Developing Writers in Higher Education

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The transition from high school to college is a critical period for undergraduates. For students, this transition is both exciting and scary, as it represents an accomplishment, but also the movement from one educational context to an entirely new one, where expectations and norms are often unclear. For the general public (and many educators), discussions often center around the degree to which students’ transitions are “smooth,” “easy,” or “successful.” Though describing students’ transitions in these ways is tempting, we must reject these overly simplistic portrayals. The complex range of students’ experiences before they come to college have the power and the potential to shape their experiences once they arrive, and in this way, to influence their development as undergraduate writers (Swofford). In this chapter, I argue that using both broad demographic data and rich individual qualitative studies offers a fuller perspective on the writing experiences, resources, and development that students bring into college. We must consider this prior background to fully conceptualize writing development at the undergraduate level. As an example of such a method, I use geo-demographic data and individual case studies of two undergraduates at the University of Michigan (UM), Natalie and Marie.

To make sense of these students’ college experiences and undergraduate writing development more broadly, it is crucial to look not just at the students’ projects and grades. We must also examine where they have come from, how they position themselves, and how they have been positioned with regard to their communities and their academic lives. At UM, there is a sense that entering classes of
first-year students are generally fairly homogeneous. “Typical” students enrolling as first-years at UM come from affluent backgrounds, and most matriculate at well-resourced high schools. Both Natalie and Marie, in contrast, graduated from high schools considered “good schools,” but had less access to resources than many of their UM peers. Understanding the “typical student” who enrolls at a given institution is important, as this knowledge offers context for the kinds of instruction students have typically encountered before they arrive in first-year writing. It is tempting, though, for instructors and writing programs to focus on the “typical student,” without recognizing the variations that may occur even among relatively homogenous populations. When researchers and instructors gloss student populations to provide a profile of a “typical” student, we often actually describe aspects of social class, which encode norms of shared writing and academic know-how and discourses. In creating these profiles, we mark the ways that students already understand what is valued in academic writing classrooms. These profiles can be useful, particularly as writing programs understand the “wide view” of the student population or help new instructors know something of their classes before the semester begins.

They can also be dangerously seductive in that they offer a way to statistically erase populations of students whose experiences do not match the profiles we create. Students’ actual experiences reveal complexities in the transition that we often would prefer to overlook or simplify. For example, Natalie and Marie are similar to the “typical” profile of a UM student in that they come from communities that highly value education and provide a high school curriculum that, at minimum, explicitly states it is designed to “prepare” students for college. However, their experiences also reveal important distinctions, which suggest that examining student writing development should reach back to the communities and schools students engage with before coming to college.

At some institutions, the profile of the “typical” student is based on campus legend. At others, it’s based on institutional data. At UM, it seems to be a combination of these two factors. In 2008, UM purchased access to data called Descriptor Plus, which is a College Board product intended for use in admissions. Descriptor Plus offers two primary data sets—Neighborhood Clusters and High School Clusters. Neighborhood Clusters (NC), the data used in this study, are profiles of communities across the country based on geodemographic data. UM purchased access to this data as a means of combating the growing homogeneity of entering first-year classes after the state passed Proposal 2, which banned affirmative action. When the university started using the data, it found that more than 75 percent of stu-
students came from the five highest-income NCs (G. Nelson). NC data offer a detailed snapshot of the students’ communities before they come to college, providing an interesting perspective on the types of high schools students come from and how their home communities might shape their expectations of college. NC data can also help researchers and instructors understand the kinds of guidance students have probably received about going to college, the kinds of secondary institutions they most often enrolled in (which could, potentially, reveal something about how they are prepared for postsecondary education), and the kinds of financial aid that students from their neighborhoods most often seek.

While this information is undoubtedly important, it cannot possibly capture the complexity of individual students’ experiences and backgrounds. NC data, as demonstrated below, are necessarily broad and lack nuanced details. The data offer information about neighborhoods and communities, but cannot suggest how individual students’ experiences line up with those profiles. For an institution like UM, these kinds of community profiles can be particularly interesting because there are fewer local connections between the institution and the places students come from, given that most students do not come from the area surrounding the university. At smaller, regional institutions, collecting information similar to that found in the NC can be useful to inform research on student populations, because more nuanced (but still broadly sweeping) profiles of the student population can reveal the smaller percentages of students whose experiences may not be the “norm” at a given institution. This information can also inform the broad generalizations that writing programs and individual instructors often make about their students, and the ways that we characterize “typical” students at a given institution.

Understanding where students come from, even in the broadest strokes, should also inform the theories of writing development that we build. NC data offer us a way to see patterns in our students’ precollege communities, but it must acknowledge the complexity of individual student experiences, a complexity we can only layer onto NC data by asking students to explain their development both before and during college. In this way, we can see the various communities that shape students’ understandings of writing before they transition into first-year writing. Before students arrive at college, the adults around them offer opportunities for literate practice and often shape the exposure to the various literacies these students encounter. The adults and communities around students sponsor these literacies (Brandt), which in turn shape the kinds of writing and discourses students expect to see and create when they enter college. As Shirley Brice Heath argues in her seminal work *Ways with Words*, different communities develop shared norms
for language and literacy practices, and these literate practices shape students’ understandings about how they will communicate (both verbally and in writing) in postsecondary academic writing contexts.

Bringing together the NC data and case studies of illustrative students demonstrates how both researchers and writing instructors might use similar data to reveal students’ complex, individual backgrounds and to better inform our sense of the students we serve and how we can shape pedagogy and policy to support them. The important role of secondary education in students’ writing experiences has long been a focus of research conducted on the transition from high school to college. Much of this research has taken the form of calls for collaboration between high school and college instructors (Addison and McGee; Appleman and Green; Creech and Clouse; M. Nelson). These calls reflect the sense that student experiences in high school somehow influences their experiences in college, and the emphasis of this work is on how collaboration can better “prepare” students for college writing. While these calls for collaboration are both important and valuable, they have not been addressed in sustained, far-reaching ways. However, there seems to be a growing conversation about how students’ specific experiences in secondary contexts can shape their experiences with college (Hannah and Saidy).

First-year writing is an important site for facilitating transfer (Beaufort; Rounsaville, Goldberg, and Bawarshi), but reaching back across the border of first-year writing to secondary writing contexts is also necessary to truly understand development. Recent scholarship on transitions both hints at and calls for more attention to what comes before students enter our classrooms. This research points to the ways that students’ experiences are complex, arguing that “any social context proves affordances and constraints that impact use of prior knowledge, skills, strategies, and dispositions, and writing transfer successes and challenges cannot be understood outside of learners’ socio-cultural spaces” (Adler-Kassner et al. 8). Nevertheless, writing research has not fully examined how the “prior” shapes the “now” when it comes to student writing development.

Attention to individual students’ experiences and how those experiences shape student development can be logistically difficult, particularly when we try to gather a more complete range of student experiences. So, on the one hand, we have literature with calls for collaboration, which have gone systematically unheeded (though answered both locally at various institutions and through initiatives such as the National Writing Project), and on the other hand, a burgeoning field of work that dives deep into small groups and/or individual students’ responses to transition, allowing theories of identity to inform our understandings of student learning and development (Wardle and Clement 161).
A method that surveys a broad population of students, identifies interesting subgroups, posits how their prior knowledge might shape their development, and then asks them about their experience could help develop a better theory of the wide range of precollege experiences and the complexities of students’ writing lives. We need to reach not only ahead of students’ collegiate experiences, as Anne Gere suggests (chapter 10), but behind them, beginning with a fuller understanding of high school and then, the context surrounding their precollege development, and someday, even further back. Therefore, the demographic data represented in this study offers a method for guiding inquiry into student experiences, pointing writing researchers to which populations of students may have experiences that can offer insight into the trajectories they explore. The experiences students have before college with writing can heavily influence the kinds of resources they engage with at the undergraduate level and how they navigate the differences between what they bring with them and the development they experience in college, and, therefore, our very assumptions about how to characterize successful growth and student writing development.

The connections between the “big data” information in the Descriptor Plus data set and individual case studies complicate the current research on writing development and the transition to college. The College Board NC information offers a very broad, sweeping understanding of the kinds of resources students have access to in their communities. It gives a more detailed profile than the monolithic understandings of the “typical student” that proliferate on many campuses. However, this data does not allow us to see the effects of how students’ communities shape their writing development, nor does it offer perspective on the complexity of students’ individual experiences. So, in addition to the NC data and the neighborhood profiles it offers, it is essential to examine the experiences of individual students, so that we add rich detail to these broad profiles and see to what extent they describe students at a given institution. In this chapter, I argue that students’ precollege writing experiences are shaped by the resources available in their neighborhoods and neighborhood schools, how students’ relationships with “expert” adults in their home communities influence their attitudes and expectations of writing in college, and how their familiarity with the tasks and discourses in academic writing allow and constrain students’ sense of their own expertise and capacity for growth as writers.

Neighborhood Clusters

NC data, as pictured below, offer a map of the various communities that represent the College Board’s description. Some of these NCs are more dense in one or two
regions, while others are more broadly distributed across the nation. The majority of the students in this study are from neighborhoods described as “affluent.” As an example of the kinds of information that NC data can provide, figure 9.1 represents NC 78, one of the common clusters for students in this study. The image in figure 9.1 contains a description of this cluster:

This neighborhood is at the top of the economic heap with top salaries and home values. There is little diversity among the highly educated, professional residents, and both students and parents value education. Some students choose private and religious schools but all attend schools with good academic programs. They take advantage of AP and honors coursework and perform near the top on admissions tests. They submit a prolific number of applications to a variety of colleges, often private, across the country. Although some will apply, financial aid is not a priority.

The information portrayed in figure 9.1 offers several key insights, including the average educational attainment in the neighborhood, home values, and rates of homeownership (which in some states can offer a sense of how well-resourced the local public schools may be). This information can describe communities and local schools, and how those places have contributed to the writing experiences that students have before they arrive in college.

The NC information in figure 9.1 suggests that a student coming into first-year writing from this NC is likely to have encountered many community members who have gone to college and who offer institutional knowledge and support. It is also likely that schools in communities as well-resourced as this one have more experienced teachers, who are given more resources and who have had more time to develop pedagogies that support writing development. As Sarah McCarthy describes, teachers in low-income schools face overwhelming pressure to raise test scores, and many experienced teachers choose to work in higher-income schools where there is more “insulation” from these pressures (47).

While we certainly cannot make assumptions about what individuals experience in any given NC, we can see that a high school in NC 78 would “prepare” students for the writing experiences they were likely to encounter at UM, in the sense that the adults around them had experienced similar writing tasks and situations. The students who enroll at UM from Cluster 78 communities would probably have been surrounded by many adults with college and postgraduate degrees, and, therefore, a large number of adults with extensive experience in academic discourses. Students in these communities have probably had more experience with
reaching back to move beyond the “typical” student profile

these academic discourses, because the adults around them have personal experience with the value of academic writing.

To examine how NC data might offer new insights into the development of students in this study, I divided up the thirty clusters defined by the College Board into five “Megaclusters” based on the College Board’s description of income in each cluster description: lower income, lower-middle income, middle income, upper-middle income, and upper income. As evidenced by table 9.1, the UM students in this study (N = 178) reflect the university’s fairly affluent population. Nearly 60 percent of the participants in this study came from neighborhoods within the highest income Megacluster, while fewer than 10 percent of the participants came from the lowest income Megacluster.

Guided by geodemographic data found in the NCs, I now explore the expe-
periences of two students in this study, Natalie and Marie, whose backgrounds do not match those of the “typical Michigan student” (and, for that matter, the most common background of students who participated in this study). For both of these students, experiences in high school shaped expectations of what writing in college would be like. These participants’ experiences demonstrate the complexity and diversity of individual writing development. While we certainly cannot say that socioeconomic status, social class, or the type of neighborhood a student comes from determines their growth or development as an undergraduate writer, this kind of information offers a helpful starting point for better understanding what students bring to college writing classes. Writing development, as Natalie’s and Marie’s experiences suggest, does not begin in first-year writing. College instructors should understand that “high school writing” is by no means a monolithic experience. What we can see in this data of Natalie and Marie’s development suggests that their precollege writing experiences played a key role in their collegiate writing development.

A Tale of Two Students

Natalie and Marie represent students who are at once typical and atypical. Natalie, a sports management major, was also a writing minor who used the minor curriculum to explore and develop her own identity as a writer. In her interviews, she expresses a sense of engagement and interest in writing, and frequently discusses not only the writing she completed in her courses, but the writing she does outside of academic contexts. As I will describe in more detail below, Natalie’s college writing development is marked by a sense of disorientation—her expectations of what would be valued in college writing were subverted early in her first semester of college. However, Natalie moved through these early disorienting experiences with a sense

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group #</th>
<th>Group Description</th>
<th>Total #</th>
<th># of Minors</th>
<th># of Nonminors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Low income</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Lower-middle income</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Middle income</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Upper-middle income</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Upper income</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Note: All the cluster data, including counts and how the clusters were grouped together can be found on our Fulcrum platform at https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.10079890
that being flexible would allow her to gain new writing skills and strategies, though her experiences in her first semester of writing at the college level would cause her to question the ways she felt she was prepared in high school for writing in college.

Marie, on the other hand, began her time at UM as an undeclared major in the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, but quickly changed majors and entered the College of Engineering, where she earned a BSE in chemical engineering. Marie feels a close connection to her discipline, regularly identifying herself as “an engineer” and describing her writerly identity in terms of herself as an engineer. She professes having an easier time with “technical writing,” pointing out that this is true for most engineers. Despite her relatively high level of confidence, though, Marie struggles to adapt her writing to new contexts and clings instead to the expertise in grammar that she developed as a high school student.

If a “successful transition” to college is defined as a student beginning college and continuing on to graduation, then both of these students are successful. Natalie graduated magna cum laude and Marie finished with a GPA just a hair under 3.5. These students certainly had success at UM, and in that respect they are not necessarily “atypical.” They describe working hard in their courses and being very engaged in their academic work. That attitude toward academic work is common in descriptions of “typical” Michigan students around campus.¹ Both Natalie and Marie detail going to high schools where they took advantage of honors and AP course offerings, and they describe these courses as helping them feel prepared for college writing. Natalie and Marie make interesting cases for considering how students’ precollege experiences influence their writing development, because they are students for whom those experiences were salient enough that they choose to mention them several times throughout their two interviews in the study. Neither the entry nor the exit interview protocol explicitly asked students to refer back to high school, and though Natalie and Marie are not the only students who chose to do so, they are especially interesting because their communities are not similar to those of the majority of the other students in this study.

Natalie and Marie’s experiences offer a window into how both the NC data and rich qualitative case studies might inform our understandings of the complexity of undergraduate writing development. Natalie’s community falls into Megacluster 1, and Marie’s into Megacluster 2, which means they are part of the just under 22 percent of students in this study from communities with incomes in the low to lower-middle range. Nearly 60 percent of the students in this study came from communities in Megacluster 5, the most affluent cluster. These populations are consistent with the demographics of the university as a whole (or, at least with the most recent data available at the time of this writing). To better understand how Natalie
and Marie's backgrounds shaped their writing development, I briefly describe their NC information before using that information to contextualize the perspectives that both women offer of their own experiences through their interviews.

Natalie’s experiences as a writer at UM are especially interesting, because how she navigated her transition from high school to college writing appears to be deeply connected to her background. As table 9.1 shows, just 10 percent of the students in this study come from a background similar to Natalie’s, but as her case study will demonstrate, their experiences suggest that this population of students merits keen attention. Specifically, Natalie comes from what the College Board calls “Cluster 79,” which is described in the Descriptor Plus document as follows:

This is a unique, urban, blue collar neighborhood of low income families with very high educational aspirations. It is modestly diverse with parents who generally have had at least some college. Students attend schools with solid curricula where they take advantage of the AP and honors offerings. They get good grades; have solidly above average test scores and extremely high aspirations. They look at a modest number of selective privates and public flagships across the country. Financial aid is sought by most and will play a big role in their attendance.

This cluster description sits in contrast to Cluster 78, pictured in figure 9.1. The majority of students in this study (and in the minor alongside Natalie) came to UM from neighborhoods like the one described in Cluster 78, neighborhoods where most families are affluent. Natalie’s neighborhood is very different. Though the cluster description suggests that students at high schools in neighborhoods like Natalie’s are encouraged to apply to selective universities and colleges, students in Natalie’s neighborhood are less likely to have the financial resources required for college than her peers at UM from more affluent neighborhoods. They are also surrounded by fewer adults with college degrees than students who come from the more affluent clusters.

Like Natalie, Marie comes from a neighborhood that the College Board characterizes as having fewer economic resources than that of the “typical Michigan student.” Marie’s neighborhood falls into the second Megacluster, described as “lower-middle income” in the College Board’s profile. Specifically, she graduated from a school in NC 59, which the College Board characterizes in the following way:

Residents of this neighborhood have lower middle incomes and own homes which are of moderate value. A traditional blue-collar community, most parents have some expe-
rience with college but less than half have a baccalaureate. A large majority of students attend public high schools where they engage and excel in solid curricula which include a solid number of AP/honors courses. They have very high educational aspirations and score well above average on admissions tests. Most are mobile, interested in financial aid, and likely to apply to nationally selective privates and public flagships.

Like Natalie’s NC information, Marie’s NC description offers key information about how students in neighborhoods like hers are positioned for college. Students in these neighborhoods are not surrounded by adults who have baccalaureate or postgraduate degrees, which means they may not have access to the same kind of support that students in Cluster 78 are likely to have. However, the cluster information also makes it clear that these students are not in “failing” schools. Rather, these are schools that work hard to prepare students for success in college. Schools in Cluster 59, like the schools in Natalie’s cluster, offer students a curriculum that is, at least in its stated intention, meant to prepare students for college. It is tempting to place students on a binary of preparedness—they are either prepared or they are not, and public perceptions of high schools suggest that “good” high schools prepare students for college, and “failing” high schools do not. Fully investigating the nature of “preparedness” is beyond the scope of this chapter, but such work can and should examine what “prepared” means in the context of how developing writers perceive their transitions into college.

Natalie and Marie’s interviews, for example, reveal that even though their high schools offered them a curriculum intended to prepare them for college, and even though they succeeded with that curriculum, they had a range of complex experiences, including at times feeling very unprepared compared to their classmates at UM. These two case studies offer a perspective on the scope of experiences that students may have as they bring their precollege experiences into collegiate writing contexts. While the information about Natalie’s and Marie’s neighborhoods of origin in contrast to those of their peers is certainly illuminating, this information does not reveal the scope or process of their development as writers at the university. To better understand how those precollege experiences shaped their development, I looked to the interviews, where both students were asked to reflect on their experiences with writing and to consider how they were developing as writers. In this way, both data sets (the NC and the interview transcripts) revealed how these students navigated their divergent undergraduate writing trajectories. This in turn allows for an analysis that suggests that both “writing development” and “successful transition” might be more capacious terms than we currently recognize.
Writing in Community

Both Natalie and Marie identify their precollege experiences as a site of writing development, and they both situate at least part of their development as writers in how they participate in communities with other writers. Though they share a sense that the writers around them contribute to their development, they experience the importance of writing in community in very different ways. Understanding Natalie’s precollege background offers insight into her development in college; she identifies the adults around her as key to her writing growth and success.

Perhaps because she comes from a small school and a small community, Natalie views her continued writing development as relational, at least in part. In her entry interview, Natalie identifies the source of her confidence in her writing (which later she describes as “over-confidence”) as coming from her high school experiences. As a high school student, Natalie was given opportunities to write for the town newspaper, and to write for what she called a “sports journalism thing” in her local community. As she engaged as a writer, trusted adults encouraged her efforts. Natalie describes this encouragement: “I was also told, ‘Natalie, you’re a good writer. Keep pursuing writing,’ or ‘keep working hard,’” and she returns to these comments as a source of her precollege confidence again and again throughout both of her interviews, and ostensibly, throughout her undergraduate writing experiences. For Natalie, writing before college (particularly writing she did outside of the classroom) was something she enjoyed and felt confident in—a skill that brought her recognition in her hometown and her high school.

She describes these experiences with writing in warm terms, and notes her small community offered few “cultural opportunities,” a lack of experience that she hoped coming to college would address. The complexity of Natalie’s characterization of her community must not be overlooked here. In this moment, she both validates the trusted adults all around her who supported her extracurricular writing, yet worries that perhaps these adults, despite their best efforts, might not have the cultural capital that would be more highly valued in her postsecondary writing contexts. However, at no point does Natalie wholly denigrate her community of origin. She clearly values the opportunities she was given there as a writer, but she is reaching outside of that community for new opportunities at college.

In this way, Natalie roots her development as a writer in her relationships with trusted, encouraging adults, but also in her relationship with herself. Though she experienced a sense of dislocation when she transitioned into college writing, and is jarred by the new expectations for her work, she does not take up the narrative that she is not good at writing as we witnessed with Grace, who was profiled in
Anna Knutson’s chapter (7), nor does she adopt a narrative of failure. Instead, she uses a process of reflection and evaluation to consider her writing experiences. The feedback she receives from her instructors in college similarly provokes growth; as she described in her entry interview, “initially I don’t think that I appreciated what he [first-year writing instructor] was telling me, appreciated the things he was trying to get me to do. . . . [but] I think that it got me to be more open, I guess, to revision and suggestion.” As Emily Wilson and Justine Post suggest (chapter 1, this volume), there is great potential for growth when students find that the feedback they receive is different than the feedback they expect, particularly when, as is the case with Natalie, that feedback provokes greater reflection on her own writing. This process seems to allow her to collect herself and to create a framework for the expectations of writing at college. In part, her success at this reframing might lie in her focus on herself as a writer and on her own development, as demonstrated in her keen attention to growth: “I guess as a writer I would say I at first was very hesitant, hard to get things done, hard to express what I’m trying to say, I guess now, stepping back and being able to see where I come from and the experiences I had, like that very much frees me as a writer.” Here, Natalie acknowledges that the transition into college writing has resulted in a sense of dislocation, but that the dislocation that has been so uncomfortable actually produces an opportunity to look at her own development. Natalie also relates her sense of growth to a sense of freedom. At no point in the interview does she directly say that she felt bound or restrained in her previous encounters with writing, but the repetition of feeling “freed” as a writer suggests that she may have felt restricted by the kinds of writing she was exposed to in high school.

As she moved into college, armed with the confidence of high school success and the encouragement of adults in her community, Natalie felt she knew what to expect. As she describes her early expectations, “I came into Michigan thinking, ‘Oh I got this. I just need to do what I’ve been doing and be able to grow with whatever help I can get.’ But I had no idea what I was doing.” In this description of her transition to college, Natalie notes the good reasons she expected to continue being successful with her writing: her previous work had been well regarded, and she had no reason to believe that the writing strategies she had developed as a high schooler would be unsuccessful in her new writing context. However, what she discovers as she begins to write in her college classes is not the seamless transition she recalls expecting. Rather, she describes her transition to college as one marked by disruption. The expectations that had been established by her experience in high school and by the adults around her were not fulfilled, and she suggests that her earlier confidence was erroneous, or at least naïve.
Natalie’s assumption that she could continue to do what she had been doing in high school is tempered by her acknowledgement that she needs to rely on the relationships she builds in college to receive the help she needs to grow and develop as a writer. As Ben Keating describes in chapter 2, some students build writing communities of their own to support their writing development. Natalie engages in this kind of self-sponsored search for peer support in her writing. The acknowledgment that she would need to rely on someone to give her help so she could grow is aligned with the relational strategies she developed in her home community. In this moment, though, she also notes that even this strategy did not completely address the new challenges she faced. However, her reflection on the difficulties of transitioning into college writing reveals a willingness to repurpose her previous knowledge for new tasks and contexts. She mentions in her entry interview how small her school is, and nearly in the same breath describes how she’s learned to work through her feelings of disruption and dislocation by relying on the relationships she forms with other writers:

I think the faculty and the courses I’ve taken. . . . I think they push you to be more definitive in what you’re writing. I think that was the big thing. I also think that just listening to people smarter than you is a big thing. I think I learned to take a step back and listen to what other people are writing and read what they are writing and realize that was good writing in its own way. I could learn from that.

Here, Natalie reflects on how she navigated the feeling of disruption that her transition to college produced. She recalls listening to people she perceived as “smarter,” and of reading their work as part of that listening process. Earlier in the interview, she seems to be casting about for a way to incorporate what she is noticing about what is “good” writing in college contexts into what she knew to be “good” when she arrived, and as a means of building a framework that connects what she already knows to the new knowledge she is developing. She recognizes that what is valued in academia is not what was valued in her small town, so she reaches back to what she knows—the relationships she referenced as being critical to her earlier writing development. As Wilson and Post (chapter 1) note, student/instructor relationships play an important role in helping students learn to critically engage with feedback. Here, Natalie offers an example of how relationships with instructors have shaped her development as a writer.

She looks to faculty for advice, and cites “listening” to people in what seems to be both spoken and written language. Here, Natalie takes her prior knowledge
(the sense that her relationships with people help her develop her writing) and combines that knowledge with a growing sense that paying keen attention to her audience supports “good writing.” Natalie seems to be looking for the writing advice she had received in high school, when her teachers and community members encouraged her to write and to keep writing. Natalie views this move to college as a chance to experience culture and knowledge beyond that of her home community, and she similarly looks to other writers as a resource to pull from as she seeks to develop her own work. The initial sense of disruption she describes seems to make her reel a bit, but she recovers and uses her relational strategies to find a way to move forward with her writing.

Like Natalie’s, Marie’s sense of her writing community and the community she came from also shapes her developmental trajectory as a writer. Marie’s writing confidence is fairly rigid. Her confidence in her abilities is real, but it’s possible that her confidence comes at the expense of greater growth and development. Her reliance on what she calls her grammar skills and formatting appear in her entry interview and thread through her undergraduate years, as she continues to insist that her grammar skills, what we might call conventions, bring her success. As Ben Keating notes (chapter 2), Marie’s focus on grammar is not uncommon for nonminors in this study, and like her fellow nonminors, her focus on grammar probably contributed to her resistance to peer review. She finds collaborative writing projects very useful, but she dislikes the fact that her peer reviewers did not have the same kind of stake in her writing as in projects where all members wrote together.

In this way, Marie’s common refrain is her deep investment in writing with others. The writing that Marie describes in her engineering courses asked her to build relationships with other writers, a process that demonstrates much of her development throughout her undergraduate years. She notes that considering her group members as one audience helps her shape her writing, but also that she takes on the role of “editor,” relying once again on her skills with grammar to complete her share of the work rather than engaging more in the invention of the text her group produces:

[The grammar] definitely helped there [in group projects], ’cause in high school, you were writing it for the teacher. You just write it and it’s done in high school. Definitely when I got here, it was more of a group course where everyone works together, and everyone had groups, where we analyzed each other’s papers, and we helped each other. It helped me. It definitely helped me to be able to write things that people actually want to read, which I think is good.
Marie uses her skills with grammar as a way to navigate both the relationships with other writers and the writing they produce. Later, in her exit interview, Marie notes that her competency with grammar is the strength she brings to each group project. Her group writing became so important to her, in fact, that when she was asked to select a piece of writing to upload to the archive for each semester she was in the study, she consistently selected a group project to submit, even in the semesters when she describes taking courses that asked her to write independently. Because of her strong commitment to collaborative writing, though, it’s difficult to determine to what extent Marie’s writing developed, because it’s impossible to determine what portion of those texts she composed.

From the interviews, though, it is clear that she does stretch her prior knowledge about writing in the matter of audience, noting that a sense of audience helps writers produce successful texts:

To write well, someone has to want to read what you have written. I think if you’re writing and nobody wants to read it, then I feel like, what’s the point? . . . Definitely a big part of writing well is making sure other people want to read what you’ve written and a lot of that comes with talking about things maybe in a different light, a way that people have never thought of something before, or bringing up things, maybe ideas people have never thought of, things like that.

In this moment, Marie has a keen sense of audience, and she maintains that appealing to audience is one key factor in producing “good” writing. Like Natalie, Marie has a clear sense of relationships, but for Marie, the relationship at the center of her single-author writing is between herself, as the writer, and her audience. Marie notes that considering audience is important regardless of what kind of writing she is producing, which facilitates growth in her writing as she progresses through her degree. Marie’s sense of audience seems particularly keen, and it is certainly possible that her orientation to her discipline contributes to her sense of herself as a writer. Again and again, she describes herself in both the entry and the exit interviews as “an engineer,” and in both interviews she describes the “technical” audience who might encounter her writing. She is remarkably attentive to what this audience might value in reports and other kinds of technical documents and genres. Even her focus on the conventions of Standard English reflects this attentiveness to audience, as she notes that “correctness” in reports and other professional documents is important for engineers. In this way, Marie chooses to enter a community of writers that, according to her description, highly values the set of skills that she brings from her high school writing.
Though Natalie describes using relationships with other writers to develop the skills where she felt she needed practice, Marie uses the skills she feels she already has to leverage her relationships with other writers at her new institution. The kind of development she experiences, in this way, may not offer her as much room for writing growth, but her strategy certainly seems to give her a kind of capital to offer her classmates in their group conversations. Discounting her decisions as largely unsupportive of her development would negate the ways she leverages the resources she brings to college. Marie uses her skills with grammar as a way to navigate her relationship with both the other writers and the writing they produce. Marie is content to transfer her skills from high school to college, and does not seem to wish to push the boundaries of her previous understanding as Natalie does. This, of course, does not mean that Marie fails to transfer knowledge from her previous context, nor does it suggest she does not grow as a writer; rather, she simply limited her discussion of her writing development to a specific set of writing skills (grammar, conventions, and formatting). Both students’ focus on the role of community indicates the central role it plays in their writing development, and it is further evidence that students employ resources from their precollege writing environments as they grow as writers. These two students, bolstered by the social connections to writing in their home communities, find ways to construct and engage in writing communities in college, which allows both of them to succeed as writers (though in very different ways). As Gere (chapter 10) indicates, writing communities also facilitate student development after college, so the fact that Natalie and Marie bring this resource with them offers them support that extends from high school through college and beyond.

Confidence and Being Humbled

As previously mentioned, Natalie began her time at UM with confidence in herself as a writer. This confidence was fed by the writing she created for her community and the encouragement she received there. Moving from high school to first-year writing, however, seemed to be a particularly jarring moment for her. Natalie returns to her transition into college again and again, and each time her description of that moment in her experiences as a developing writer evokes a sense of the difficulty she felt in this new context. In her exit interview, she states,

I was definitely confident coming in [to college]. I also think maybe over-confident, maybe I wasn’t sure—I had done really well in the things that were put in front of me
in high school and those kinds of tasks. I hadn’t done deeper stuff. I hadn’t been challenged I guess in other ways with writing. . . . I think I was confident, and maybe over confident. I think I was humbled my first—maybe my first writing class and realized that there were people and professors and students out there that were really stretching to write.

Natalie is an adept student, but her description of entering college does not evoke the positive, “easy” transition many people believe is common (or, for that matter, desired) of successful students. As she describes it, she began college as a confident student and writer. As a high school student, Natalie did “really well” with the assignments and writing tasks she was asked to undertake, and in this comment, it is clear that she brought with her a confidence born of previous success. Natalie considered herself a writer before she came to UM, and found occasion to write both in and out of the classroom, and as previously mentioned, her community sponsored and supported her as a writer. She reflects on her prior experiences, and rather than finding them wholly positive, some of those reflections lead her to wonder about the value of her high school experiences, as in this moment in her entry interview, when she questions the quality of her writing before college:

I was told in high school that this is good, but it wasn’t good. I don’t think it was good. Looking back, I don’t think it was good at all. I think that first year, there was lots of road bumps, and I didn’t—my confidence was knocked a little bit, but in a good way. I needed to go back to the core of what writing was going to be for me.

Here, Natalie again frames her transition to college as one marked by disruption, as her previously held assurance is “knocked a little bit” in postsecondary writing. This disruption, though, is framed as a necessary one. She references a sense that the writing she expected to be rewarded was not, that the writing she perceived in high school as “good” is not considered “good” in college. The movement from what she felt confident was good in high school to her growing sense of what might be good in college is one she describes again and again in her interviews as rising and falling. In this way, Natalie demonstrates how student writing development does not need to be linear—picking up new skills at each step along the way—to be “real” development. Instead, she describes a developmental trajectory marked by fits and starts, and one where her sense of self-efficacy is as key to her progression as the skills she gathers along the way.

The disruption that Natalie experiences in her transition to college is one that might pose barriers to “success” for some students. However, Natalie sees it as con-
tributing to her growth as a writer and a student. She frames being “knocked a little bit” as a catalyst, as pushing her past the initial discomfort and forcing her to stretch herself as a writer. Natalie’s willingness to adapt her strategies and to reconsider what made her writing “good” contributed to her writing development, as it gave her space to grow and to risk small failures. This kind of rhetorical flexibility, as Gere notes (chapter 10), is an important feature of students’ continued writing development, because it enables them to connect the writing they learned in college with their understandings of how they will continue to grow as writers. She did well in her classes, so the sense she describes of “being knocked a little bit” isn’t one that describes literal failure—either of her individual classes or in her degree program. Rather, this is the description of a student who experiences what might be called a “snag.” Her first-year writing class, in particular, seems to create a place of tension, or as Natalie describes it, “struggle.” Natalie notes in her entry interview that she found the class to be a difficult experience:

I think if you were to ask me what I first got out of it [first-year writing], I would have been very disgruntled because it was a class that, I think I struggled through it. I did well academically, but I struggled through concepts and all of that. I think I was stuck in, well, in what I was doing prior. . . . It’s a small class, but initially I don’t think I always appreciated what he was telling me, appreciated all the things he was trying to get me to do.

Natalie’s struggle with first-year writing is certainly sympathetic. Many other students would remark on their experiences in similar ways. She readily acknowledges, though, with good-natured grace, that the course was difficult for her, not just in an academic sense or that her grades weren’t what she expected. More than grades, it seems that the root of Natalie’s frustration is in the difficulty she had in seeing how this experience connected to her previous experiences with writing before she came to college. She notes that while she was “struggling” to understand the concepts underlying her first-year writing class, she relied on “what [she] was doing prior,” which seems to be a reference to her experiences in high school.

Though Natalie remarks on her growth as springing from the sense that what she had learned in high school was not going to be accepted as well as she had expected, Marie’s sense of confidence in her precollege writing skills was, on the surface, much more surefooted, as she articulates in her entry interview:

I know in high school I did the standard English classes, and I took AP English classes, and a lot of that was writing a lot. I did very well in them. I did really well on the AP test.
Actually, I started off in LSA [the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts] when I got here. I took the first-year writing courses, and I did well in those. I think when I got into engineering, it was no longer required of us. Actually, in the College of Engineering, it’s kind of a joke. Engineers don’t write... it’s kind of a joke there. I’m good at grammar. I had a grammar Nazi [sic] in high school, so I’m good at that. I think it’s almost a level of expectation that’s not necessarily there in the College of Engineering. You’re expected to be able to write well and show your ideas efficiently and condensed. I think that takes away a lot of the creativity of writing. You’re supposed to condense everything and say it as quickly and... as concisely as possible. (entry interview)

As Grace’s profile in Knutson’s chapter (7) similarly suggests, students use their experiences in high school English classes that explicitly purport to be preparation for college (like AP courses) to set their expectations for what writing in college will be like. They attempt to transfer these skills, with varying degrees of success and struggle. When Marie reflects back on her movement from high school into first-year writing, she focuses on how she was able to utilize what she did well—grammar—in her college writing courses as well. She sees a connection between what she did before and what is expected of her in her new writing context, and she capitalizes on that connection. She demurs at calling herself a writer (“Engineers don’t write”), and instead turns to focus on what she already knows (“I’m good at grammar”), citing her precollege writing experiences as giving her skills she uses to write in college. While Natalie takes up a “writerly identity,” Marie resists that description, instead taking up the identity of “engineer,” which she seems to believe precludes being (or seeing herself as) a writer.

Though Marie’s chosen identification with her discipline offers space for her professionally, it seems to constrain the kinds of writing she engages with and the kinds of growth she makes available to herself. It is certainly helpful for students to take up professional identities, and such identification gives Marie a writing community where she can engage with other engineers and their writing. She has a clear sense of the writing that engineers do, but in her exit interview she also expresses a desire to write so that she can consider “a different perspective.” In that moment, there is a glimpse of the kind of flexibility and adaptation that Natalie develops, and given more opportunities to do such thinking, Marie may have found other kinds of writing and other audiences with whom to communicate. It may be that the boundaries of her discipline did not invite her to participate in the kind of reflection and writerly revision that Natalie was able to do through her wider range of writing experiences.

Marie does not describe her transition from high school to college writing in terms of her struggles with it or in terms of the way it negatively affected her con-
confidence with writing. Rather, she creates a narrative that focuses on the skills that bring her a sense of confidence, again relying on her training in high school focusing on “local” concerns such as grammar: “In terms of within engineering, I think I’m pretty confident in the way I write, and I think a lot of that is because in high school I had all that grammar training, and all that. It’s not necessarily technical, but things every writer should at least know, like grammar.” From her precollege experiences, Marie has gained a firm confidence in her abilities with grammar and formatting documents. This sense of expertise allows her to feel she experiences success in college similar to her success in high school. Like Natalie, Marie situates her level of confidence with writing in the experiences she had with it before coming to UM. As I will discuss in greater detail below, Marie does not look for opportunities for growth, though, and instead seeks places to utilize the skills she feels she has already mastered relying on her grammar to excel in “technical writing” and in her chosen discipline.

**Flexibility and Writing Taxonomies**

While Natalie seems to experience a sense of disruption in her transition to college writing, with a corresponding blow to her writing confidence, Marie seems to find a writing trajectory where she believes she already has the skills to be successful. Natalie describes the experiences that shaped her college writing practices in her entry interview, noting that though she had been introduced to the writing process before she arrived at UM, that process was not like the processes she was expected to adopt in college writing:

[T]hey tell you over and over again you have to—I mean, growing up, they tell you you have to—these are the steps. You brainstorm, then you prewrite and then you draft. Then you draft again. They have those posters on the front of elementary school classrooms. I always hated that, like I didn’t like that.

Natalie’s precollege understanding of writing process, informed by her teachers’ explanation of the “steps” and the classroom posters in her elementary school, is in no way unique to her experience. Posters outlining a very straightforward, linear writing process litter the landscape of classrooms across the country, and the first time that most students are introduced to the idea of a process for writing is typically in K–12 classrooms. The concept of writing as a process is a foundational concept of writing instruction at the primary and secondary levels, and as Natalie noticed, it is similarly important in first-year writing. It is not surprising, then, that
Natalie points to these posters as an example of what was so frustrating about her transition to writing in college. As a young writer, she had a sense that this linear process didn’t work for her, but it was the only process she was offered. Moreover, when she entered college, she found that the processes emphasized in first-year writing were markedly different than those she had been exposed to in elementary and secondary education. Here again, there is a sense that transitioning to college was disorienting for Natalie. Though she didn’t care much for the process she was offered, that process was one she had developed familiarity with and one where she knows what is expected of her.

As the Council for Writing Program Administrators’ “Outcomes for First-Year Writing” indicates, “Composing processes are seldom linear: a writer may research a topic before drafting, then conduct additional research while revising or after consulting a colleague” (WPA Outcomes). These recursive writing processes valued in postsecondary writing instruction felt at least somewhat at odds with the kinds of processes Natalie had been exposed to in the past, perhaps because she feels that the relationship between her writing process in secondary school and her writing process in college are not connected. Though she expresses discomfort with the linear processes of her previous education, it was what she was most familiar with, and Natalie describes a sense of dislocation in this moment of her transition. In her first writing class at the university, she seeks to understand the concepts underlying the new kinds of writing (and the new expectations for that writing) that she knows exist. As Natalie describes feeling “stuck” in what she had learned before, it seems that she felt she had to create a new conceptual framework for the writing concepts she was being introduced to in her first-year writing class. At first, these concepts seem disconnected from what she had learned about writing previously. As far as Natalie can tell, she does not have her previous frameworks about what is “good” in writing to rely on, which caused her to feel “disgruntled.”

While Natalie seems to bring a strong recollection of her process from secondary education, Marie identifies the grammar instruction she received in high school as a source of power in her transition to college writing and in her continued development as an undergraduate writer. She takes her understanding of grammar, or conventions, and her sense of their significance in the kinds of writing she encounters, and uses that sense, alongside her understanding of her prior experiences with writing, to develop a taxonomy of the writing she experiences in college, dividing “writing” into two distinct categories—“creative” and “technical,” a move similar to those described by Lizzie Hutton and Gail Gibson in chapter 3. She describes her sense of these categories in her entry interview:
I think they [past experiences] did [teach me], because I got such a good education in the grammar and everything. I never really was that creative. I could fake it when I needed to write an essay in high school or something, but when it comes to editing something, I’ve always been really good at that. That definitely helps in the technical writing also, ’cause you still need to be grammatically correct. You still need to have the formats down correctly and all that stuff, otherwise it’s distracting from what you’re actually trying to say in the paper. I think [high school] definitely helped.

In this moment, Marie describes how she understands “writing” to work. For her, there are simply two kinds of writing: creative and technical. This taxonomy is limited, and Marie’s assessment of her expertise in these two categories is grounded in how she can use what she already feels she has mastered (grammar) in writing each one. She notes that her grammatical expertise in “technical writing” (which she never fully defines) “helps,” and there is a clear sense that she does not feel as comfortable with “creative” writing. As Marie describes her trajectory through her undergraduate degree and the various forms of writing she encountered along the way, she maintains that her background in grammar from high school is one major key to her success. As Gere notes in chapter 10, the kind of genre taxonomies that Marie describes persist in students’ understanding of their future as writers.

The limitations of Marie’s writing taxonomy become clear when she attempts to describe how her first-year writing experience shaped her as a writer. For example, Marie’s taxonomy of technical and creative writing does not leave much room for the genres of writing that are most common in academic writing in the humanities. Marie seems unsure in her entry interview how to classify the writing she encountered in her first-year writing course, especially in relation to the writing she had previously encountered in high school:

My first-year writing class, it was a different kind of writing than what I had done before. In high school it was much more analytical. . . . When I got here, I took English 125, and it was definitely more creative. There was analyzing portions, but each essay we did, there was an argumentative essay, an analytical essay, different creative writing essays, and different exercises we did. I definitely think they helped. I got better as I progressed in that class. I think, as I said, it’s definitely helped me, even in engineering, just being able to think of different ways to think about things and different ways to look at things. I think it’s helped.

Here, Marie notes that there is a kind of writing she is less certain of how to classify, and for a moment, she applies what seems to be a third category—analytical
writing—to her taxonomy. However, later in the interview, she classifies her writing in high school as “creative,” and for the remainder of both the entry and the exit interview, she places the writing she encounters in college as either “technical” or “creative.” Though Marie seems to define “creative” writing here as having “different ways to think about things and different ways to look at things,” much of the writing she describes doing in first-year writing could certainly be described as analytical. It is unclear why Marie felt she needs to operate within such a limited taxonomy as a writer, but here, she bumps up against something new, and rather than revising her understanding, she doubles down on her previous concepts of what it means to write. In doing so, she also constrains her understanding of herself as a writer. She explains that she knows herself to be competent at “technical writing,” in large part because of her abilities with “grammar,” but that she does not feel as comfortable in “creative” forms or kinds of writing. Because most of the writing outside of the reports she creates in her engineering courses is writing that Marie classifies as “creative,” she is left with limited options for developing new skills or writing expertise. As she creates this taxonomy that values the skills she already has, she unknowingly limits her options for becoming more expert as a writer.

**Characterizing Development in Transitioning Writers**

Natalie’s comments about her movement from high school to college writing, on the surface at least, focus on the difficulties she experienced and the unease she felt about the confidence she arrived with. Her apparent difficulty, though, reveals a growing expertise—she notices that being “challenged as a writer” offers her opportunities to develop her abilities. Marie, on the other hand, articulates a confidence in her abilities that does not seem to facilitate a trajectory of growth. Marie’s apparent expertise reveals chinks in the narrative of how “smooth transitions” into college offer more success to students. In these two comments, Marie and Natalie’s reflections on their precollege writing experiences appear parallel but point to their divergent development. This divergence is a place where the profile of the “typical student” falls short of the reality of students’ complex and diverse experiences and growth as writers.

In Natalie’s case, the description for her NC, Cluster 79, aligns fairly well with the experiences she describes in both of her interviews. The high school she went to appears to have offered her opportunities to practice writing extensively both inside and outside of the classroom. Her experiences writing for the town paper and in local sports journalism are especially noteworthy. She also describes supportive
teachers and a curriculum that, while limited, offered her ways to feel confident as a writer. In her comments about her teachers’ encouragement, Natalie displays a sense of her teachers as trusted professionals and mentors. When they told her she was good at writing, she believed them, and that belief shaped her experiences with writing after she left high school. Her teachers cared deeply about her success and told her that she should keep writing, and so she did.

Similarly, Marie’s cluster information offers a perspective on her development that is supported and expanded on by the data from her interviews in the study. Her high school offered course work intended to prepare students for college, and Marie took advantage of those courses. As a result, she feels well prepared for college and relies heavily on the skills she was told would lead her to success as an undergraduate writer. In high school, Marie had found an area of expertise and holds fast to that expertise as she moves through college, especially since she occupies a discipline where the kinds of writing skills she feels most confident with are highly valued.

Marie and Natalie illustrate the ways that students’ experiences as developing writers do not begin when they enter first-year writing. Rather, this development reaches back to its beginnings in their communities and local primary and secondary schools. Understanding how those complex and varied experiences shape individual students’ growth is tricky, though, and requires that instructors have at their disposal information that is often difficult to obtain and time-consuming to sift through for each and every student. “Big data,” such as the information provided by the College Board in their NCs, does not and cannot tell us what individual students have experienced before they come to college. But as this chapter demonstrates, this kind of data can suggest patterns of development among student populations. This research is important because, as the analysis of Marie and Natalie’s experiences suggests, it illustrates the fine-grained complex differences between students who, on the surface, may appear to have very similar backgrounds.

When we, as instructors and researchers, erase those fine-grained complexities, we risk alienating the students who are experiencing their transition into and through college in different ways than those expressed in the dominant narratives on our campuses. This kind of analysis can and should work to inform both our “big picture” sense of the students we teach and to destabilize the questions we ask about our students’ growth and development as undergraduate writers.

The cluster and group counts used in this study are available on our Fulcrum platform at https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.10079890
NOTES

1. This sense I base on my own experiences as a teacher of first-year writing at UM, and on conversations I had with students in those classes, where they shared their understanding that the “Michigan difference” (a campus-wide slogan) meant that most students were good students. This sense led many of my students to feel inadequate in the sense that they were “behind” their peers.

2. By which I mean, “typical” in the sense that they represent the majority of students both in this study and at the university in general.

WORKS CITED


