Challenging the Efficiency Model: Supporting Inclusive Pathways Toward Student Success

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This article responds to higher education's increasing focus on graduating students efficiently. Building upon current WPA and composition scholarship, the author presents data gathered from focus groups and interviews with 21 first-year students attending a large, public university nationally recognized for efforts to retain students until graduation. Findings from this data suggest that when student support initiatives prioritize students graduating efficiently, they create challenges for students whose needs require different paths toward graduation, namely students who commute, are nontraditional, or come from low-income households. The article concludes by offering writing program administrators ways to advocate on behalf of students for more inclusive ways to support student success.

At the 2017 CCCC, Linda Adler-Kassner used her chair's address to confront the Educational Intelligence Complex (EIC), or the systemic consequences of neoliberal economics and its oversimplification of the learning experience. Adler-Kassner's talk expressed the need for WPAs and faculty to understand how politics and economics inform our daily practices and influence how we encourage students' success. If indeed the philosophy behind the EIC treats "time [as] the enemy" (Denley qtd. in Adler-Kassner 324), then WPAs will have to negotiate the complexities and nonlinearity of writing with initiatives intended to sort students through school at the most efficient rate possible. To advocate on behalf of our field's knowledge of how students learn to write, Adler-Kassner calls on WPAs to first "learn the values and principles" informed by the EIC and adopted by leaders in higher education, to then find ways to address the "issues" of most concern to our writing programs (334).

   Adler-Kassner's message to WPAs is an urgent one, as organizations representative of the EIC continue to earn praise in major publications,

especially for their use of "predictive analytics" to inform decisions about supporting student retention (Hefling). With this praise, colleges and universities continue to sign on, implementing the strategies recommended by their new partners. These initiatives include incentivizing students to take 15 credits per semester, re-envisioning the structure of first-year math courses, ensuring students are provided extra support for gateway math and English courses, and appealing to years of data to inform student advising ("Strategies"). WPAs are uniquely implicated by this movement as they oversee one of the two first-year courses of most concern to retention leaders and represent a history of scholarship devoted to encouraging students' success in the writing classroom. When pressed to implement changes that promote students' swift progression towards graduation, however, WPAs have noted that "decontextualized" initiatives can "fail individual students" (Brunk-Chavez and Fredericksen 91) and have recommended improved collaboration between writing programs and their institution's centers for academic and student support (Holmes and Busser).

As organizations devoted to student retention continue promoting changes to first-year courses, the following study takes up Adler-Kassner's call to examine higher education's interest in graduating more students efficiently. Specifically, this article reports on a case study conducted at one university famous for its early and expansive partnership with Complete College America, a nonprofit retention organization funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Situated within WPA, composition, and retention scholarship, data is presented from focus groups and interviews with 21 first-year students, all of whom participated in multiple retention initiatives by the completion of their first semester. By taking a closer look at how initiatives aimed at streamlining students' path towards graduation impact students' educational experiences, WPAs can more confidently engage with retention leaders and advocate on behalf of writing research to further support students' success.

In recent years, composition scholars have suggested that higher education's increasing focus on student retention does not always align with students' goals, needs, and lived experiences (McCurrie; Webb-Sunderhaus; Reichert Powell). Pegeen Reichert Powell's groundbreaking text *Retention and Persistence: Writing Instruction and Students Who Leave* notes the inevitability of students dropping out or taking a break from school due to circumstances outside the control of their respective institutions. She then challenges writing programs to reconsider how student success gets defined, calling for a shift from equating success with staying in school to students achieving individual goals. Reichert Powell and others have argued that higher education's rhetoric of retention risks framing students who leave

school as failures and have recommended more careful considerations of university retention efforts.

Though these scholars have sparked many new studies focusing on the intersections of retention and writing programs, students' perspectives on retention initiatives are still greatly underrepresented. Recent WPA research has begun giving students voice on the topic; however, students' perspectives are largely offered as a singular counter-narrative to challenge the rhetoric of retention, as is the case in *Retention and Persistence*, wherein Reichert Powell traces the narratives of three students alongside her discourse analysis of retention, but warns these narratives do not serve as a totalizing data. Published in *Retention, Persistence, and Writing Programs*, Sara Webb-Sunderhaus' likewise offers the case study of Roxie, a traditional-aged commuter student who worked full time, received no financial assistance from her parents, and eventually had a baby prior to graduating. The complexities of Roxie's life, which Webb-Sunderhaus appropriately points out are not uncommon among many college students, do well to show that our students' "needs are different, and as a result, the paths they must take to earn their degrees are different" ("'Life Gets in the Way'"115). In other words, institutions employing initiatives to move Roxie toward graduation more quickly risk overlooking Roxie's needs as a student, mother, and financially independent young adult. While this argument is imperative when deciding how to support students' success in writing programs, case studies of individual students do not allow for data-driven conclusions to be drawn.

When WPA scholars have gathered multiple students' perspectives about retention, these projects have largely served to evaluate new initiatives implemented by writing programs (Buyserie, Plemons, and Ericsson; Chemishanova and Snead). At Washington State University, for example, Buyserie, Plemons, and Ericsson implemented the Critical Literacies Achievement and Success Program (CLASP), which requires students participating in the one-semester program to meet with their faculty regularly and engages faculty in a professional development series focused on critical pedagogy. Data gathered from surveys and focus groups with faculty and students suggests that interrupting the power dynamics between teachers and students through required, rather than suggested, meetings during office hours encourages students to be "actively engaged in their own education, rather than subjects of it" (163). Buyserie, Plemons, and Ericsson found that students involved in CLASP were more likely than other students to meet with faculty during subsequent semesters, while also noting a strong correlation between participating in CLASP and students' persisting in school. Similarly, Chemishanova and Snead report on their implementation of the PlusOne program, an initiative at the University of North Caro-

lina at Pembroke that serves to bring writing studio pedagogy to the first-year writing classroom. Linking a one-credit, small group lab to first-year composition classrooms, the PlusOne program allows students to receive greater assistance from their same writing instructors on a weekly basis. Data gathered from "student outcomes [and] a review of instructor and student evaluations" suggests that participating students are retained at significantly higher rates than students who do not participate in the program (173). In both studies, Buyserie, Plemons, and Ericsson and Chemishanova and Snead found a positive correlation between increased faculty-student interactions and students persisting in school.

These researchers offer useful, replicable advice for supporting student retention in first-year writing programs. This study seeks to extend their work by providing data that would support WPAs' design and evaluation of multiple retention initiatives, as well as offer WPAs insight with which to advocate on behalf of students' unique needs with campus leaders who communicate a preferred path for all students pursuing graduation. To construct a fuller picture of how higher education's focus on efficiency can impact the process through which students might achieve their goals, the results from this study reveal a panoramic view of students' experiences with multiple, intersecting retention initiatives.

Methods

Offering one way to understand what Adler-Kassner dubs the Educational Industrial Complex and its impact on first-year students' experiences, I conducted a case study at Georgia State University, a large, urban, public university nationally recognized for its many retention initiatives and swift increase in graduation rates over the past ten years. Georgia State University's student population is diverse, with 42% of students identifying as African American, 26% Caucasian, 12% Asian, 10% Hispanic/Latino, and the remainder of ethnicities unknown or noted as other. The university maintains a higher-than-average enrollment of nontraditional students with approximately 30% of its student population 25 years or older ("Georgia State Student Population Stats"), and 77% of undergraduates qualify for need-based financial aid ("Georgia State University"). Though its *Strategic Plan 2011–2016/21* shows the university's interest in becoming more residential, only 21% of students currently live on campus. Recognizing that students whose racial backgrounds have been historically marginalized and who have greater financial need struggle to persist in school at rates comparable to students from white, middle-class families (Thayer; Landry; Flowers), Georgia State has been devoted to promoting retention over the past

thirty years and has earned increased recognition from major news publications as its retention efforts have continued throughout and after the 2008 recession (Brownstein; Fausset; Hefling). A case study conducted at Georgia State, therefore, allows for gathering data on leading retention initiatives and their impact on students most considered at risk of dropping out.

Because it is widely known that most students who drop out do so their first year (Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot; Reichert Powell), scholars have advised universities to target their retention efforts toward students' first year of college. This advice is accepted at Georgia State, as the university employs many of the programs recommended in retention literature and promoted by Complete College America. These programs are informed by the pervasive idea, established by retention scholar Vincent Tinto and his student integration model, that if students can integrate early into the university community, by academic or social interests, they are more likely to persist for subsequent semesters ("Dropout from Higher Education"). Programs designed to support integration include freshman learning communities (FLCs) (Tinto, "Taking Retention Seriously"; Zhau and Kuh), summer bridge programs (Ackerman; Cabrera, Nora, and Castañeda), a first-year book (Benz, Comer, Juergensmeyer, and Lowry; Ferguson, Brown, and Piper), and first-year seminars (Williford, Chapman, and Kahrig). For the purposes of this study, students whose first academic semester intersected with one or more of these programs were selected to participate.

Recruiting participants for this study took place in the spring and summer of 2016, following the approval of Georgia State University's Internal Review Board (IRB number H16399). I requested permission from first-year writing instructors to visit their classes and invite students to participate in focus groups about their experiences in college thus far and the intersections of those experiences with their writing and success goals. Students enrolled in three kinds of FLCs were recruited: students placed in traditional FLCs, which structure students by majors into shared class schedules, students enrolled in Georgia State's summer bridge program, and students who persisted after one semester in Georgia State's fall-enrolled bridge program, referred to by students as "PEP" for Panther Excellence Program. Though all three groups are considered FLCs, the latter two programs are designed for students who enter college at risk of failing (determined by SAT/ACT scores and GPA) and thus come with extra support and requirements. Over 70% of Georgia State's freshmen belong to an FLC, which functions as an opt-out program for students, rather than opt-in.

In total, 21 students from all three FLCs agreed to participate. Representative of Georgia State's student population, most participants were students of color, with the majority identifying as African American. Par-

ticipants included commuters and residential students, and two students took at least one year off between high school and college. The participants belonged to ten different FLCs, bringing in experiences with varied instructors and schedules. Five focus groups were conducted, wherein students were asked 8–10 questions that ranged from general inquiries about their goals, needs, and expectations for college and composition to more specific questions regarding their experiences with Georgia State's retention initiatives. At the end of each focus group, students were invited to participate in a one-on-one interview on a different day. Nine students, still representing the three types FLCs, agreed. Interview questions were based on the same topics addressed in focus groups but were tailored to individual experiences. Focus groups and interviews took no longer than 60 minutes. Following the recording and transcription stages of data collection, the data was coded for common themes. Because student voices are limited in current WPA and composition scholarship on the topic of retention, themes were developed organically rather than created prior to data analysis.

Results

The findings from this study, presented in table 1, show that initiatives designed to move students toward graduation and at an efficient rate present benefits that retention scholars have long argued help students succeed, specifically offering extra academic support and social support (Tinto, "Dropout from Higher Education"; Zhau and Kuh). Participants especially highlighted the inclusive value of FLCs, which were said to help residential and commuter students alike cultivate relationships and hold themselves accountable academically. A third benefit of professional support was also reported of first-year seminar courses. Elements of those same initiatives, however, were identified for presenting challenges to how students manage their time and make plans. For example, George, a military veteran and commuter student, expressed frustration over his summer bridge program limiting how many credits students could take per semester because he wanted to graduate earlier than four years. A third challenge repeated by participants was the financial costs associated with some initiatives.

Discussing benefits of certain retention initiatives, such as students sharing schedules with their peers, revealed frustrations about those initiatives' ancillary expectations. This was the case when participants elaborated on their summer bridge program's out-of-of class requirements. These requirements include obtaining signatures from professors multiple times during a semester, attending study hall, meeting with peer coaches, and attending success workshops (e.g., "How to Meet with Your Professors" and "How

to Effectively Manage Stress"). Because individual initiatives can include beneficial and challenging attributes, certain components of initiatives are discussed separately (see table 1); for instance, though FLCs prove beneficial to students' academic and social needs, the concept of fixed-schedules, or grouping students together by shared classes and credits, can also present noteworthy challenges. Likewise, out-of-class requirements collectively raised many concerns for students, but one of those requirements, supplemental instruction, was viewed by all participants as adding value to their education.

Table 1

Benefits and Challenges of Student Success Initiatives

Student Success Initiatives	Benefits		
	Academic Support	Social Support	Professional Support
Freshman Learning Communities	✓	✓	
Supplemental Instruction	✓		
Summer Bridge Programs	✓	✓	
First-Year Seminars			✓
Student Success Initiatives	Challenges		
	Time	Finances	Ability to Plan
Fixed-Schedules	✓	✓	✓
First-Year Seminars	✓	✓	
Out-of-Class Requirements	✓	✓	✓

The remainder of this section provides a broad view of first-year students' experiences with Georgia State's multiple retention initiatives. Examples will first be given to show the academic and social benefits offered by three different retention initiatives. Data is then presented to show how well-intended initiatives can hinder rather than support student success. What these findings reveal is that while some initiatives are designed to support students' individual paths toward graduation, as diverse as those may be, others attempt to dictate how and when students can pursue grad-

uation, creating new challenges for students whose needs keep them from pursuing graduation on an institutionally-preferred timeline.

Benefits: Academic Support

A major benefit of Georgia State's retention initiatives is the academic support they provide. Originally prompted by Tinto's student integration model, institutions of higher education have looked internally to examine how they can better support students' classroom performance. Specifically, they have employed strategies that can assist in students' academic improvement, such as building student success centers, sorting students into learning communities, and offering supplemental instruction for courses that have proven difficult for students. This study has found that FLCs and supplemental instruction effectively position students to assess their individual academic needs and utilize the initiatives to improve their chances in school.

FLCs encourage students representing varied lifestyles and possessing a range of priorities to build academic support systems that work for them. As one example, many participants created with their peers a group messaging system by using the app GroupMe. A messaging app that can be downloaded to an iOS, Android, or Windows device, GroupMe allows users to send text and picture messages to as many people as they want in a single private conversation. For some students, like Destiny, a low-income, residential student who balanced participating in school clubs and job hunting with her first year of college, this app allowed her and her peers to work together on assignments and keep each other accountable, a practice she said continued following her first semester, when her and her cohort shared fewer classes. According to Destiny and other participants, the messaging app was used often to check in with peers about what they might have missed in class, set up study groups, and talk through assignments.

Providing similar opportunities for students to address their individual needs, supplemental instruction was repeatedly described by participants as a beneficial retention initiative. Optional for students in traditional FLCs and mandated for those enrolled in bridge programs, Georgia State's supplemental instruction program consists of free study groups for typically difficult courses led by current Georgia State students who have already excelled in that course. Supplemental instruction leaders attend course lectures and then prepare engaging lessons for their study groups to complement the lectures. Students in the summer bridge program are required to attend one of two supplemental instruction sessions offered per week during

the summer and fall bridge students are required to attend a set number of times throughout the semester.

All participants spoke highly of supplemental instruction because of its small group, student-centered dynamic. Illuminating the pedagogical style of one supplemental instruction leader for philosophy, Sydney describes why the mandatory tutoring worked for her: "[He] really summarizes it for us and gives us, kind of like, breaks us up and gives us a question and answer that's the opposite of other groups and it really helps for the test." Here, Sydney is referring to the practice of providing half the group with questions and the other half with answers so that students can work together to learn, not just what the solutions are, but how to achieve those solutions. Participants consistently talked about how the small group dynamic and their leaders' different perspectives worked well to reinforce what they were learning in their courses.

Mandated supplemental instruction posed some time constraints for commuter students and prompted much confusion for students who repeatedly spoke of their institution's poor communication regarding when sessions were available and how many times students needed to attend. Nonetheless, most students found the initiative useful because they were given space to address what they did not understand in their classes. Offering similar benefits to embedded tutoring programs (Severino and Knight), students realized with supplemental instruction the importance of speaking with someone else about their work, while also recognizing the value of support services more generally. Because, like FLCs, supplemental instruction gives room for students to address their academic needs, in this case through asking questions, students planned to or already were attending voluntarily following the semesters it was mandatory.

Benefits: Social Support

A second benefit of Georgia State's retention initiatives, long aimed for by retention scholars, is their facilitation of students' social connections. Scholars argue that the more students can feel connected to their school through relationships and identification with various social circles on campus, the more likely they will feel motivated to stay in school. Thus, universities have sought ways they can encourage students to make those connections, employing initiatives that range from requiring students to visit teachers' office hours to offering lectures on joining student organizations. In some cases, students can find these efforts contrived and unhelpful, especially students who do not require membership into social circles or do not want to follow their university's instructions for how to do so. According to this

study, FLCs and Georgia State's summer bridge program offer opportunities for all students to organically develop relationships in ways that serve their individual needs.

One example of how students were able to establish social connections that benefitted their success goals is the same strategy many employed within FLCs to support their academic needs: the GroupMe app. Beyond its academic benefits, students were able to use the app to better connect with their peers, especially since many mentioned that even though they were in cohorts, they did not always have time to talk with one another in classes. Eshan, a commuter student, explains how the GroupMe messaging system used within his cohort eased his experience feeling a part of the community at Georgia State:

> Because I commute, I'm not exposed to everything that's going on, on campus, but with the group chat, they're talking about things that are going on. They're like hey, this is going on tonight. Y'all should come, and all this. And I'm more exposed to this stuff, so I'm more part of the clique I could say.

Recognizing his lifestyle did not allow him access to the same information as students living on campus, Eshan worked around that issue by appealing to the app. While using the app was an idea that came about organically from students, the social benefit may not have existed for everyone without the structure students were provided by FLCs, not unlike the friendships that often form from group work in composition classes.

Georgia State's summer bridge program was also credited for supporting students' social transition to the university community. Many participants, for example, commented on the opportunities provided for them by beginning school in the summer rather than fall; taken together, their comments suggest that an early start eases the transition into college because it lets them adjust to the university's environment and expectations. Brianna, a residential student, explains that the early start allowed her to reconsider her priorities before facing the backlash of carrying her partying mentality into the fall semester:

> I feel like coming here in the summer versus fall made me mature because when I first got here, I was really excited, like, "yo, it's college, turn up!" Right? You know, I only have three classes, so it's okay for me to turn up a little bit, but now I'm realizing that you know, it's going to take more work. You can't just party every night. So little things that I would have to figure out in August, September, October and now it's late working toward finals, I figured out now, so in the fall I know how to say, nah I'm good.

Brianna alludes to a process of introspection. Because her acceptance to Georgia State was granted under the condition that she begin school in the summer, a condition that she and most summer bridge students felt grateful for, Brianna was positioned to address social pressures earlier and with less intensity than if she would have begun college in the fall.

In addition to learning lessons of work/life balance prior to managing a full-time class schedule, summer bridge students also mentioned the usefulness in establishing friendships and familiarizing themselves with the campus before the university would return to its standard, much higher number of attendees in the fall and spring semesters. While beginning in the summer was mandated for bridge students, the students took advantage of the early start to negotiate what kinds of lifestyles best served their goals; students also capitalized on the less populated campus to explore and become comfortable with the campus's urban setting. Regardless of whether students were traditional in age or nontraditional, commuter or resident, all were given time with the early start to acclimate themselves and accommodate their new lives within the university community.

Challenges: Ability to Plan

Though participants largely benefited from FLCs, supplemental instruction, and the summer bridge program, three popular retention initiatives, this case study has also revealed significant challenges faced by students, particularly those enrolled in bridge programs. These challenges, observed together, present the risks involved with universities encouraging all students to pursue graduation in the same way and underline the unique needs of students who commute, are nontraditional, or come from low-income households.

One challenge caused by retention initiatives involves students making short-term and long-term plans. The out-of-class requirements many students must fulfill, for example, often position students to rely on the communication and organization of administrators, a situation that makes students' daily schedules vulnerable to the priorities of others. Many participants described the program's communication about these requirements as "jumbled" and "hearsay" rather than organized in a manner that would help students get what they needed complete (Chris). Alicia elaborates on her experience managing the program's demands:

> We were kind of just fish thrown into water having to fend for ourselves and I know that college kind of is, you know, you gotta do what you got to do, but whenever they explained this summer success to us at Incept [orientation], it was just kind of, yea you're going

to have required things that you're going to do, but it was just like "required things." So we're like, okay, I'm guessing that you know, when we get there, they're going to tell us these required things and they didn't tell us these required things. So, I think it was last week we just figured out at a workshop, um, last Friday we figured out that if you go to two SIs a week, you don't have to go the following week . . . which, we didn't know about that.

Alicia and many other participants discussed instances of not knowing exactly what they needed to complete, but also fearing that if they did not complete the requirements, they would risk their spot in the program. Beyond confusion about supplemental instruction, students also spoke about receiving notifications on their phones of meetings being rescheduled within a few minutes' notice and advising sessions being cancelled, but not rescheduled by the program's administrators. Thus, first-semester students were faced with having to figure out how to reschedule the sessions themselves to avoid getting into trouble. For commuter students, quick changes to their schedules were especially difficult to accommodate, but for all students, poor communication disrupted their ability to plan when they would devote time to different responsibilities each day. While summer bridge students are aware, prior to enrolling in the program, that they must be available between 9:30 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. during the week, students negotiating their multiple priorities with those expected of them from the program require to know ahead of time how their week will be structured. Not granting students this courtesy displays an institutional preference for students to integrate fully into the university community, an option not possible for all students.

Another obstacle found to impede long-term planning concerns the credit limits placed on summer bridge students' first three semesters, which can cause significant disruptions to their college trajectories. Although Georgia State's initiatives encourage students to graduate in four years, not every student enrolls in college with the same timeline. In a 2015 study of nontraditional students, for example, nontraditional female students were found to persist at higher rates if they attended school part-time and could maintain a balance among all their life roles. Furthermore, nontraditional students did not require social integration to perform well in college. Rather, their biggest priority was ensuring they could attend school while serving demands outside of the classroom (Markle). For George, a married commuter student with a part-time job, this meant graduating more quickly than what his summer bridge program had in mind for him:

> I'm not trying to be here for four or five years; I'm trying to gradu-
> ate in three, three and half because that's when the GI bill stops pay-
> ing me. So I'm trying to get in, get out, and they're like oh yea, you
> know, you're only allowed to take 12 hours. It's like, what do you
> mean? I'm trying to take 14 or 15.

George was placed in the summer bridge program because, like oth-
ers enrolled in the program, his freshman index score was below Georgia
State's standards, a factor George attributes to taking the college entrance
exam years after graduating high school. While he is grateful for being
accepted, George does not require many of the same initiatives designed
to support traditional students. Monitored study hall, weekly workshops,
and credit limits, for example, are employed with the presumption that
students need a university-designated time to do their homework, require
formal discussions on stress management or financial literacy, and should
pace themselves to avoid getting overwhelmed their first year. A 23-year-old
who has already served four years in the military, George finds it difficult
to study among a group of younger students: his definition of stress differs
drastically from his peers; he lives on his own, sharing bills with his wife;
and he does not view Georgia State's workshops as relevant to his needs.
With many other responsibilities, George wants to finish school as quickly
as possible, especially while he still qualifies for the GI bill. For George to
fulfill his personal goals for success, therefore, he requires an institution
that will allow him to construct his own path toward graduation, rather
than engage in "hand-holding," as George often described his many out-
of-class requirements.

Challenges: Finances

Data from this study has also presented disturbing financial challenges,
particularly for students whose needs and lived experiences clash with pur-
suing success according to their institution's preferred timeline. This section
will address two scenarios that speak to the unique position low-income
students face should their schedules be restricted by credit limits.

Participating in the fall bridge program, or PEP, Destiny and Kennedy
both knew they had not earned HOPE, the "merit-based award" given to
students who graduate high school with a 3.0 GPA and go on to attend
a public university in their state ("HOPE Scholarship"). If students earn
HOPE, they receive tuition assistance to cover the costs of 30 credits per
year along with student fees. Students must maintain a 3.0 GPA to con-
tinue receiving HOPE, and that GPA is reviewed every 30 credit hours
until a degree is earned. If students do not earn HOPE coming out of high

school, their GPA will be reviewed after they earn 30 credits for reconsideration. This is an excellent opportunity for all students, but especially low-income students.

Destiny and Kennedy were very aware of the process for earning HOPE to avoid paying out of pocket for tuition after their first year. What they did not know was that PEP would not give them the opportunity to earn 30 credits between their fall and spring semesters. Destiny and Kennedy enrolled in PEP, in other words, without being informed they would have to pay for summer school and summer housing the following year. Destiny, who entered college with one AP credit, realized after she enrolled that she could not take 15 credits in the spring, and therefore, experienced stress during her school year to manage summer enrollment:

> My mom has her own bills she has to pay and, you know, I don't like asking people for stuff. I've always wanted to get stuff done myself, so coming into fall, I paid half of what was due myself 'cause I didn't want to have to make my mom pay all of it because I didn't get the grades I should've got in high school. And doing step, she didn't want me to have to have a job. She wanted me to enjoy my freshman year. But doing step and stuff and then having to take a summer class, I had to stop stepping so I could get a job. And so, I could've still been stepping, but I'm stressing myself over a job because I have to now pay for summer school or else I will be behind because if I don't do summer school, I may not have the money to fully pay out the full amount for fall, and I won't be able to stay on campus and then I'll have to commute all the time, so it's just like, issue on top of issue . . . when I could've just went to the community college, so. If you don't have the funds for PEP, [it] creates a lot of complications.

The financial struggles Destiny faced managing her fall bridge program's restrictions and earning HOPE present tensions between a college lifestyle where students have time to integrate into the university community both academically and socially—as evidenced by Destiny's involvement with her school's step team—and the circumstances faced by low-income students. Destiny worked to experience college the way retention scholars suggest: she attended school full time, lived on campus, and got involved in a social community at the university. With the limitations placed on students enrolled in PEP, however, limitations employed because these students were deemed "at-risk," Destiny was unable to afford the recommended lifestyle.

Offering "at-risk" students less coursework during their first semesters in college is well-intended. As discussed earlier, students enrolled in Georgia State's summer bridge program benefited greatly from beginning school

earlier, without the pressures of a full course load. However, dictating students' credit hours is also enforced with the presumption that all students can attend school on the university's preferred timeline, a presumption that favors the student who can afford to integrate completely into the university community, rather than those who must balance that time with earning money or juggling other responsibilities.

In another example that highlights the challenges retention initiatives can present to low-income students, Kennedy, who did not have any AP credits, offers an experience like Destiny's. In doing so, she gives insight to why some students must also pay for campus housing should they attend summer school:

> Most college students take 15 credits their first semester, but PEP stopped it at 13 credits, so I mean, if I had taken 15 credits that last semester and this semester, I would automatically get HOPE in the fall and we wouldn't have this problem. But, since it was 13 and 13, I have 26 and now I have to somehow go to summer school, spend more money to make money in a way. So my parents have to try to come up with $2,000 for me to go to summer school and they don't want me to stay at home since my home is in a bad condition, so they, you know, had to take out even more loans. So, my mom is trying to take out this parent plus loan to make sure I'm able to stay on campus. I mean she said if push comes to shove, then I'll have to stay home. It's not that big of a deal, but I mean, you know, we don't, I don't want to.

Kennedy's story is one that also includes the university reevaluating her GPA and explaining to her at the beginning of the fall semester that she did not have to enroll in PEP; however, Kennedy appreciated the free tutoring and support the program advertised and so opted to remain in it. At the time, Kennedy was not made aware of the program's limitations. As she does above, Kennedy spoke of the way her and her family strategized simply to raise the funds for her to attend Georgia State. Her father borrowed money from a friend, and Kennedy wrote a letter to someone she once worked for, asking for a donation. With greater transparency on how initiatives may impact the diverse circumstances of those enrolled, however, situations such as Kennedy's and Destiny's may have been avoided.

Discussion: Facilitating Student Success in Writing Programs

The examples provided are just a few of many gathered for this study that show the ways in which initiatives representative of the EIC can benefit and challenge students' journeys toward graduation. Overall, the data on

first-year students' experiences with multiple retention initiatives reveals that those most beneficial to students' success are initiatives that help facilitate students' academic journeys, regardless of what those paths look like. Facilitative initiatives offer space for students to consider how best to use the support for their individual needs. FLCs, for example, bring students together through shared schedules and, therefore, facilitate students' regular interaction with each other. With this initiative, students of all incomes and ages, residents and commuters, are encouraged to leverage their eventual familiarity with peers to improve their chances of achieving academic success. Similarly, the most beneficial aspects of supplemental instruction and Georgia State's summer bridge program are the position they place students in to determine for themselves how the initiatives can best support their academic and social needs. Participants were required to attend supplemental instruction but spoke often of preparing questions for their instruction leaders that would assist with their personal understanding of the material; participants also overwhelmingly agreed they were more likely to make use of the resource in subsequent semesters because of their initial required sessions. Finally, while the summer bridge program can present obstacles for students, the program's most beneficial attribute was bringing students together for an early start. Students used the opportunity to reflect on who they wanted to be at State, developed friendships, and took advantage of the less populated campus environment to get acclimated. All these initiatives, then, appear crucial to facilitating students' individual pursuits of success because they create supportive spaces inclusive to the varied needs of Georgia State students.

Alternatively, the initiatives most challenging for students are those that try to dictate students' paths toward success. These initiatives, while well intended, control or restrict how students advance through school by presuming their needs and limiting how they might make use of support services. Assigning numerous out-of-class requirements for first-semester students, for example, intends to engage multiple practices suggested by scholars for supporting retention, such as giving students information through workshops, increasing faculty-student interactions through grade check-ins, and encouraging valued habits by sectioning off time for homework with monitored study halls. These initiatives can often cost students time, however, which is harder to come by for commuters and students who hold full- or part-time jobs. In George's case, these initiatives are also not designed with all students' needs in mind, decreasing the likelihood for every student to find the initiative worthy of sacrificing time outside of class. Finally, though credit limits seek to support at-risk students by not overwhelming them with heavy workloads their first year, they can

also create financial stresses and impede students' planned trajectories through school.

With a quick search on the WPA listserv, scholars can observe the increasing pressure faced by WPAs to improve success rates in first-year writing. Whether they are charged with designing in-house initiatives or implementing strategies recommended by external organizations, WPAs can work to ensure their programs support students' diverse pathways toward success by prioritizing initiatives that facilitate rather than dictate students' engagement with support. Ideally these initiatives would promote community, contextualize academic assistance, and give students greater agency through increased transparency.

The possibilities for how these traits may be employed are varied by institutional context and resources, but they are not far removed from the suggested practices of composition studies. To promote community aligns with composition's longstanding preferences for group work, peer review, and conferencing. Yet, situated in the conversation of retention, the benefits feeling a part of a community have on students' academic success bring renewed relevance to our field's fight for improved labor practices and employment stability (Horner). Contextualizing academic assistance, likewise, encourages the continued support of writing centers; yet, when prompted by greater institutional attention, WPAs may advocate for other methods, such as embedded tutoring and credit-bearing writing studio labs, to request further resources and expand their student outreach (Kim and Carpenter). Offering students' greater agency through transparency, finally, calls on WPAs to examine programmatic and institutional initiatives that presume students' needs, goals, and lived experiences. Doing so may encourage a reexamination of placement procedures (Brunk-Chavez and Fredericksen), an adoption of anti-racist assessment practices (Inoue), and greater scrutiny of initiatives that promote a single college lifestyle: inflexible class scheduling, credit limits, and out-of-class requirements.

The pressure from our political and economic moment encourages all who have a stake in higher education to invest in keeping students in school until graduation. The financial consequences of students dropping out are widely felt, from the individual and their family to the university and greater economy. Encouraging students to graduate efficiently, however, is not possible for everyone enrolled, and WPAs are well-positioned to ensure that the call from retention organizations to support students' success is met with initiatives that are inclusive to multiple pathways through school.

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