly, much research has examined the transition to college for Latinx students in the United States. This work has found that Latinx students’ success in the transition to college is aided by parental support; personal drive and desire to overcome poverty; college preparatory class work despite initial placement in basic or vocational tracks; and specially designed minority retention and recruitment programs (Falbo, Contreras, and Avalos; Gándara, *Over*). While studies have shown that Latinas, as opposed to their Latino counterparts, are more academically successful in high school and college and graduate at higher rates, gender roles and expectations have the potential to significantly impact these success rates (Gándara, *Making*). Furthermore, students from low socioeconomic or ethnically underrepresented groups who do enroll in college are often less likely to have had access to a college-focused high school curriculum and are often placed in remedial college classes. These factors often lead to less confidence in students’ beliefs about their abilities to succeed in college-level work and a feeling that they do not fit, which thus contributes to lower retention rates for Latinx students (Engle and Tinto). In writing programs, the first interaction with students often happens at the moment of placement, long before an incoming student steps on campus. Yet, for students like Inez, this moment can be critical to developing a sense of belonging in both college and the writing class.

Placement is the first interaction between the student and the writing program. Holly Hassel and Joanne Baird Giordano note that placement “is a critical moment of contact—when students are being evaluated for

the match between their prior educational experiences and their learning needs as first-semester students” (“Blurry Borders,” 60). Furthermore, in writing programs, placement is often shaped by institutional and financial constraints. Hassel and Giordano go on to point out “At many campuses, students are placed into first-year writing courses by standardized placement tests (for example, ACT, SAT, Compass, and Accuplacer) that assess students in limited areas such as usage, grammar, and reading comprehension” (60). In addition to the limited scope of measured skills and abilities for placement in FYC, most standardized tests, such as the SAT and ACT, which was used for Inez’s placement, tend to privilege white students from middle and upper-middle-class backgrounds. New research on the SAT in the University of California system found that in a 17-year timespan, race and ethnicity were the largest predictors of standardized test scores with white students scoring significantly higher than black and Latinx students on the SAT (Geiser). This research confirms what composition scholars working in developmental writing and academic retention programs have known for years—standardized tests for placement in writing classes lead to less diverse and often segregated classes. In his *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies*, Asao B. Inoue discusses the remedial early start or bridge courses for students with low scores on California State University’s English Placement Test (EPT). Inoue states, “Even a casual look into the classrooms and over the roster of all students in these programs shows a stunning racial picture . . . The classes are filled with almost exclusively students of color” (34–35).

WPAs have long understood the impreciseness of standardized tests as placement mechanisms. In their “Toward Writing as Social Justice,” Mya Poe and Asao B. Inoue note, “So much of the writing assessment work we do seems complicit in sustaining inequality. No wonder we are drawn to seemingly more democratic assessment methods” (119–20). Among these seemingly more democratic methods, WPAs report exploring placement test replacements such as directed self placement (Royer and Gilles, “Attitude”; Royer and Gilles, *Principles*; Blakesley, Harvey, and Reynolds) and modifications to testing placement (Isaacs and Keohane; Peckham). While these alternate placement methods are often considered more predictive, useful, and just, Hassel and Giordano, citing a report by Fain, note that standardized tests are solely used for placement in 80% of cases (“Blurry Borders,” 60). Standardized tests are employed primarily because of budgetary and personnel constraints. However, it is widely accepted that when these tests are used for placement they cannot, or do not, provide the necessary level of sensitivity, especially for students whom standardized testing is known to exclude.

The moment of placement is often a critically important one from a programmatic perspective, since it dictates course numbers, instructional needs, etc. However, this moment is also critically important for students transitioning from high school to college writing because it is the moment in which they are institutionally labeled as prepared or underprepared. A student's writing placement can impact the way the student perceives their abilities, fit in college, and even self-worth. Moreover, Siskanna Naynaha also notes that for traditionally underrepresented students, especially multilingual students, placement or competency exams may "mean they are consigned to a kind of institutional purgatory. They are neither in nor out; they gain access to college but remain blocked from advancement by required courses or chosen programs of study" (197). For students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds, the moment of placement is often the first time, but certainly not the last time, they experience the gatekeeping aspect of college writing. In her 2004 keynote, "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key," Kathleen Blake Yancey urged, "Suppose that if instead of focusing on the gatekeeping year, we saw composition education as a *gateway*? Suppose that we enlarged our focus to include *both* moments, gatekeeping and gateway" (306). If we are to heed Yancey's call, to make the first year more than a gatekeeping year, Naynaha argues "unjust placement and curricular models must become the focus of critical inquiry into our institutional practices and especially the ways those practices impact particular student populations" (200). One starting point for this critical inquiry is investigating students' experiences of transition, which includes students' writing backgrounds and experiences and their experiences in our programs. This is information that traditional data sources—test scores, grades, demographic information, and even portfolios of student work—do not provide.

CASE STUDY AND THE TRANSITIONING WRITER

Using case studies for critical inquiry and programmatic fact-finding, research, and assessment offers the opportunity to understand writing transitions, especially for students who are typically underrepresented in our institutions. Case studies are in-depth studies of individual representatives of a group, organizations, or phenomena in the natural context (Hancock and Algozzine). Case studies do not typically provide generalizable findings. Rather, they provide stories and real examples that raise additional questions about decision-making and practice (Dyson and Genishi; Yin). For WPAs, case studies offer an additional layer of information to consider in institutional and programmatic assessment. Although case stud-

ies may only reflect the experiences of one person at a time, they offer us glimpses into the student's experience of our programs that we typically cannot obtain from other types of data available to us such as grades, retention rates, student academic indicators, course evaluations, or even student portfolios.

Case studies ranging from anecdotal stories to more formal uses of the methodology have a history in FYC for offering a picture of what writing classrooms look like. For example, in his 1989 book *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose uses anecdotes to represent students who, "By the various criteria the institutions use . . . deserve admission—but they are considered marginal, 'high risk' or 'at risk' in current administrative parlance. 'The truly illiterate among us,' was how one dean described them" (2). Rose goes on to show that the specific students he describes, those placed into the university's lowest level writing course, are as one might assume of students accepted into a competitive university, highly intellectual and critical thinkers who are both aware of their placement and struggle with feelings of inadequacy because of it.

In recent years, these anecdotal accounts have been enhanced by research that focuses on using case study methodologies to further provide insight into the academic and cultural experiences of students in writing transitions. For example, in his book *Transiciones*, Todd Ruecker follows language minority students from high school into college and offers suggestions for ways that writing programs and institutions can better serve underrepresented and language minority students. In his article "From Journals to Journalism," Kevin Roozen tracked a writer from a college bridge program, through college writing and college, and into a career in journalism. Roozen explored ways that the student's personal journals were significant in her writing transitions. The work of Ruecker and Roozen have begun to illustrate the role of case study in exploring writing transitions, especially for students who are traditionally considered underrepresented in university settings. My case study of Inez adds further complexity to discussions of writing transitions, writing placement, and the institutional and political considerations WPAs face as they address these transitions.

As a case study researcher, it is important to disclose my own subjectivity. My interest in Inez and in her transformation as a writer is rooted in my experience as a former secondary English language arts teacher and FYC instructor, and now as an assistant professor of English teaching writing methods courses for secondary teachers and as a writing researcher examining writing transitions from secondary school to college. My research focuses on complex stories of writing transitions as a way to influence the field's thinking about institutional policies and practice. However, this

interest is also informed by my personal transition into college and college writing. Like Inez, I was a first-generation college student. My father, an immigrant from Brazil, had a high school education, and my mother, a white woman born and raised in the United States, graduated high school and then attended technical school when I was a child. After technical school, she had a successful career in healthcare, but she had no formal college education. My parents very much wanted me to attend college, and I did. Like Inez, I remember throughout college feeling on and off like I did not belong. Fortunately, I participated in a college bridge and retention program for students like me at UCLA: first-generation college students, underrepresented students, and students from low-income families. I often credit that program and its academic and community support system for keeping me in college.

As a researcher, I am aware that stories like mine and Inez's are often told in aggregate form. Our experiences of education are typically reduced to statistics about postsecondary success and retention or, on the flip side, postsecondary attrition and dropout rates. Therefore, as a university researcher and teacher committed to understanding writing transitions, I believe it is important to contribute work that is reflective of the nuance, complexity, and detail of writers' experiences as they transition from high school to college and that accurately reflect people, experiences, and institutional policies/practices that help or hinder students. In addition to understanding the statistical norms and outliers that constitute data about writing programs, it is important to continue adding real examples and stories that impact programmatic and institutional decision-making and change.

In the following pages, I will share Inez's story. At the most basic level, her story represents the experience of one Chicana student and her writing transition as she enters a large public university. I will use Inez's story to raise questions and make observations about her experience. Furthermore, I will argue that Inez's case, while only one student's experience, invites us to consider case studies as a form of programmatic fact-finding and assessment. This form of assessment encourages us to engage in critical inquiry that serves students, strengthens teaching, and provides information about who and how programs serve or fail to serve their students, especially traditionally underrepresented students.

LEARNING ABOUT INEZ

To learn about Inez's transition to college writing, I met with her monthly from August to December of her first year of college. I collected a pre-survey in August and post-survey in December. At each monthly meet-

ing, I interviewed Inez. These interviews were voice recorded. They lasted anywhere from 20–45 minutes. Inez was an engaging interviewee, and she shared very openly with me. She told me on more than one occasion that she liked being involved in “the research” and asked questions about my research methods, practices, and areas. I collected copies of all Inez’s writing assignments from her first semester writing course. I invited Inez to bring her writing from her composition class to our interviews and each time she would read a passage to me. This would give us the opportunity to talk about her writing choices and progress, and it would help me to understand the elements of her writing that were most important or interesting to her. Finally, at the end of each interview session, I wrote research memos. The purpose of the research memos was twofold: (1) they were a reflective practice for me, and (2) Inez would often continue talking as we walked to the copy machine to copy her assignments or prior to leaving my office. Often, I learned much about Inez, her family, and her experiences from these side conversations that were not voice recorded, and I used my memos to keep track of these added details. At the end of our meetings, I kept in touch with Inez via email.

I recruited Inez for participation in my study from her high school. Inez attended an urban high school in the Southwest that I call Community High School. Prior to meeting Inez, I had conducted research and provided professional development to teachers at Community High School. The school currently enrolls 1,800–2,000 students yearly. The school population is comprised of 94% Latinx/Chicanx students, 2% Anglo, 2.5% African American, and 0.8% Native American students. Some 89% to 94% of students receive free and reduced lunch. The school reports a four-year graduation rate of 66.2% percent. Out of Community High’s graduating class, 11% plan to obtain a postsecondary education. The majority of these students attend local community colleges. In the year I recruited Inez into the study, approximately 15 students planned to attend the nearest state university. Through my work at Community High School, it became evident that even the school’s highest achievers were often labeled at-risk or underprepared when they entered college, and I wanted to understand why.

Inez is a first-generation college student, but not the first in her family to enroll in postsecondary education. Inez’s older sister attended a local community college until she became pregnant and needed to work longer hours to support her son. Inez’s parents are both immigrants from Mexico. Her father immigrated to California as a teenager and attended high school in California for a short time where he learned English. Inez’s mother graduated from high school in Mexico before immigrating to Arizona. Inez’s parents met and married in the United States and Inez, her

older sister, and her younger brother were all born in Arizona. The family primarily speaks Spanish at home. However, all Inez's education has been in English. She was never classified as an English-language learner in school and all schooled reading and writing has been in English since kindergarten. Inez's father works as custodial staff at a local college, and her mother works as housekeeping staff at a large hotel. Inez's mother is a union activist, and her sister has become an activist as well. Inez told me a number of stories of working on activist campaigns alongside her mother and sister. Her mother, who is not a citizen, is very active in registering community members to vote.

Inez chose to attend the in-state, local university, Southwest State University, primarily for financial reasons. She qualified for financial aid, and her parents were able to help her pay for the costs of schooling and housing not covered in her aid package. Southwest State is the state's largest public university. As part of its mission, Southwest State seeks to increase access to postsecondary education for traditionally underrepresented students, including Latinx students. In the semester Inez entered Southwest State, approximately 18.5% of the student population identified at Chicana/Latina, while the state Chicana/Latina population in the same year was 31% (*Demographic*).

Upon admission to Southwest State, Inez declared a criminal justice major since she planned to go to law school. Her parents were excited that Inez wanted to be a lawyer. However, before even beginning her freshman year of college, Inez changed her major to psychology when realized she did not want to be a lawyer. At the midpoint of the first semester, Inez once again changed her major, this time to elementary education. On her "About Me" page of her online writing portfolio, Inez states: "My passion is children. I want to pursue a career as a teacher. I want to teach 3rd graders. After I have had the experience, I eventually want to work my way up into becoming a principal." Inez told me that another motivating factor for becoming a teacher is that her younger brother, who is in elementary school, has had trouble in school and she is interested in helping students in the way she wants her brother to be helped.

WRITING IN HIGH SCHOOL—SUCCESS AND SUPPORT

Inez started her high school career in what she called "normal" English. At Inez's school, normal or regular English was the class for students who were not tracked into honors. However, early on, Inez was moved to the honors class. She said, "I started in normal English, but then the teacher thought that I would be good in honors." Although Inez's teacher perceived

her writing and reading abilities to be above average performance, Inez was at first insecure in the honors track. She told me, “When I took that leap into honors I felt really discouraged by everybody just because they wrote wonderful papers. I really had something simple. That was the awkwardness about being in honors. Either you were too smart to be normal, or I felt too dumb to be in honors.” Despite Inez’s insecurities about her writing and fit in the honors track, she reports excelling in her high school classes, especially English language arts. On more than one occasion Inez said that high school was easy or that she didn’t have to work very hard. Inez’s hard work on writing in school was rewarded with good grades. She received A’s in language arts every semester. Inez’s early experience as a writer in high school was shaped by her teacher’s perception of her writing as honors-level material. This teacher’s act of moving Inez to honors greatly shaped her experience of learning to write in high school because she remained tracked in more challenging writing courses throughout her high school experience.

To be successful in high school, Inez regularly completed “A lot of independent writing where it was just like, write about this and that. We had to write five pages every time.” She noted that most of the writing topics were things she did not care about, or topics she did not choose, and that often papers would be returned with just a grade and no comments. Inez told me that she completed the five-page writing assignments easily and regularly. Although Inez wrote regularly and at length in her English language arts honors classes, writing was minimal in classes outside of English. Inez reports doing PowerPoints in biology but no sustained writing in classes other than English. This supports Applebee and Langer’s findings that writing in high school classes is minimal and that, on average, students write 2.1 pages per week of writing combined in social studies, math, and science. The majority of this writing is fill-in-the-blanks (15).

When asked what mattered most in her high school writing, Inez noted, “That we didn’t plagiarize . . . Just that it [the writing] was ours. That it was our opinion. That’s what was valued the most.” Inez told me that writing original work in high school was easy, which is part of the overall picture of her high school writing experience. In high school, Inez wrote regularly, by senior year five pages at a time, and was rewarded with high marks on her assignments. Although she did not necessarily receive detailed feedback on her writing, she met the ethical expectations for writing in high school and grew beyond her ninth-grade lack of confidence to feel like a fairly successful writer.

During her high school years, Inez also developed into a successful writer outside of school. She told the story:

There was this one time in my junior year. I volunteered for political campaigning. I wrote an essay just on what I thought about it. The person that I worked for in the campaign, she loved it so much that she cancelled somebody else's speech and she put me in there.

Writing in this particular context brought together the family commitment to politics and campaigning and Inez's schooled strengths. Furthermore, this experience of being publically selected to share writing solidified Inez's confidence in her writing abilities. Although Inez started high school feeling apprehensive about being on the honors track, she developed into a successful and confident writer both inside and outside of school.

PLACEMENT AND THE INSTITUTION

When Inez entered college, her confidence in her writing quickly faded. Because of her ACT score, Inez was placed into Stretch writing, a course that stretches the first composition course (English 101) over two semesters. The first-semester course is counted as an elective course and students take English 101 in the spring semester of their first year and English 102 in the fall of their second year. The Stretch course is intended to give struggling writers more writing practice and to increase retention rates.

Inez saw her placement in Stretch as a misunderstanding of institutional structures. For example, she told me, "My ACT score was 17. I was put in [Stretch English]." When she talked about the ACT, she said, "We thought it was a required test. We didn't know it would affect us in college, so we didn't really try, or I didn't. If I could go back I'd probably try." Inez's comments point out some of the challenges of using standardized tests for placement. In our standardized testing culture, students learn not to take tests all that seriously since they are regularly evaluated formally. Furthermore, as Hassel and Giordano point out, using standardized tests for placement often leads to incorrect placement of students who do not test well ("Blurry Borders"; "Transfer Institutions"). Research shows that SAT and ACT tests privileges white, affluent males and that women, black and Latinx students, and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds regularly test lower (Geiser and Studley). There is no way to know whether Inez could have tried harder and done better, but this particular placement mechanism made her feel, in her words "lower about my writing." She goes on to say, "I think the idea of being in that class discouraged all of us because we felt like, I guess dumb in a way." While the Stretch course was designed to increase retention and give Inez extra practice, she saw it as remedial and an indicator that she was not good enough for the institution.

Although Inez saw her placement as a mark of her deficits as a test taker and writer, she was also aware of the political implications of placement. In talking about her Stretch course she told me, “When I go in there, basically all you see is nothing but minorities. We’re all either Hispanic and one African American girl. It makes me feel like we’re all . . . Here’s all the Hispanic people for [State University].” I was not able to confirm the ethnic makeup of Inez’s class, but I was impacted by Inez’s perception of her experience and clear articulation of the students who made up her class.

BECOMING A COLLEGE WRITER

As a writer, Inez excelled in her Stretch writing class. She maintained an A grade the entire semester, and her final grade in the course was a 96%. Inez’s writing was well received by the instructor and by fellow students in her writing class. In a sense, the Stretch class was the first time that Inez’s schooled writing became public in a number of ways. Inez told me that in high school she never received feedback on her writing. She suspected her writing teachers did not really read her writing, and she never read other students writing via peer review. This contrasted dramatically with Inez’s experience in college in which it was clear that her teacher read her writing and she often shared writing with her classmates as part of the composition process. What impacted Inez most was her teacher often asking if she could share aloud Inez’s writing with the rest of the class. In this writing, Inez was invited to write about her experiences and things she cared about deeply. In one of these examples, Inez wrote:

I grew up in the Hispanic community. I only spoke English in class. I used to get grounded for speaking English at home. Going to Mexico is really funny because here I am such a Mexican. I eat Mexican food, I have dark skin, my height is 4’11”, and I have trouble pronouncing certain words. I’ve been yelled at to get out of this country. How can I leave my own country? I was born here. Just because Mexican blood runs through my veins, I am not American enough? When I go to Mexico I am considered a Gringa. Why? Because I love country music, I don’t really eat real Mexican food, and I’m rich over here. It’s really hard finding who you really are in a world where society characterizes you based on appearance.”

After the teacher read this aloud, Inez reports a classmate turned to her and said, “Whoa. That was deep. You wrote that?” In the passage, Inez interrogated what it means to belong, which is something she struggled with in her personal life, transition to college writing, and transition to the university more broadly. Furthermore, Inez appreciated the attention that came from

being recognized for her writing, and this helped her to see that writing for an audience gave her writing a sense of purpose.

DEFICITS AND BELONGING

Throughout the semester, Inez was successful in her writing class, and toward the end of the semester, Inez was able to express a sense of accomplishment and feeling that she had made it by learning how to negotiate her writing transition and, more broadly, her university transition. Furthermore, as the semester progressed, the topic of Inez's placement in Stretch came up, in some way, every time we met. However, the discussion of Inez's placement changed dramatically. Inez's early description of the students in her writing class showed a critical awareness of the racial politics of tracking and sorting and a sense of anger and injustice about institutional policies and practices to which she did not have access. However, beginning in the middle of the semester, her anger was quickly replaced with shrinking confidence in her abilities as a writer. She told me that placement in the Stretch course made her feel "lower about [her] writing" and went on to say, "I think the idea of being in that class discouraged all of us because we felt like, I guess, dumb in a way." Inez left high school a successful writer who regularly wrote on demand up to five pages at a time. Yet, as a result of her placement, a placement she did not completely understand, she began to feel dumb and lower.

As the semester went on, Inez's feelings of inadequacy transformed. She enjoyed her writing class, and she felt successful since she shared her writing with other students via peer review, was invited to write about things that *mattered* to her, and had her writing read aloud to the class by her instructor. However, as Inez's personal feelings about the class became more positive, the way she represented her work became more problematic. Inez began to internalize the deficit that she resisted at her initial placement. For example, in our November interview, Inez justified her placement saying, "They told me I had to take the class for a reason, you know?" Later that day, as we walked to the copy machine, Inez told me that her instructor told the students how important the Stretch class was and that students who took that class often passed English 102 at higher rates than students who did not take the class. Inez had come to trust her instructor and how the instructor valued her writing, so too Inez came to trust the instructor's defense of the course as supportive of Inez's future writing success.

Furthermore, Inez often talked about how students from her community were slower or behind. She told me academic reading and writing

takes me longer, I think, because I'm exposed to new vocabulary that I wasn't used to back in my community. It's a lot of new vocabulary that I know I'm expected to know by my age but since I haven't had practice in it, I am a little slower at it. I'm getting there. I'm trying.

Inez focused on a perceived cultural deficit and assumption that she is missing knowledge because of her experience with language and her cultural background. Inez's experience of internalizing her deficits operates separate from her success in her writing class and separate from the fact that introductory college-level reading and writing is challenging for many students. Inez stopped seeing her placement as a function of her missing institutional knowledge and began seeing it as a function of her deficient writing skills and abilities.

ASKING QUESTIONS, SEEING GAPS

On the surface, Inez made a successful transition to college writing. She came to college as an accomplished and successful high school writer and continued that success in her FYC class by finishing the class with a high grade and feeling accomplished as a writer. If I had only looked at Inez's test scores, demographics, grades, and a portfolio of her work, I would assume that Inez's transition was smooth and uncomplicated. Yet, through my case study, I came to see Inez's story as a more complex and nuanced story about the politics and experiences of placement and the transition to college writing for a student who was traditionally underrepresented at my university. Case studies, such as my study of Inez, offer an additional layer of information about students that complements existing teaching and programmatic assessment materials such as test scores, grades, course evaluations, and student portfolios.

Inez had been tracked and sorted throughout her academic career. In high school, she was tracked into honors based on abilities perceived by her teachers. Inez's comments about honors and normal English language arts show a sophisticated understanding of the ways tracking and sorting work. Furthermore, Inez seemed aware that what constituted honors at her urban high school may have been different than honors in other schools where students had socioeconomic privilege. Inez's experience of tracking and sorting changed dramatically when she was placed, via test scores, into the Stretch course. Inez believed that her placement, which she perceived as a remedial, was the function of missing institutional knowledge and a lack of understanding regarding the role of standardized testing in college placement processes. While Inez did not link this missing institutional knowledge to standardized test biases, she did clearly note that her Stretch course

was primarily comprised of students with similar ethnic backgrounds as hers, and she expressed great disappointment that “all of the brown kids” would be in a class she considered remedial.

As in many writing programs, the large program at Southwest State University relies solely on test scores for placement. Funds are not provided for other placement measures, and the writing program’s courses are typically filled to capacity at the beginning of the semester, which limits the mobility of students who may have been misplaced. These institutional constraints, paired with the political implication of using standardized testing for placement seem to be the perfect recipe for the type of segregation Inez described.

Case studies have the potential to raise questions and provide rich description to evaluate student experience and learning in situations where institutional constraints impact programmatic practice and decision-making. For example, the early data from the initial implementation of the Stretch program showed that the demographics of the classes matched the university’s demographics. However, Inez’s comments about all the brown kids in the room counters this early data and suggests that a closer examination of the segregation in these classes may be warranted. A 2008 Pell report by Jennifer Engle and Vincent Tinto finds that first-year college students from underrepresented groups who are placed in remedial classes are more likely to drop out of school because they feel they do not belong. Rather than dropping out, Inez attempted to understand her placement and the necessity of the Stretch course. In doing so, Inez internalized deficits related to writing ability, which she did not actually seem to have. If the Stretch courses are disproportionately comprised of “the brown kids” as Inez perceived, are they actually increasing retention? If so, at what cost? Using case studies for programmatic assessment has the potential to make questions and programmatic concerns visible in ways that retention data, such as grades and percentages, cannot.

CASE STUDY AS INSTRUCTIONAL COMPLEMENT

While case studies certainly have the potential to raise programmatic questions, an added benefit of the case study approach was Inez’s informal learning about university research, writing, and even publishing. Inez regularly asked me about my research and writing. She wanted to understand how it worked and why it worked that way. She saw connections between the interviews she conducted for the research for her writing class and the case study research I was doing. While I was not Inez’s instructor, it was empowering for her to think that her experience could impact the way instructors,

WPAs, and university-level administrators think about a writing program. Through the case study, I came to see that Inez saw me as a form of literacy sponsor (Brandt). Via this case study methodology, Inez, a student who was struggling to navigate the university and its practices, felt integrated into the research that is integral to the way her university works.

In her “Definitive Article on Class Size,” Alice Horning notes that the small size of composition courses adds to student engagement and learning, offers space for in-depth writing process activities since teachers have time to respond to many drafts of writing, and contributes to higher retention rates for incoming students. Because of the familiarity between instructors and students in the FYC course, students have the opportunity to see their instructors not only as subject matter experts in composition but also as researchers and learners who are continually developing. Integrating case studies into individual practice is one way for FYC instructors to model research for their developing writers who are also conducting research and to develop a deep understanding of their students in the transition to college writing.

In programs where a large number of graduate teaching assistants take responsibility for teaching FYC courses, a case study model could both benefit the program, the graduate students’ research, and the FYC students who are case study subjects. For example, case studies could be assigned in the writing practicum to help developing TAs to learn about their students in order to directly impact curriculum and retention. For programs with graduate-level, WPA-focused seminars, this methodology can be used in a semester-long programmatic assessment. This helps future WPAs learn a specific method for qualitative research while also learning how to regularly conduct in-depth programmatic assessments on a continuing basis. Finally, in programs that use portfolio assessment for direct assessment of student writing, case studies may offer a way to complement, or even replace, student portfolios. For example, throughout the semester, Inez’s portfolio showed that she was an accomplished writer. However, the additional information I gathered about her gave context to her placement, class work, and the overall experience of writing in FYC that I could not have gleaned from her work alone.

The integration of case studies into the work of writing program instructors and graduate students also invite instructors to see ways that assessment, as Staci M. Perryman-Clark notes, “creates or denies opportunity structures” (206). At Southwest State, as in many programs across the country, faculty in writing programs are often far less diverse than students taking their classes. Perryman-Clark argues that to support students of color and linguistically diverse students,

white, monolingual instructors and graduate students are challenged to work differently from the practices to which they have been accustomed, and by working differently, white, monolingual instructors and graduate students often see themselves as unsure of what exactly they should do. (210)

Integrating case studies into the work of writing instructors and graduate students opens up the opportunity to more clearly see and address the institutional and pedagogical elements that deny opportunity structures in order to consider ways to better support traditionally underrepresented students and create opportunity structures.

CONCLUSION

Case studies open up opportunities to understand the experiences and writing development of students who are often misunderstood by other measures. As Mya Poe and Asao B. Inoue remind us, “So much of the writing assessment work we do seems complicit in sustaining inequality” (119) and Inez’s story confirms this. Inez was highly ranked out of high school but, according to her test scores, at risk in FYC. Via this case study, I want to suggest that transitioning writers like Inez have much to teach us about programmatic policies, practices, and assessment in our programs. The integration of case study methodology offers an opportunity for instructors to conduct research alongside their students, get to know these students and their stories of transition more deeply, and alter instruction to meet the needs of transitioning writers. Case studies offer programs a way to develop a deep understanding of their students, especially their traditionally underrepresented students, via data that can be used to complement, or even challenge, traditional and more quantitative data sources that are typically used in writing programs or by upper level university administrators.

NOTES

1. The names of all people and institutions appearing in this article are pseudonyms. This research was institutional review board (IRB) approved.

2. I am using the term Chicana specifically to describe Inez’s ethnicity and the gender-neutral Chicax or Latinx in situations where I am speaking generally. At the beginning of the case study, Inez used Chicana, Hispanic, and Mexican interchangeably to describe herself, as evidenced by her writing samples. However, as the semester moved on, and she continued in a Chicax studies class, Inez began using Chicana when talking about her ethnicity. Therefore, to honor Inez’s own choice of language, I use Chicana when I am specifically writing about her.

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