The new U.S. national standards movement has pushed us at “warp speed” from Common Core curriculum standards to updated assessments for college readiness, but we have not fully examined what it means to be college ready. Why is it that roughly half of all high school students need remedial classes before being considered ready for college-level work? Current public policies aim to eliminate the need for remedial college classes by ratcheting up instruction and expectations at the K-12 level, but if we do not find out what these students are missing, how can we expect to be successful?

For higher education scholars and practitioners and those generally interested in the future of college, this book helps tell a novel story about the transition to college, from the perspective of an experienced college professor. The first-year experience is conceptualized as a two-way relationship between students and colleges, involving introductions, resistance or acceptance, collaboration and exchange of ideas, and learning. There are both success stories and stories that end in a parting of ways. These stories show what college readiness really means and offer valuable insights about the academic, social, monetary and other forces that can overwhelm the typical college-bound student. Higher education scholars and professionals will benefit from these rich and detailed accounts as they help shape the landscape of 21st century college readiness.
Readiness Realities
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Struggles and Successes During the Transition to College

Pamela W. Hollander

Worcester State University, USA

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

For twenty years, I have been teaching students who were identified by their respective universities as not quite college-ready. Usually, college administrators make that determination based on a math or reading test or due to a low SAT score. However they decide, the result is often hundreds of admitted and matriculated students who just are not ready. I think of the college experience as a relationship between the student and the college. For students deemed unready at the outset, the relationship is off to a rocky start. To get a meaningful sense of why this relationship might be strained, one must consider the broad set of emotional and social qualities that inform college readiness—beyond a narrow set of purely academic skills. Early in my career teaching remedial reading and writing, I met Andre. His story helps show that college readiness, in which academic ability does play a critical role, goes beyond academia to include issues of identity and other sociopolitical matters. These issues broaden the conversation surrounding college readiness, from the standard “How prepared am I?” to the equally important “How comfortable do I feel at this college?”

It was the first day of the 1995 school year and I asked my first-year developmental writing students to share something they felt good about with the class. Andre, who identifies as African-American, told us that he was a motivational speaker for Christian youth. I imagined Andre, in clerical robes, standing in front of a huge crowd of youths who were hanging on his words about hope—and I was excited to have him in our class. I anticipated that Andre’s experiences crafting persuasive speeches would help him contribute meaningfully to discussions and play an enriching role in what was shaping up to be a very interesting group of people. For the first time, I was teaching with a curriculum that I felt was truly empowering. We read texts like June Jordan’s “Nothing Mean More to Me Than You and the Life of Willie Jordan,” where Jordan explores the importance and power of Black English. The whole course would be undergirded by White & Epson’s postmodern ideas about how reality is socially constructed and therefore, together, people can create change.

The discussion part of the class started off well, but once Andre faced critical feedback of his writing, my hopes for his role in the class came
crashing down. When he got his first assignment back with content and grammatical issues pointed out, he stared at me in disbelief. As far as the grammatical issues went, I explained that I was just trying to help him learn to write using Standard English—the accepted language of American colleges. After that, he missed classes, was resistant and withdrawn, and did not contribute to class discussions in the way that I had hoped he would. We were reading the texts I anticipated would be thought-provoking and inspiring, but Andre was facing his own “private storm” with these issues and had no interest in discussing them. The more I tried to help by offering extra tutoring, the more Andre withdrew. Finally, I gave up—and only then, weeks later, did he come back and ask for help. At the end of the semester, I gave him a C in the class and he dropped right out of college after that.

As a relatively new composition instructor, I was devastated by my realization that the empowering curriculum in which I had placed so much hope had done nothing to help Andre. Sure, Andre had academic problems with which I was trying to help him, but there were other problems as well. I realized after reflecting on this story that Andre had a positive identity as a “Motivational Speaker” and had experienced success doing that work, but that success was neither recognized nor reproduced by his college experience. Furthermore, after hearing me talk about the differences between African-American English Dialect and Standard English as reflected in his own writing, Andre seemed to feel that his identity as an African-American was being attacked, and that it was somehow incompatible with the academic language endorsed by the college. This was the opposite of my intention; by teaching Jordan’s piece, in which she recalls teaching a class about the unique qualities of African-American English, I was hoping to elevate African-American English, not denigrate it.

Andre had a holistically bad first semester in my class—and, presumably, since he chose to leave school, in his other classes. His first-semester experience is suggestive of the constellation of academic and identity-related issues that come up in a student’s transition to college. There may have been other factors in Andre’s story that impacted his decision to drop out. In Andre’s case, I lacked the information necessary to draw any concrete conclusions, but I have learned from many other students over the years that financial and family issues can greatly impinge upon their ability to be successful in college, and it is often the combination of academic and financial or family issues that coalesce and cause a student to drop out.

Many of the students in my developmental classes, as well as many of the other first-year students I have seen over the years, have been struggling
financially and/or were the first generation in their families to attend college. Additionally, for many of the students in my class English is not their first language or, like Andre, they are more comfortable with African-American English than Standard English. Certainly, such students face a myriad of challenges, which I try to capture through the examples discussed throughout this book.

At this time of national debate about the terrain between twelve years of schooling and college, the passage continues to be a precarious one for many. Many, like Andre, just don’t make it—at least the first time they try. Reformers wonder why this passage is so precarious and difficult and why students are often unprepared to easily make it to the other side. They postulate that reforming K-12 education through the implementation of new standards and new assessments will make it so that students will no longer need significant help making this transition. Most states, and the U.S. Department of Education, have adopted a definition of “college-ready,” which stresses that the student who is college-ready is prepared to succeed in college credit-bearing classes without taking any remedial classes (Conforti, 2013), even though statistics show that half of all undergraduates will take one or more remedial courses when they begin college (Scott-Clayton et al., 2014). These reformers hope that the ratcheted-up English and Math National Common Core Standards will enhance students’ abilities. While they put steps in place to test this idea, those of us who work with students who are attempting this crossing wonder how struggling students will meet these new demands of K-12 schooling, never mind how they are going to succeed in college.

New assessments supposedly intended to match new national standards, PARCC and Smarter Balanced, measure only one aspect of college and career readiness: a very narrow band of academic skills. According to Conley, for four decades researcher-scholars and educators have maintained a much broader definition of college readiness, which has been pushed aside within the public discourse in the race to assess. What has attracted the most public attention within discussion of the Common Core and the issue of college readiness are the highly specific academic changes brought on by the Common Core, such as new emphasis on “close reading” and calls for teaching more complex texts in earlier grades than before. The aforementioned, broader definition, which has been informed by years of research, includes not only academic skills, but dispositions, habits of mind, ways of being, and stances toward one’s own learning, such as curiosity, perseverance, short range planning, long range planning, self-monitoring, self-esteem,
et cetera (Conley, 2013; Sommerfeld, 2011). Other environmental factors which affect one’s ability to be college-ready are also left out of the public discussion of college readiness, including financial hardships and poverty, family issues, learning disabilities, mental health issues, language issues, lack of mentoring, et cetera. And finally, the college environment itself has been largely left out of the conversation. How accepting and comfortable is the college environment for the wide range of students who hope to spend productive time there? Recent campus demonstrations by African-American and other non-white students have answered this question with stories about campus environments that are unwelcoming and stressful for many students (see Figure 1.1).

As an educator who has worked for twenty years alongside students who are moving from K-12 to college, I can say that it is a difficult passage for many reasons. While college can be a time of an explosion of ideas and novel ways of thinking, it also can be a time of great stress. Students may find that their identities are unwelcome in the college environment. They find themselves without the prior knowledge to grapple with the ideas
presented to them in classes. They sometimes seem to be at a loss as to what is happening around them.

The national statistics for students completing college are bleak: only “about half” of college students will finish a degree within 6 years (Scott-Clayton et al., 2014). I’m so thrilled when I see any of my Developmental Reading students in the halls during the semesters after they take my class. *Still here,* I think to myself—that’s great, and, as I’ll share later in the book, these students have some great stories of how they have persevered and evolved. Still, my many inquiries to these successful ones about other students in the class often come up empty.

“Rosie left because she couldn’t keep up with the work. Than left to join the army after not doing well in school. Leticia had family issues and had to leave.” These are the kinds of reports I often get. Although I keep tweaking and revising my teaching to try to help students, there are always those students who cannot make use of the support that is offered to them: often, it is not enough. As a teacher of reading and writing, I have been delving deeper and deeper into the problems students have with academic work. The academic problems are not usually a quick fix. There are fundamental misconceptions and gaps about what it means to do academic work and why we do it. There is a need to slow down and spend more time clarifying the meaning of important words and concepts.

In addition to academic problems, however, there exists an array of other issues like finances, family responsibilities, and work responsibilities. Further, students do not always feel welcome or comfortable at the college for a variety of reasons. My successes and my failures working with students as they attempt their first year of college have made me want to write this book and tell their stories and my stories about trying to help them. I want to shed light on the notion that “college readiness” is a two-way street between students and colleges. National conversations about college readiness up until now have not discussed these two together. The college experience is, in essence, a relationship between a student and a college, which is part of the reason why I organize my book around the metaphor of “love”—to allude to a mutual relationship. The other reason I use the metaphor of love is because I believe that respect, positive feelings, and gratitude on both sides of the college equation are essential for this relationship to work.

It will be useful for me to share a little about my own background before diving much further into the heart of this story. It is in many ways second nature to me to be involved with students who exist on the margins. I grew up with two parents whose jobs involved working with just such students.
My mother taught in a program for migrant workers’ children (see Figure 1.2). They were only in New Jersey at certain times of the year, around growing seasons. They barely had time to get adjusted to school before having to leave to go somewhere else. One snowy day, my Mom picked up two of her students, brothers, to go sledding with us. We didn’t get snow that often, so it was kind of a big deal. Her students were two African-American boys a little younger than I was. They rode our sleds with us all afternoon. After teaching in this program for a while, my mom began teaching special education students. There was a student, Tina, who would call our house periodically over the course of about ten years to talk with my mother. Sometimes I would try to make conversation with her if my mother wasn’t home. My father was a school social worker in the inner-city of Trenton. As much as my mother blurred her boundaries and let her students into our lives, my father tried to have his time away from school really count as “away” time; he didn’t talk much at home about the families and students he helped at work.

My early experiences as a student were largely positive; from a very young age, I was excited about reading and writing. I was an early reader and enjoyed books. But television was like a third parent, in the way that Douglas
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Coupland wrote about in his book *Generation X*. When I was in a quandary, I would ask myself: *What would Jan Brady do in this situation?*

My hometown resembled the set of the movie *Dazed and Confused*—lots of drugs and rock n’ roll and only 50% of the kids in my high school went to college after graduation. My neighborhood of tract ranch housing was once referred to in the newspapers as a “lower-middle class” or “working class” neighborhood, but my perception of it was that it was a mixture of middle and lower-middle class families. During this time I experienced the kind of segregation that still exists in many suburban neighborhoods. There were very few non-white families in the neighborhood and school district. Those few were either migrant workers or other disenfranchised families, and a handful of African-American families who were solidly middle class and successful.

There were many children and teens who wandered around without parent supervision while their parents were working, and unfortunately many teens who got involved in criminal behavior during their unsupervised time, like theft and drug use. Several of these teens met tragic endings of jail or death. I was friends with many kids who were resistant students, people who just hated school and were called burnouts, but with parents so invested in teaching and learning, I was connected to learning in a way some of my peers were not. I continued to enjoy school mainly because of the connections I could make through reading and writing stories and essays. I graduated in the top 10% of my class and went off to college and graduate school, eventually landing a job as a teacher at my own high school. Ultimately, though, I found that teaching high school was not a comfortable match for my artistic, open, and rebellious nature, and decided to leave the high school setting.

After I quit teaching high school, I supported myself by doing secretarial work while I began writing feature articles for a local newspaper. Having a Master’s in English Education and gaining experience as a writer, I felt like I had something to share and wanted to try teaching again, so I accepted a job as an adjunct at a local community college. My students were mostly returning students who hadn’t seen a school desk in 10 or 20 years. We sat in the cafeteria after class naming all of the nouns in their houses and verbs they experienced all day. Alternative circumstances called for alternative methods.

After teaching several semesters at two community colleges, I decided I wanted to go back to school for my doctorate and teach college full-time. While getting my doctorate, I taught developmental and first-year writing for five years, and then continued to teach developmental reading and writing classes for the next 15 years in the Northeast at a medium-sized public state school, two smaller private schools, and another medium sized public state school.
During my time teaching high school, I met another new teacher, Charles, who had been valedictorian of his Trenton High School class and had attended college at Brown. The capital city of Trenton, New Jersey is a city of about 84,000 people that is 52% African American. The city has experienced ongoing struggles with poverty and crime. After Charles got to know me, he asked me to come to Trenton on a warm night to see what it was like. Despite the fact that Trenton was just 20 minutes from where I lived and my father went there to work in the schools every day, I had never really been there. We drove to Trenton together and I saw Charles’s family’s neighborhood, where there were people hanging out on the street socializing, and then I went to his house and met his mother and sister (see Figure 1.3). Charles wanted to demystify Trenton for me, but I don’t think it quite worked. I saw an African-American neighborhood from a car—from a distance, just as I had seen African-American neighborhoods in Brooklyn as we drove to visit my grandparents who lived there.

Figure 1.3. Typical run-down residential neighborhood in Trenton, New Jersey.
(Source: Wikimedia Commons; author: Famartin, CC-BY-2.0 License)
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I tell this story about driving around in Trenton because it underscores the limitations of my own ability to understand the experiences of many of students who are African American and Latino and who have grown up in such cities as Trenton, New Jersey or Holyoke, Massachusetts. (Many of the students I taught in the college bridge program Upward Bound, which I taught in for three summers, came from Holyoke.) And because I grew up identified as white, I lack the firsthand experience of living as a non-white person in any neighborhood, suburban, rural, or urban. In the same vein, because I grew up with two parents who had middle class professions in a single-family home, I am unable to see the world in the way that my students who have severe financial and familial hardships do. My background growing up among many resistant students provided me with some insight into the obstacles to the education process, but my culturally privileged position and lack of overlapping experiences with my students was and is limiting for me. Over the past 20 years, I have listened to my students’ stories about their experiences, and I have tried to help and advocate for them, but I recognize my limitations based on my own subject position. The story of Andre from the beginning of the book speaks to those limitations. Perhaps if Andre had connected with someone at the college who had a background more similar to his, that person might have known how to help Andre feel more empowered.

Although my experiences may be different from those of my students, I have sought to build common ground with them through the inclusion of popular culture in my curricula. I have always followed popular culture as a kind of hobby, and if I can stay current with changing music, television, movies, et cetera, I find that it helps me connect to my students. Students tend to get excited about popular culture and the analysis of popular culture lends itself to the kind of scholarly work students need to do in college. I believe what bell hooks says: “Whether we’re talking about race or gender or class, popular culture is where the pedagogy is, it’s where the learning is… [pop culture is] the major pedagogical medium for masses numbers of people globally who want to in some way understand the politics of difference” (MEF Films interview, undated).

For several years, I taught a first-year seminar focused on hip-hop culture. I was inspired to teach the class because one day I was watching a cable TV station and a young man rapping said, “This is my composition and here is my thesis.” I felt he had captured what I had felt, which was that hip-hop and popular culture could be combined with formal academic scholarship in several ways. Hip-hop and other forms of popular culture use the vocabulary
of academics. Academic language and methods are great for making sense of and critiquing pop culture, and ideas from popular culture are useful for academic discussions. I have continued to teach developmental writing and reading, first-year composition, and literacy education classes for over two decades in environments ranging from larger state universities to small private schools. In these pages I will share the stories, the observations, and the insights I have compiled to shed light on this challenging transition period for young men and women.

There have been ongoing dialogues in educational literature about the transition to college, which I have followed over the years. Many teacher-researchers (Herrington & Curtis, 2000; Goldblatt, 2007; Chiseri-Strater, 1991) have highlighted the importance of students’ affective and intellectual connections and commitment to college work. The role of human mentors, mentor-texts, and supportive institutional practices in helping to nurture this relationship to learning has also been well documented (Herrington & Curtis, 2000; Goldblatt, 2007; Backhus, 1989). Many students have early intellectual experiences through their interactions with popular culture through song lyrics, movies, and fashion trends, which lay the groundwork for critical work in college, and therefore many first-year programs have designed their first-year seminars with this notion in mind. Ginia Bellafante’s December 2014 *New York Times* article masterfully profiled a community college classroom in Queens where these very practices were in place and celebrated. Threshold Theory also has a lot to offer in conceptualizing this period in its description of “transformative texts,” which Gogan has persuasively argued may alter students’ thinking in significant ways. Studies of college students have found that, for many college students, the supports listed above are pivotal. Still, some students are not able to take advantage of all of these efforts and opportunities, and these students keep me, along with other educators, thinking, wondering, and testing out new ideas about ways to help them.

At the time of this writing, many U.S. states have put their eggs in the basket of new national standards. The “lack of college readiness” of many students has been one of the chief concerns that has led us to this stage. There is hope that doing more “close reading,” problem-based math, and multi-text assignments will help better prepare the future Rosies, Thans, and Leticias for college. I like the idea of close reading and problem-based learning—we should be doing those things—but after all of my own teaching in high school, community college, college-bridge programs, first-year and developmental college classes, as well as observing and supervising in
elementary and secondary classes, I feel that there is something missing from this plan. Students enter my classroom with gaps in their knowledge and skills, but they also come with gaps in their affective relationship to learning: they often don’t know how to care about learning. They have to be persuaded and cajoled into caring about their studies. What can be done about that? What reform could we pursue that would help with that? Like so many of those who have come before me in humanities and social science research, I find myself appraising successful students to determine what habits of mind and approaches to college enable their success. I then contrast them with the students who show resistance to the learning process and struggle to make the transition to college. In this collection, through my memoirs and research, I share with you my experiences and thoughts about the students I have taught over my career as a college transition educator.

As I discussed earlier, I frame the experience of first-year college students using the metaphor of love because I see college as a complex two-way relationship. College is not an entity that offers unconditional love. College loves selectively. At the same time, students’ perception of their experience of college is important as well. I see many students come to college with only vague notions of what college is. They don’t know what to expect and are often surprised by what they find.

I want to share what I have learned from both students who have struggled and students who have made it. From these stories emerge teaching practices and institutional practices that have worked well to help struggling students. Also out of these observations come examples of students’ own actions that have served them well or buoyed them when they were faltering. From all of this I hope to present an optimistic picture of how clarifying the definition of college readiness and using that new definition to seek answers will be beneficial.

The student examples that I share are meant to be illustrative, but are not meant to mimic organized case study research. I have conducted scholarly qualitative research on this topic, but this book is something different. I feel that sharing these examples and my experience in a memoir format supported by ideas from scholarly research and popular media sources is the best way to tell the story I am trying to tell right now, which is the story of the disconnect between notions of college readiness as a thin slice of academic skills and the reality of what really enables students to succeed in college. The version of college readiness that I have conceptualized is the interplay between what college students bring with them and what colleges have to offer students.
Here is a more specific outline of what you will find ahead in the rest of this book. The next chapter explores which identities college welcomes and which ones it does not. Students find that certain aspects of themselves do not open doors in college. Chapter 3 describes what implicit academic prerequisites are required for success in college. Chapter 4 examines the plans of high-achieving college students versus struggling students to see which approaches to college life garner better results.

The second section of the book focuses on the relationship more from the college student’s point of view, with particular consideration of the nature of the student’s experience. Chapter 5 examines the way in which students can find “comfort zones” of particular classes within the perceived hostile territory of college. They can draw strength from these “comfort zones” to help them succeed in college. Chapter 6 looks at ways students use connections between ideas in different classes to create a more positive college experience. Chapter 7 shows the positive results some students get when they find clubs and activities at their college that reflect their own interests and get deeply involved in these groups. In the last section of the book I draw on the material from the earlier chapters to make suggestions about what I believe we need to add to our discussions about how to get our students to a stage of college readiness.

I hope that this book will open up the discussion of college readiness to include some things that educational reformers might have overlooked. I think we need to widen the definition of college readiness to include much more than the traditional definition of solely academic skills to include students’ approaches and dispositions with regard to college-level work. When we talk about helping students to dig into texts through close reading, we also need to ask what is standing in their way. By doing this we can move forward, but we can also make sure the path is clear for more students. In addition to preparing students for the increased complexity of college level texts and assignments, we can work backwards to figure out how to minimize the disconnect students feel with their work. Some of our students tell us that there is more to the picture than we see. Let’s try to learn what we can from students who are able to engage in college-level work—as well as those who, at this time, cannot. Let’s implement the kind of teaching and institutional practices that will really make a difference in getting students ready for college.

NOTE

1 This statistic includes both two- and four-year institutions.
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REFERENCES


