Examining Retention at the SLAC: the Impact of Race, Class, and Resource Use on First Year Writing

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This article explores retention at a SLAC, specifically breaking down the factors that affected our students' success in the writing classroom. Noting that students of color and first-generation students struggled more than their peers, we explore the current literature surrounding these issues and the writing classroom, particularly in terms of the ways that it affects a SLAC that is also a primarily white institution (PWI). In addition, we explore the use of resources that are available to all students on campus, and the fact that most students who did not successfully complete the course also did not take advantage of those resources in a meaningful way. Throughout, we brainstorm ways that we might further assist students in succeeding in the writing classroom and ways that writing directors might continue to implement antiracist pedagogies.

Throughout our years as writing directors, we have often lobbed national data at our administrators as a way to argue for either increasing or at least not reducing our current resources. Starting arguments with "national research shows. . ." was a way to not only indicate our participation in national conversations and awareness of current research, but also typically helped the ethos of our arguments. However, one spring, a frustrated administrator, responding to our claim that students who fail composition are more likely not to persist or graduate (Reichert Powell), shot back with "Yes, but is that true of *our* institution?" Gauntlet thrown, this challenged us to compare our own data to national trends. Simple initial results showed that students with a grade in the C range were just as likely as any other students on our campus to persist and graduate. However, students with grades of D and F were put on probation and/or dismissed from the institution 50% and 80% of the time (respectively).[1]

As pleased as we were to point out that yes, our data was in keeping with national results, the exercise raised larger questions for us, even if it seemed to temporarily quell the administration. What, exactly, was the profile of the students who were struggling in our classes? What, if anything, was being done to assist the students who were having difficulties? What resources were the D/F students using on campus? How could we more effectively assist first-year students, specifically in the writing classroom, to pair them with resources that might help them succeed? Scholar Pegeen Reichert Powell points out that retention issues are caused by so many

mitigating factors (finances, health, family situations, etc.) that there is ultimately little that we can do at the institutional level to raise overall retention rates (106). But our research pointed out that the students who were most at risk for not succeeding when they entered the institution were also not being connected with the resources that most likely would help them to be retained. Furthermore, our research raised concerns about larger socioeconomic disparities in the success of economically disadvantaged students and students of color versus their white and economically stable counterparts. The problems presented by these findings are particularly troubling given our institution's status as a predominantly white institution (PWI) and small liberal arts college (SLAC), meaning that race- and class-based divides are deeply rooted in campus life.

This article gives a brief overview of the most relevant current retention/persistence research for composition studies in terms of race, class, and retention in the composition classroom. Following this, we parse the data that we gathered in order to explore our findings regarding students' race and first-generation status and how these correlated with those students struggling the most to complete the classes. We also explore the ways in which their struggles figure into composition's current research. Finally, we offer suggestions for the possible improvement of retention/persistence by increased availability of on-campus support systems and outreach geared specifically towards marginalized student populations at a PWI. Because such issues are always local and specific, we realize that our particular study may not always be applicable to other locations. However, we hope that our methods and results will assist other WPAs as they work to design their own studies and understand the factors assisting in/impeding their students' success at the university.

There is no doubt that this work is ongoing, messy, and sometimes unsatisfying. Our overall conclusion is that there is value to an institution doing a deep dive to examine retention through the lens of the writing courses. For us, we discovered that while the use of on-campus support systems (particularly those geared to the writing classroom) cannot guarantee student success, students who do not use them, particularly students of color and/or economically disadvantaged students, are more likely to fail. In our case, our self-examination of the needs of first generation and BIPOC students lead us to reaffirm our commitment to socially just academic practices, and a commitment to institutionalized training and pedagogy. Given trends in the ways that the needs of students of color and economically disadvantaged students often go underserved at PWIs, our results reiterated that our overall pedagogy and specific support services must perform better outreach to those student groups in particular.

Background of Our Institution/First Year Retention Team

Centenary University is a small (>1,800 student), rural, religiously affiliated, primarily white liberal arts university in New Jersey. As such, many of our students (38%) are first-generation, and nearly all are from within a 100-mile radius of the campus ("Centenary University"). Like many other campuses with our profile, we have a large number of students in pre-professional programs such as business, criminal justice, and fashion. In addition, we have a unique program in equine science (and a corresponding barn with approximately 100 horses) that brings students (and sometimes their horses) to campus for a business-based degree in barn management and an equine pre-veterinary track.

Like many other institutions, in the last few years enrollment has become a significant issue, with administration counting on every student who can be recruited. As a result, at the time of our study our average incoming student SAT is a combined score of between 900 and 1100, and the acceptance rate is 93% ("Centenary University"). While the university was once known for primarily serving the local, white, upper-middle class population of the surrounding area, the student population has become more diverse as the college has realized the need to recruit outside of the immediate geographical area and the semi-rural area surrounding the college has become more working-class. In addition, the university has recently become increasingly focused on recruiting larger numbers, which has resulted in lowering selectivity and increasing geographic diversity, resulting in a more racially and economically diverse but less academically prepared population.

The result, predictably, is that we are losing a higher percentage of the first-year population than we have in the past (last year, approximately 25% of our first-time first-year students did not return or were dismissed). In response, the college appointed a Director of General Education and created a First-Year Retention Team (otherwise known as "the Squad"). While it is largely comprised of student service employees (the director of Disability Services and two of her staff, as well as members from student life and athletics), the Squad also invited the director of the Writing Program (Lisa) and the director of the Writing Collaboratory (Erin) to serve on the committee as well. Because of our small student population and the fact that nearly every incoming student takes first year writing, this provides us with a unique opportunity to track students and to attempt early interventions with students who are struggling.

Our first-year writing program consists of a two-course required sequence. Students are placed via directed self-placement and classes are

capped at seventeen. They are required to take either WRI 1001 (Composition and Rhetoric 1) and WRI 1002 (Composition and Rhetoric II), or WRI 1002 and WRI 2012 (Advanced Composition). This is designed to help our students more effectively move through the composition sequence and give them greater options if they struggled with their initial course choice. In part, we chose directed self-placement because of the evidence that it gives students greater autonomy and can lead to increased student success (Royer and Gilles 70).

One factor that affects our program (and is surely not specific to our institution) but that the administration does not want to address is the make-up of our writing faculty. We have four lines that are designated for full-time writing faculty. Two faculty members are tenure-track and have PhDs in Rhetoric and Composition. Two faculty members are non-tenure track and have long taught writing full-time for the institution, but have other degrees (an EdD and a DLit). Helping ensure that those two faculty, and the many contingent faculty members teaching first-year writing, get continued faculty development in teaching writing has been an uphill (and losing) battle as the institution also continues to scale back on funding for conferences and other professional development opportunities.[2] This means that the majority of our classes in any given semester are taught by poorly paid, under-supported adjunct labor.

In addition, both of our full-time composition-trained faculty are cisgendered white females. This is reflective of the campus as a whole. In recent years, we have had an average of two to three faculty members of color (out of eighty five faculty). While we know that a diverse faculty assists in the retention of non-white students, our numbers of faculty of color are far less than the national 12% reported (McClain and Perry). We recognize that a lack of "compositional diversity can hinder student retention due to faculty composition" (McClain and Perry)[3] and as a result continue to join other faculty voices across campus to encourage our administration to drastically rethink hiring practices in addition to our current retention study.

Methodology

When we were initially tasked with gathering this information, we simply looked at grades reported for the first-year composition courses for the previous three years (extending back to fall 2016, which is when both our current data system and the two-course required sequence began). We quickly realized that it would be much more helpful to explore other factors involved in the students' profiles, and we sought IRB approval.[4] From there, we compiled lists of students who had received a grade of D or F and

then gathered institutional data based on gender, race, and first-generation status. Campus faculty have surprising access to electronic student records, which allowed us to gather other data (such as intended major) on our own.[5] In addition, we conducted both individual and small-group interviews with students who had failed the writing courses to obtain input into their thinking about the reasons why this had occurred and how outside factors might have contributed to this (see the appendix).

Retention/Persistence

Overview of Our Campus

Like many small colleges, our writing program resides in another department (Gladstein and Regaignon 45). Three years ago, when we began this study, we were part of the English department on campus. However, since then, a reorganization moved us to a department later named Communication, Writing, and Design.[6] This move has maintained our place as a program within a larger department, which is certainly common for smaller institutions. However, we are fortunate to have a free-standing peer tutoring center with a full-time faculty director ("The Collaboratory") and a writing program director. Yet, another strength is our small size, which allows us to know most students individually quite well and to tailor potential ways to assist individual students. As faculty members, we are lucky to have a seat at the table of the weekly retention conversations. As Ruecker, Shepherd, Estrem, and Brunk-Chavez note, faculty are often not interested in this conversation, and for many, if they are interested there is no place for them at the table where the conversation is happening (11). If they are interested, they may actually have "little idea about what other parts of the university do to promote persistence outside of the classes we teach" (15). While both of us had had some connections with the Disability Services Office (DSO) prior to our work on the first-year retention committee, it is safe to say that as a result of our work on the Retention Squad, we both have a better sense for how offices such as the DSO, athletics, and student life work (both by themselves and together) to assist with student success. We have also created valuable relationships with these offices that assist us in other areas of our work.

Goals for Retention

It's important to think about what our goals are for student success in the first-year classroom. There will never, of course, be 100% success rates in these classes (at the very least, because there are always highly capable students whose success is interrupted by other factors). As Reichert Powell

notes in *Resistance and Retention*, the fact that nearly all students entering the university come through our courses presents us with unique opportunities (109). At the same time, however, we must admit that (1) not all students will be retained (or even wish to stay), despite our best efforts, and (2) we should find value in thinking about the skills that students are exposed to in our courses regardless of whether they persist and graduate (production and consumption of texts, for example) (110). What happens, for example, if we view transfer of skills more broadly than just transferring those skills to other courses? Powell encourages us to also see students' "fits and starts," movements back and forth, as potentially productive instead of simply disruptive (117). Our goal, then, is to better understand our student population in order to improve success and retention where it is both practical and possible.

Overall, we want to use our data to see if there are distinct areas where we could do better. While we could all, always, learn to teach better, it is important to think about the training that our instructors (particularly our adjuncts) have, and ways that we can offer them directed training for better addressing the needs of the particular students in their classrooms. As well, we have brought our findings back to the Retention Squad in order to think about ways that we could structurally and individually better support our students. Two areas, in particular, seemed to most affect students' success: race and first-generation status.

Race, Class, and Retention

Beginning as early as CCCC's *Students' Right to Their Own Language* resolution in 1974, research in composition and rhetoric has helped writing program administrators understand the impossibility of talking about "students" in the first-year writing class. Instead, we need to understand them as conglomerates of their individual experiences and backgrounds. Understanding the research, in our case, on race and class, which seemed to have the largest impact on our students' success, is essential to understanding how we might better support our current student population.

Research on students' interactions in the classroom as non-white bodies helps us to understand both their experiences on our campus and their experiences with retention. Scholars such as Asao Inoue, Staci Perryman-Clark, and Vershawn Ashanti-Young have deepened the field's theoretical insights into the importance of race in the writing classroom. Using a literacy-based framework, Young argues for the importance of honoring home literacies as a way of establishing racial equity and outreach to students of color who may be differently positioned to take on the typical white-washed

expectations of the college classroom (5–6), particularly at PWIs like ours. By acknowledging the efficacy of home literacies, not only do writing instructors offer students of color opportunities for building connections between their writing education and lived experiences, they also offer students a path for institutional success. Both Inoue and Perryman-Clark's work highlights the importance of administrative decision making in assuring that classrooms incorporate practices that ensure fairness in approaches to writing pedagogy, emphasizing the need for actively antiracist teaching, administration, and assessing in order to give students of color equitable chances at success in writing courses.

In thinking about the support services that first-year writing programs rely upon, we are aware that critical discussions of race have also deeply impacted the work of writing center pedagogy as directors and tutors negotiate power structures outside of the writing classroom. Neisha-Anne Green; Wonderful Faison and Anna Treviño; Aja Martinez; Mandy Suhr-Sytsma and Shan-Estelle Brown; Laura Greenfield and Karen Rowan; and countless others have produced scholarship geared toward recognizing the essential nature of linguistic diversity and antiracist activism in the writing center in order to promote the success of students of color. Green's IWCA keynote speech on the complex and difficult work of being a Black writing center director (WCD), along with Faison and Treviño's descriptions of being people of color in academic spaces such as the writing center, highlight the urgency of these issues in supporting writers of color on university campuses. Suhr-Sytsma and Brown push support services to rethink our approaches to student advocacy, arguing for "productive dialogue about language, oppression, and resistance" (14) at the forefront of tutor education. Keeping abreast of such scholarship, then, helps us to continue to help our students.

As we review and contextualize our findings on retention at our institution, we commit ourselves to doing the work of interrogating inherent inequalities in our work as WPA and WCD. In particular, we keep Mya Poe's call to administrative action in mind:

> What do we do when we find that some students do not perform as well as other students? What do we do when performance seems to be linked to race? Rather than using an achievement gap frame and explaining differences through static identity groupings, it's more useful to consider what expectations teachers and students bring to rhetorical situations across the curriculum. Turning questions of difference into moments of dialogue aligns with WAC's emphasis on "pedagogical reform rather than curricular change." (95)

In taking on this work in WAC (in the case of Erin's work through the writing center) and in FYW (in the case of Lisa's work in the writing program), we aim to both improve instructors' understandings of the impact of race in the writing classroom and introduce them to more mindful, intentional classroom practices.

In addition to understanding race as it relates to the writing classroom and writing center, it is also important to note that race is an important conversation to have in terms of retention in general, particularly for a PWI like ours. In "Where Did They Go: Retention Rates for Students of Color at Predominantly White Institutions," McClain and Perry identify key factors associated with retention of students of color at PWIs. Key diversity factors were listed, including a history of inclusion/exclusion, compositional and structural diversity, and psychological and behavioral climates. McClain and Perry's research indicates that higher retention/persistence rates were found amongst students who had access to transition/bridge programs, student mentorship programs, and diverse faculty and staff.

While McClain and Perry advocate for positive psychological and behavioral climates, research also shows that students who perceive campuses to be racially hostile are less likely to persist and be retained. Ibrahim Karkouti's work on black students' educational experiences at PWIs indicate higher levels of racial stress and lowered levels of social integration and academic achievement (66), leading to higher rates of attrition. While our campus has begun to work on some of these areas, we still have significant work to do.

Perhaps the greatest concern that we directly observe in the writing classroom on our campus related to race is the concept of shaming. bell hooks, in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, comments on this shame, which many students of color bring to the classroom, particularly if they have not attended high-performing high schools. hooks notes that many academic settings are shame-based:

> In many cases simply the experience of being 'judged' activates deep-seated feelings of shame. Messing up, performing poorly eases the anxiety. If the fear is that they will be found wanting, then as soon as they can inappropriately act out so that they are indeed wanted, they can feel better. There are serious taboos against acknowledging shame. . . . They voice shame about feeling shame. (93–94)

Karkouti's research seconds hooks' findings, noting that "research indicates that lower levels of perceived institutional commitment toward diversity are associated with negative social behaviors among all students" (66). However, hooks' framework of shaming is a difficult concept to address with

instructors, since it is hard to imagine an instructor who believes that they are intentionally shaming their students. And yet, in our experience, students of color in our classes have indeed experienced this. One student, who failed composition his first semester, responded to the question of "what impact did the instructor have on your success in the course?" with a very direct answer. While many students simply responded to this question with a version of "I didn't like/understand their teaching style," DJ specifically responded with "I felt she disrespected me, so I stopped working." DJ's answer brought us up short. He indeed felt shamed by his professor, and he proceeded to behave exactly as hooks predicted. Once he felt shamed, he stopped submitting work, started coming to class late, and eventually stopped attending the class at all. Clearly, if DJ's response is at all representative of his peers of color in the writing classroom, this is an area where we must do better on our campus.

First-Generation/Class Conceptions

Data on first generation students and the ways that this might affect their success in the writing classroom is only recently coming to be understood in ways that might be helpful to persistence and retention. Collecting data from students is complicated—for instance, is a student first-generation if a parent had "some college" to report? Is ANY college experience on the part of a parent helpful in providing role modeling for current students? Current research does not make these distinctions, and nor do the data collection vehicles available to us. In addition, first-generation status is complicated by class. Cassandra Dulin notes that a key characteristic of working-class students is that they are also generally first-generation (80). First-generation students, however, may not always be working class. Overall, first-generation students are noted to be "at-risk" for dropping out of college during their first year; national data shows that only 73% of them return their second year (80). In addition, because they have no/few role models to provide frames of reference, they "come to college with expectations that are not aligned with academic reality, and they struggle to readjust these misconceptions during their first year" (81). Composition and rhetoric research has also begun to explore the ways that first-generation students experience the writing classroom differently from peers.

Many of the conceptions that instructors bring to classrooms regarding working class students are similar, if not the same, for their first-generation students. As Aaron Barlow and Patrick Corbett observe in "Implications of Redefining 'Working Class' in the Urban Composition Classroom," composition is a middle-class pursuit, taught in a middle and upper-class

location. Barlow and Corbett note that many instructors, consciously or not, divide working class students into the following categories based on their levels of resistance to the curriculum:

1. Those Most Likely to Succeed
2. Reluctant Scholars
3. Unlikely Candidates
4. Those Who Choose to Not-Learn. (68)

In doing so instructors view levels three and four as students who are not worth our time, or who will be too resistant to instruction for us to bother attempting it. And yet, many of these students, in our experience, appear "reluctant" or appear as if they are "choosing not to learn" because they are instead overwhelmed by the entirety of their experience: "They are aware that their writing expression is not the same as the academic expression expected of them by the university and their writing instructors" (Dulin 81). This is further supported by research on working class students in the writing center. In their study of four different institutions' writing centers, Harry Denny, John Nordlof, and Lori Salem found that working-class tutees needed more direct feedback during writing tutorials (86). Particularly for students who have been raised in classrooms where they have been told what to do and how to do it, the critical thinking and exploratory nature of composition, and the middle-/upper-class performances required of participation of university coursework, may overwhelm and confuse them.[7]

Indeed, we find this to be the case with many of our students. One first-generation student on our campus, NM, who failed WRI 1001 twice, never submitted the weekly summary/response that was required for the course. In Lisa's course that submission is labeled in an online platform as "Weekly News Article" and then numbered. Several times, Lisa reached out to him to ask why he was not submitting them, and what help he needed. Lisa grew increasingly frustrated with his lack of response. During a Squad meeting where the student's name came up as "at risk for course failure," she mentioned that he was not submitting work. However, in his weekly meetings with his DSO support person, he had said that he was up to date with all work in the course. Once his support person asked him specifically about his lack of submission of these documents, the student admitted to her that he was never sure where the summary/response was supposed to go. However, nor did he ever ask. When Lisa asked him why he had not asked for clarification, either in office hours or by email, he indicated that once he had missed submitting several of the assignments, he was too embarrassed

to ask. In his case, working directly with his DSO officer helped to pinpoint this as an issue, and to get him back on the path to submitting his work. His admission, however, made Lisa realize that she needs to go over where to put these documents more than just on the first day, in order to be sure that all students understood the assignment and where to submit it. The instructor's familiarity with the course platform and the assignments and their names, in this case, did not translate to the student; his overall discomfort in the academy translated to discomfort asking clarifying questions about his work.

This realization for us is further backed up by Erin's experiences in the Collaboratory, a space where students often feel that they are able to ask basic questions that they are too embarrassed to bring up in class to professors. Following scholarship in writing center studies that emphasizes the importance of reading comprehension in writing tutoring appointments (Adams 75–76), Erin trains tutors to answer any question that comes up in a tutorial to the best of their ability. Frequently, this results in their helping students find course materials on course websites or the LMS or going over writing prompts that rely on academic terminology with which the student (particularly first-year, first-generation students) may not be familiar.

As part of our commitment to Reichert Powell's notion of privileging larger goals for composition than "proficiency" within the academy, and in acknowledgement of the charged nature of that term, we also embrace James Paul Gee's notions of complicating "primary discourse communities" (the home) and "secondary discourse communities" (the classroom of the university) (174). Instead of viewing the students' primary discourse community as one that must be "fixed" (Preston 96), we must instead embrace the knowledge that students bring to the classroom. In part, we do this through direct conversations in our classrooms about discourse communities, but this is clearly an area where we need to continue in our efforts in response to the findings of our study.

As Jacqueline Preston notes, a successful classroom for working-class students is one that moves writing beyond simply the function of representation. Instead, we must model for students the ways that writing can "resolve tensions; build and sustain working relationships; move projects forward; raise and answer questions; explore and extend concepts; reject, accept, and create new ideas; and carve new rhetorical paths for imagining what could not have been imagined before" (98). This can be risky work for first-generation students, who often feel that the stakes for their success in college are very high. They may feel discomfort at first at the idea of using writing to explore rather than using writing to represent the "right answer," as their teacher sees it. In our writing program, we ask students to complete

work in our WRI 1001 class that revolves around an issue that they see in their home community. Doing so allows them to write about what they know, but it also asks them to explore issues, think about representations of those issues, and propose solutions to the problems that they see. The first-year writing classroom, in this case, can help first-generation students see the value of writing within discourse communities other than the university, but clearly our work in this area needs to continue.

Centenary University Data

Success/Failure in FYW

As we began to explore our preliminary data, it was important to us to understand the profile of the students who were failing the course before we explored what resources had been available to them. Centenary University has a long history as a women's college (we transitioned to co-education in 1988) and as a result, the majority (64%) of our students are female ("Student Diversity"). In addition, because of our location in the northwest corner of New Jersey and the fact that most of our students come from within 100 miles to attend, the majority of our campus identifies as White (50%, with a further 25% not reporting race) ("Student Diversity"). As we continued to work with the first-year retention team, we wondered what further profiling of these students might show both in terms of the group that received D/Fs, and how these numbers would compare to our university population in general. We chose to gather data on gender, race, major, and first-generation status.[8]

The data that we gathered indicated that 1,223 students took the courses over the three-year period, including 587 in WRI 1001 and 636 in WRI 1002 (a significant majority of all entering first year students). Of these, 46 D-range grades were given, and 104 Fs.[9] This means that 3.76% of students received a D-range grade, and 8.5% received an F. In total, then, with a minimum passing course grade of C-, approximately 12% of our first-year writing students had to retake at least one of the writing courses that they took. Probation, then, was a likely outcome of their failure in first-year writing, and for some students, was a contributing factor to their dismissal.

From our anecdotal work on the retention team, we suspected that more students of color were having to retake the writing courses than were represented on campus. In fact, our data breakdown revealed that this was indeed true. Overall, Figure 1 indicates that our White students were having to repeat the course at disproportionately lower rates to their campus population, while Black or African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian students had a disproportionately higher rate (more than double, and in

some cases nearly triple). This indicates that our students of color on campus are not well supported in their writing needs.

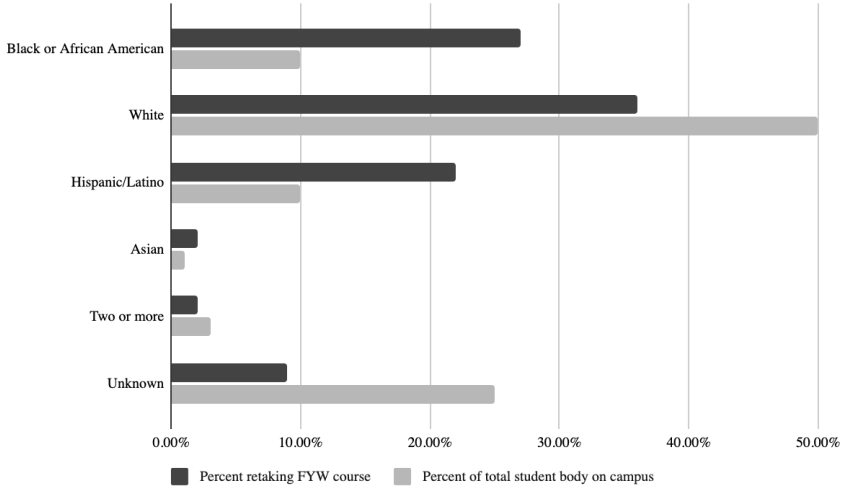

Figure 1. Reported Race ("Student Diversity").

This is complicated even further when first-generation status is considered. Overall, the campus reported in 2017 that 38% of our students were first-generation ("Centenary University"). However, it is difficult to gather this data for individual students, as mentioned above, and approximately 1/3 of our students had not completed the information on their FAFSA about a parent's college experience. Despite these difficulties, we were able to ascertain that 27.3% of students receiving a D or F in FYW courses were first-generation students. That percentage makes it clear, then, that a student's status as first-generation or not has less bearing on their success in the writing course than issues such as race but is still an important contributing factor. As well, the numbers of first-generation students not successfully completing the writing course is more in line with the campus population of those students (38%). However, this does not mean that this area might not benefit from some attention to pedagogical approaches for first-generation writers, particularly since nearly one-third of our struggling students are first-generation.

Gender provides another marker for observation in our study. Because of Centenary's status as a former women's college, the campus has retained a majority of female students since going co-ed in 1988. Degree-seeking women comprise 64% of the student population, and men comprise 36% ("Centenary University"). These numbers were relatively in-line with the

students who must retake the writing courses, as figure 3 illustrates. Gender, therefore, begins to fill out the picture for our students. Slightly more men than are represented on campus, and slightly fewer women, must retake the writing courses. Overall, then, students who were most likely not to succeed in our writing courses had their status complicated when they were male, first-generation, and minority.

Aggregating this data reveals an even more complex picture. For example, 13 students (8.6%) were white and first-generation. However, another 13 students (8.6%) were both Black or African American and first generation. Likewise, 11 students (7.3%) were Hispanic/Latino and first generation. Combined, nearly 16% of the students who had to repeat the writing courses were both first generation and non-white.

Use of Student Support Services

As we began to gather our data, as noted earlier, we also felt it important to look at the types of resources that students were using on campus and how we might place fewer responsibilities on the students themselves for locating/accessing them. This allowed us to create a picture of what students were already accessing, and in turn, what we might encourage and assist them to do more of. Our resources included being registered with the DSO, taking part in Project ABLE (a learning support summer program designed for students with learning differences to help them navigate the new environment of college), being a member of the Equal Opportunity Program (EOP—a program for economically disadvantaged students in the state), taking part in sessions at the Tutoring Center (professional subject-based tutoring, free and open to any student on campus) or visiting the Writing Collaboratory (a peer tutoring writing center, also free for any student). There is some overlap in our numbers; for example, students who are registered with DSO may also be part of Project Able, or students who used the Tutoring Center might also have used the Writing Collaboratory. Regardless, the picture that we created was one that indicated that a majority of students earning a D or F in the writing class were not using resources that were available to them (figure 2).

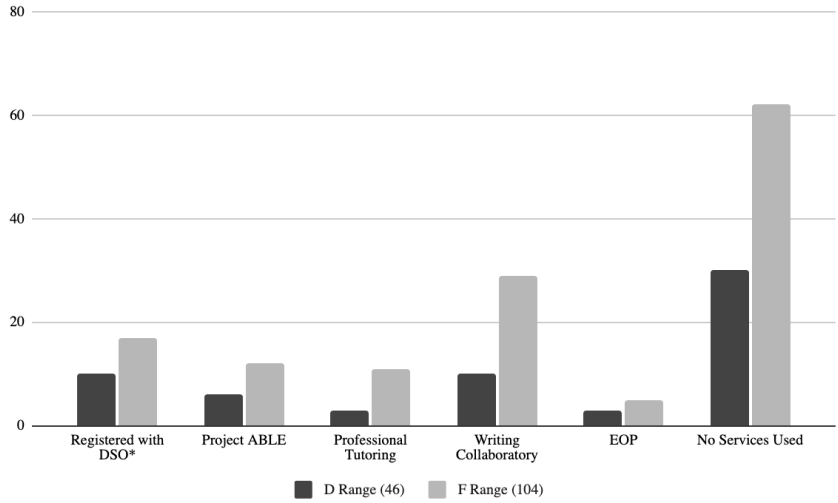

Figure 2. Usage of Student Support Services.[11]

Some of these programs are not available to every student. EOP or Project Able in particular would not be appropriate for all students. Likewise, not all students require the services of the DSO. However, students did not seem to take advantage of the professional or peer tutoring offered, either. Overall, 14/150 (or fewer than 10%) used professional tutoring. Numbers were better with students who used the Writing Collaboratory. In terms of raw data, 39 students (26%) visited the Writing Collaboratory for peer tutoring. Further breakdown of this data, however, reveals that only three of the D-range students and 9 of the students who failed the course visited the Writing Collaboratory more than once. 75% of the students who visited more than once were of color, which is encouraging in that this shows some students of color feel positively about the Collaboratory. However, this encouraging data also must be placed in the context of our other findings regarding race and retention at our institution. And while our numbers initially appear that 26% of the struggling students went to the Collaboratory during the semester that they were struggling, in reality, only 8% made multiple appointments. Clearly, we must begin by providing the students with better access to the Collaboratory. Encouraging students to not only feel confident initiating the kind of assistance that the Collaboratory can offer, but then to feel comfortable enough to continue pursuing it, is an area where we need to continue to improve.

To create a comparison, it's also important to understand which students did not use any services at all. Figure 3 indicates that over half of the

students who had to repeat the writing courses accessed no services available to them on campus. Access to resources that might assist in student success is therefore clearly an area of support that we need to improve.

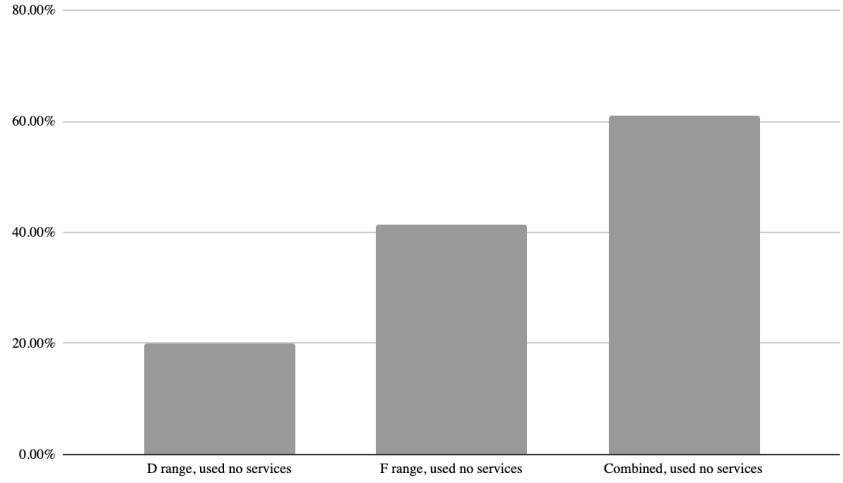

Figure 3. Grade Range vs. Service Used.

Observations/Movements Forward

As we write this article, protests are occurring across the country to condemn police brutality and systemic racism. As we take action in our personal lives to support Black lives, we continue to negotiate effective antiracist responses in our professional work. In thinking of retention, we claim an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to supporting first generation and students of color at our PWI. Without confronting the class and racial disparities evident in our findings, any social justice work we do at our institution is undermined in negative ways. We see retention, then, as the central focus of our administrative work in the near future, not because of institutional imperatives or executive-level decrees, but because of a commitment to access to frequently assessed, carefully crafted, critical, equitable education for all students.

Our data shows us, in some ways, no surprises, but some disappointments. Our percentage of students who are not successfully completing our first-year writing classes, for example, is not an enormous surprise on a campus where only two of the instructors have any direct training in composition pedagogy. But particularly when we combine this with data indicating that our students of color and first-generation students are also struggling

disproportionately, it truly indicates that we must do better despite our efforts toward inclusive writing education. In "Elite Colleges Constantly Tell Low-Income Students That They Do Not Belong," Clint Smith notes that those who are "doubly disadvantaged" (those who are from both low-income backgrounds and did not have the opportunity for elite schooling) are even less likely to succeed. Because of their educational backgrounds and the likelihood that their parents did not attend college, they are missing the "socioeducational tools necessary to understand the nuances of how these elite colleges operate" (Smith). Some of these tools are easy enough to assist students with—explaining the purpose and importance of office hours, for example, can be done in ways that don't shame students who might not know. Requiring all instructors to have students attend their first individual writing conference in an instructor's office introduces them to the space. But overall, low-income and first-generation students often have been taught that asking for help is a sign of weakness, not strength, and that individual attention is not something they desire (Pascoe 7). We must find ways to make tools available to students, then, that do not shame them but provide them with the resources that they need. These tools must be ones that students of color feel comfortable utilizing, as well. We must also make sure that, as instructors and administrators, we are not expecting students in these marginalized populations to seek out this assistance on their own; instead, we must encourage fellow faculty members and contingent faculty to follow best practices in encouraging students to pursue avenues for assistance available to them.[12]

Because our data indicates to us that students are not taking full advantage of resources such as the Writing Collaboratory, it is also important for us to imagine ways that we might invite them into the space so that they become more comfortable with its purpose and staff. For instance, our plans for next year include encouraging all instructors to increase the number of low-stakes Collaboratory group instructional visits by first-year classes in order to increase student comfort within the space. This way, students can acquaint themselves with the facilities and with the tutors in a larger group setting, with the goal of prompting them to return to the Collaboratory (either individually or with a friend) for peer tutoring.

Likewise, where McClain and Perry advocate for summer/bridge programs, we have begun to strengthen our relationship with EOP and the summer programs by involving the Writing Collaboratory, and hope to continue to do so in the near future. Current students involved in the campus's summer/bridge programs had the opportunity to work with Collaboratory tutors in group settings last summer. Peer tutors who were EOP students themselves were chosen as representatives of the Collaboratory for

the summer as a way of making the writing center space more welcoming and community-focused for the new EOP students. While individual tutoring sessions were offered, peer tutors worked with students in small groups in order to continue emphasizing the communal nature of writing and to allow students to have the support of a friend during tutorial. Making peer tutoring part of Project Able and the summer EOP program means that students, as is our goal with the low stakes Writing Collaboratory visits described above, will begin the fall semester with an already established relationship with an available resource. Additionally, Erin began recruiting potential peer tutors from the EOP summer program as a way of ensuring that the writing center staff would include EOP representatives in the future. Beginning this fall, Erin will also be asking student leaders (representatives from the SGA, sorority and fraternity executive board members, leadership from the campus BSU and Latinx organizations, etc.) for recommendations as a way of diversifying the largely white referrals that come from white faculty members.

Our work here also indicates that we clearly need to delve more deeply to find out what our most at-risk populations might need from us (rather than making assumptions). We must reach out to students—particularly those who identify both as minority and as first-generation—to better understand their needs and how we might assist them. Because this data was not gathered before our initial interviews, this would include additional small focus groups and individual interviews and/or surveys in order to better ascertain students' perceptions of both their overall campus experience and more focused interrogation of their writing classroom experience.

There are areas where the work of the Retention Squad may already be making a difference. Dane Pascoe's recent dissertation points to a significant effect on students when they feel that they have close relationships with "mentor-figures" on campus—including faculty and staff. While, in particular, "doubly disadvantaged students" are "far more resistant to engaging authority figures in college and tended to avoid them" (29), setting up opportunities for students to interact with faculty in non-classroom settings, or even setting up mentoring programs with successful upperclassmen can provide vital assistance in success and retention. For example, in response to student complaints that Black and African American students on our campus did not feel supported and felt a lack of community on campus, in fall 2019 Centenary began "Crown to Crown," a peer-support/mentoring program for Black/African American students. While the (white, cis-gendered female) Assistant Dean of Students was the appointed staff member for the group, it was run by junior and senior students of color who managed all recruiting and programming and who were the

face of the organization. While the program is not meant to be academic in nature, it does provide a place for students to ask questions of the mentors in the group and begins to provide the psychological and behavioral climates that McClain and Perry recommend. So, while we are beginning to create stronger resources for students of color on campus overall, there is still far to go with assisting them in succeeding in the writing classroom and other academic areas.

We clearly must also do better in training our instructors (both full-time and adjunct). While sharing articles and resources with them is a good start, we must do more to offer opportunities for them to learn more about these issues. Last year, for example, Lisa shared the Barlow and Corbett article with all writing faculty, with the comment that we needed to find ways to more appropriately respond to student writing that weren't viewed as shaming. We also ran small group "lunch and learn" workshops for all faculty surrounding issues such as "responding to student papers" that allowed us space for critical race and class work. However, we have struggled with finding ways to assist both full-time and part-time faculty that are not burdensome to instructors who are already seriously undercompensated on our campus.

Overall, if we think about the fact that while only approximately 75% of the first-year class was retained, 88% of the writing students were successful, it seems, on the surface, as if we are doing a reasonably good job in our approach. However, the further investigation of our study reveals several spots of significant weakness. If students of color and economically disadvantaged students are not receiving the support they need to succeed in a PWI that is rapidly diversifying in terms of our student body's racial and economic make up, can we say that we are being successful? The answer, as we continue to commit ourselves to antiracist pedagogy and administrative practices, is no. In acknowledging this difficult reality, we align ourselves with the CWPA's recent statement and "examine how our WPA practices support or challenge entrenched racial biases," recognizing our participation in systems that have worked to actively oppress students of color at our institution.[13] We clearly have a long way to go in utilizing the best methods possible to assist the greatest number of students, and we clearly need to continue to do our part to improve campus culture as well. It is our hope that by producing these results in a published format we can contribute to the growing body of data-driven research helping WPAs formulate arguments for antiracist initiatives and curricula, particularly at PWI institutions, and even more specifically at SLACs. At our smaller institutions, we are at an advantage in our ability to create change on a different scale than at larger institutions. We must do better with our teaching for

first-generation and minority students if we are committed to socially just teaching and success for all of our students, not just a select group.

Notes

1. We would like to thank reviewers Pegeen Recheirt Powell and Will Duffy for thoughtful and insightful comments on our draft.

2. While we were not pleased that two of our faculty did not have degrees in Rhetoric/Composition, this situation has been compounded by layoffs in December 2019, when the person with the EdD was let go. While we had four full-time faculty throughout the duration of this study, we now have three.

3. The faculty lay-offs in December 2019 also included the layoff of our only openly queer faculty member. In addition, in response to the layoffs, our only Asian-American faculty left for another position, leaving only one full-time faculty member of color on campus (who primarily teaches graduate students).

4. IRB #CENT-IRB-20-1001

5. While we initially sought to extend our data collection and observations through Spring 2020, the fact that COVID-19 forced our spring courses to go online, potentially skewing our data, led us to end the data collection at Spring 2019.

6. As we write this, a new reorganization taskforce is making decisions for new department structures, which means the writing program and Writing Collaboratory will, once again, be rehomed in the upcoming academic year.

7. See also Vershawn Ashanti-Young, "Introduction: The Burden of Racial Performance" in *Not Your Average Nigga: Performing Race, Literacy, and Masculinity*.

8. First-generation was derived by default—if a student indicated on their FAFSA that a parent had gone to college (even if they had not completed), they were by default not considered first generation. Likewise, if they indicated that no parent had gone to college, they were marked "first generation." Students who left the question on the FAFSA blank were marked "unknown."

9. We did not count these by actual students since a student may have received one of these grades in more than one course (or in the same course but in multiple semesters). Some students who either received a D-range grade or an F may therefore have been counted more than once.

10. Unfortunately, data for individuals identifying as "gender non-binary" or other gender identifications was not gathered by our institutional research office.

11. Students are not required to inform instructors of a disability. However, in tracking these students, all but three students registered with DSO during our study had notified their instructors of their accommodations.

12. Compare to Perryman-Clark, "Who We Are(n't) Assessing: Racializing Language and Writing Assessment in Writing Program Administration."

13. Compare to CWPA, "Mark Blaauw-Hara, President of CWPA, on Racial Justice and Writing Programs."

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Appendix: Interview Questions from the Initial Interview

1. What were the major factors that you felt interfered with your success in this course?
2. Did you, at any point in the course, ask the instructor for extra help or attend office hours?
3. Did you, at any point in the course, use the Academic Success Center or the Writing Collaboratory?
4. What impact did the instructor have on your success in the course?
5. What impact did your understanding of college writing and how this course "worked" have on your success in the course? Did you feel that you were asked to work on your own too much?
6. What impact did outside factors have on your success in this course? (Jobs, adjusting to college, stress from other classes, difficulty managing workload, etc.?)