STUDENT ENGAGEMENT THROUGH THE LENSES OF FIVE FIRST-
GENERATION COLLEGE FRESHMEN

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by

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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *Student Engagement Through the Lenses of Five First-Generation College Freshmen* by Crystal O. Wong, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a doctorate submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership at San Francisco State University.

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First-generation college students make up more than one-third of the California State University population, but more than 23% drop out in the first year. Yet little is known about their first-year experiences. Most institutions rely on the National Student Survey of Engagement (NSSE) to provide engagement data on first-year students in the belief that such data is linked to student success. However, there is no substantial evidence that NSSE actually predicts first year retention or captures the key dimension of student engagement. The purpose of this study was to use a narrative inquiry to explore this gap. I focus on the academic, social, and campus experiences of first-year, first-generation college students. Multiple in-depth interviews were conducted with five highly diverse students. The findings suggest that student engagement is driven not in terms of academics but social and emotional factors. These findings are not captured in NSSE, and therefore, institutions should broaden the definition of engagement and the use of qualitative studies to better measure student engagement.

I certify that the abstract is a correct representation of the content of this dissertation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Discourse of Retention

Every writing teacher I know at SF State has stories about disengaged students. They are easy to spot: students with poor attendance, doing the bare minimum, unwilling to participate in class, and looking bored. Some students may be disengaged because they are in a classroom that is unwelcoming; others might be disinterested in the subject, disconnected to the teacher, or wanting to hide their learning challenges; and quite often, teachers confuse introverts as being disengaged. As such, engagement is complex and difficult to understand, yet we think it's the key to successful learning, and every teacher I know looks for it. We've come to believe that "student engagement is associated with positive outcomes such as retention, graduation and satisfaction" (San Francisco State University Infographics, 2019).

With this belief, our university turned to The National Student Survey of Engagement (NSSE) for engagement data on first-year students. We looked at the NSSE data to see how students perceive their college experiences, such as their level of involvement in academics, high impact practices, and campus activities. The NSSE data can show how students rate their interactions with faculty, staff, and peers, and their satisfaction with the institution. Also, numerical gaps between gender, ethnicity, and under-represented minorities are revealed. In turn, our university used the NSSE data to consider what can be improved.

However, there is no substantial evidence that NSSE actually predicts first year retention or captures the key dimension of student engagement. As a teacher of first-year writing, a faculty fellow at the teaching and learning center, and co-chair of the Academic Master Plan work group, I have an up-close view of the picture painted by the scholarship on engagement and retention. At SF State, we have developed first-year programs and initiatives to support student engagement and retention. As a university in the process of change, SF State is striving to understand the best practices that faculty should consider when working with first-year students and the best ways to interpret data on student engagement and retention. Thus, given my different roles on campus, these discourses on engagement and retention are unavoidable, and I'm often grappling with tough questions: What do students experience in their first year of college? What do their experiences tell us about their engagement? How do their experiences shed light on retention and student success? These are the research questions my study will explore.

Retention Issues

Retention is referred to as continued enrollment within the same university in the fall semester of a student's first and second year (IPEDS, 2019); it could also be referred to the institution's ability to retain a student from admission until graduation (Berger and Lyon, 2005). More important than the bounded definitions, however, are the university's efforts to engage, and hence retain, students particularly in the first year.

On a national level, student retention is a problem. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center indicates that students who entered college as a freshman in 2011 had a completion rate of 57%, with 45% graduating from the first institution and 12% graduating from their transferred institution. This same cohort had an attrition rate of 31%, which is one in three, and only 12% continued enrollment after six years (Shapiro et. al, 2017). Additionally, there are disparities by race and ethnicity: Asian and white students had higher completion rates than Hispanic and African American students, with a racial gap of 20-30% (Shapiro et. al, 2017). Asian students and white students who entered college in Fall 2015 persisted into the second fall term of college at higher rates (84% and 80%) than Hispanic students and African American students (73% and 67%), a racial gap of 17% (Annual Persistence and Retention Report, 2017).

The national retention statistics are mirrored at the state level. The California State University (CSU) system is also struggling to retain students, especially among first-year students. The two-year persistence for students who entered college as a freshman in 2011 persisted at 75%; cohort 2012 persisted at 76%; cohort 2013 persisted at 76%; and cohort 2014 persisted at 75% (CSU Institutional Research, 2018). This suggests that the average attrition rate for the CSU system is approximately 25%. The 4-year graduation rate for first-year students was 19% for cohort 2011, 20% for cohort 2012, 22% for cohort 2013, and 23% for cohort 2014 (CSU Institutional Research, 2018). Even though graduation rates have been increasing each year, the graduation and equity

gaps based on race still remain. The equity gap was at 14% for cohort 2011, 13% for cohort 2012, 14% for cohort 2013, and 16% for cohort 2014. The CSU says these “underserved students,” which the CSU defines as low-income students, first generation students, and students of color, are graduating at a lower rate than their peers, a gap the CSU aims to close (Redefining Historically Underserved Students in the CSU, 2016).

At SF State, the two-year persistence rate is equally severe. The two-year persistence rate for the freshman cohort 2011 is at 71%; cohort 2012 is at 72%; cohort 2013 is at 72%; and cohort 2014 is at 70% (CSU Institutional Research, 2018). SF State’s first-year, full-time persistence rate for cohort 2017 is 79%, an increase from previous years, yet compared to the national first-year persistence rate (89%) for those who entered a 4-year institution, the gap is 10% (SFSU Retention and Graduation, 2018). As such, “improving the first-year retention rate is one of the first steps in improving overall six-year graduation rates” (SFSU Six-Year Graduation and Attrition, 2018).

To understand the issue of retention, institutions like SF State focus on the concept of student engagement because they perceive a linkage between student engagement and positive educational outcomes, such as satisfaction, graduation, and retention (San Francisco State University Infographics, 2019). This perception is highlighted by an existing body of literature (Astin, 1984, 1993; Berger and Milem, 1999; Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Goodsell, Maher and Tinto, 1992; Kuh, 1995; Kuh et al., 2005; Kuh and Vesper, 1997; Pace, 1995; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Given

this body of literature, the concept of student engagement has been generally accepted by institutions as being a connector to academic success and retention. Thomas (2012), who examined a large body of research projects on student engagement, sums up the connection between student engagement and student success: “It has become increasingly clear that ‘success’ means helping all students to become more engaged and more effective learners in higher education, thus improving their academic outcomes and their progression opportunities after graduation ” (p. 10). This link is what makes student engagement an important focal point and a guiding force at most institutions. If student engagement is the key to student retention, as the body of literature suggests, then we should look at how institutions measure student engagement.

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)

Currently, most American 4-year colleges use the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) survey to measure student engagement. This survey is given to both freshmen and seniors every three years, and the data collected from students are shared with institutions so they could improve what they do. The goal of NSSE is to examine the quality of undergraduate education, looking at what matters to student learning and satisfaction. NSSE defines student engagement as “the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities” and “how [an] institution deploys its resources and organizes [its] curriculum and other learning opportunities to get students to participate in activities that decades of research studies

show are linked to student learning” (NSSE, 2013, p. 1). For the purposes of this dissertation, I use the term engagement as defined by NSSE.

Drawing from its definition of engagement, NSSE measures student engagement based on two categories: students’ engagement in productive learning activities and in high impact activities. The first category -- engagement in productive learning activities -- is based on four NSSE “themes”: (1) Academic Challenge (2) Learning with Peers (3) Experiences with Faculty (4) Campus Environment. These four themes are supported by ten “engagement indicators,” which include higher-order learning, reflective and integrative learning, learning strategies, quantitative reasoning, learning with peers, discussions with diverse others, experiences with faculty, effective teaching practices, quality of interactions, and supportive environments. These “engagement indicators” are quantified by asking students about their behaviors and perceptions of the university. A diagram that summarizes the four themes and engagement indicators of this is shown in Figure 1 (see below).

Figure 1. NSSE Themes and Engagement Indicators. From NSSE 2017 Results, SFSU. (2017).

The second category -- high impact activities -- is based on the seven “high impact practices” (HIPs). These HIPs are out-of-class activities that aim to introduce students to different kinds of meaningful experiences not captured in the classroom. The HIP list includes participation in a learning community, service-learning, research with faculty, internship or field experience, study abroad, and culminating senior experience (NSSE, 2013). Measurement of these seven HIPs is based on the number of HIPs in which students have participated.

Coupled together, Engagement Indicators (EIs) and High Impact Practices (HIPs) reflect the two sides of engagement: what students do to become involved, and what institutions do to create meaningful engagement experiences.

Engagement Studies. Given NSSE's importance in higher education as a measurement of student engagement, it has been questioned, tested, and critiqued by researchers. NSSE predicts that the more engaged students are, the higher their GPAs will be (NSSE, 2002); however, these correlations, although statistically significant, are modest overall. Carini et. al (2006) examined the association between SAT scores and its relationship between student engagement and GPA. They found slight positive partial correlations in 9 out of the 11 NSSE engagement benchmarks: level of academic challenge ($P < .05$), active and collaborative learning ($P < .001$), student-faculty interaction ($P < .001$), supportive campus climate ($P < .01$), reading and writing ($P < .05$), quality of relationships ($P < .01$), institutional emphasis on good practices ($P < .05$), student-faculty interaction concerning coursework ($P < .001$), and integration coursework ($P < .05$) (Carini et al., 2006, p. 13). To summarize, this study showed that two NSSE benchmarks had no correlations, four had low statistical significance; two had statistical significance; and three had high statistical significance.

NSSE has not made an explicit correlation between engagement and retention which explains why studies investigating NSSE have mainly looked for correlations to GPA, but not to retention. LaNasa et al. (2009) and Gordon et al. (2008), conducted a

small scale investigation of the NSSE benchmarks at a single institution, and both studies found no strong association between NSSE benchmarks and GPA, concluding that NSSE is an invalid method for confirming institutional effectiveness. In another study, Pascarella et al., (2008) conducted a multi-institutional study using data from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education to investigate the predictive validity of NSSE benchmarks on six liberal arts outcomes and concluded that only one of the benchmarks (student-faculty relationship) showed a statistically significant, though modest, correlation to GPA. Furthermore, the researchers conclude that NSSE's correlation claims are not backed up by sufficient research: "The use of the NSSE to measure effective practices in undergraduate education has become widespread in American postsecondary institutions. The NSSE benchmark scales . . . purport to measure educational practices that are linked to desirable learning and developmental outcomes. To date, however, there is only a limited body of internally valid research that has attempted to validate this claim" (p. 30).

To maintain its validity, researchers at NSSE (NSSE, 2010) have conducted a wide array of psychometric studies on the properties of NSSE. However, Campbell and Cabrera (2011) called them out for two glaring omissions: (1) NSSE has not reported construct validation of the benchmarks of effective educational practices and (2) NSSE has cited no research examining how well the benchmarks hold true for individual institutions. Campbell and Cabrera (2011) also conducted their research on the validity

of the NSSE benchmarks at a single research institution; they concluded that only one benchmark (Enriching Educational Experiences) had a significant correlation to GPA. Their findings further question the extent to which NSSE benchmarks should be used as a universal tool for assessing institutional quality, and whether they predict academic student outcomes.

Studies have also been conducted to see who benefited more from engagement, as defined by NSSE. The first study is by Carini et. al (2006). Using data from multi-institutional samples, they examined the association between SAT scores and its relationship between student engagement and GPA. These researchers reported that when comparing the lowest and highest SAT scores, they found that those who scored below 1030 benefited more from being engaged than those who scored above 1330. Specifically, “low ability students” receive the “greatest payoffs” when they experience a supportive campus climate, high-quality relationships with faculty, a diverse curriculum, and supports in reading and writing. Based on these findings, Carini et al. (2006) suggest that high levels of engagement have a greater impact on those who come in less academically prepared (low SAT scores). To explain this dichotomy, Carini et. al (2006) say “high ability students [those who come in with high SAT scores] need to expend less effort” to be successful (p. 16).

The second study conducted to see who benefited more from engagement is by Kuh et al. (2008). Using data from multi-institutional samples, they examined the impact

of engagement on GPA and first-year student retention rates based on ethnicity. This study found that as a result of high levels of engagement, Hispanic students have greater gains in GPA, and African American students have greater gains in both GPA and retention when compared to White students. This led Kuh et al. (2008) to conclude that less academically prepared students, first-generation students, and students of color benefit most from structured educational activities (i.e. first-year seminars, service-learning courses, learning communities) in the first year of college. While this study does not offer an explanation for the gap, such as why students of color benefited more from engagement interventions than White students, we do know from previous studies that college completion rates are linked to students' entering characteristics (Astin and Oseguera, 2005) and economics (Braxton and Hirschy, 2005; Bean and Metzner, 1985). In other words, students who arrive at college with more advantages are more likely to graduate despite whether or not the university serves them.

In sum, this section looked at studies that critiqued and questioned NSSE's claim of predictive correlation between engagement and GPA. Many of these studies, however, couldn't find a high statistical correlation supporting NSSE's claim, and when they did, the data can only be thought about as suggestive because the overall correlations are small. This section also revealed two engagement studies that helped us better understand which student groups benefited most from engagement activities. The next section will look at how engagement data is used at SF State.

SF State use of NSSE. At the CSU level, NSSE is administered in 20 of the 23 CSU campuses. The NSSE data have been cited by the director of the first-year experience program at professional development workshops to help faculty better understand the academic behaviors of first-year students and the importance of student-faculty interaction. Also, the NSSE data were cited by the committee during the planning process of SF State's academic master plan to show the lack of student participation in undergraduate research and overall involvement in campus activities (I was a co-chair). Thus NSSE plays a significant role at SF State because the university perceives student engagement as a link to satisfaction, graduation, and retention (San Francisco State University Infographics, 2019) and retention is the main goal of the CSU graduation initiative 2025 (Graduation Initiative 2025, 2016).

NSSE measures student involvement in academics and campus activities to provide colleges with a broad assessment of their institutional quality. The NSSE data can summarize the type of students (freshmen, senior, full-time, part-time, gender, ethnicity) who are involved in specific educational practices and who positively rate their courses, faculty, and institution. And, the NSSE data can point out the numerical gaps between gender, ethnicity, and under-represented minorities. Furthermore, the NSSE data shows how students perceive their college experiences, and in turn, lets colleges know what they're doing well and what can be improved. By stacking the data against a comparison group, NSSE shows institutions how they match up with a similar institution

so areas of weakness and strength are made explicit. This data, then, allows administrators to assess current programs and determine next steps for meeting the needs of students.

NSSE 2017. The most recent survey administered at SF State is the NSSE 2017. Based on the data results, the first-year student response rate was 13% (n=471). This response rate produced an acceptable margin of error (anything below 5% is considered valid), yet it is still a small response rate. The student data is broken down by class (freshman, senior); status (full-time, part-time); gender (male, female); and ethnicity (Asian, Latino, White, Foreign/Nonresident Alien, Unknown, Black or African American, Two or more races/ethnicities, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific, Islander). Figure 2 shows the NSSE 2017 data for first-year students (see below).

Figure 2. NSSE 2017 data for first-year students. From NSSE 2017 Results, SFSU. (2017).

Critique of the NSSE 2017 data

Engagement Indicators. Based on the NSSE 2017 data, the percentage of students who were engaged, as defined by NSSE, was approximately 55%. This percentage was derived from averaging the mean scores of all ten engagement indicators (EIs).

The highest scoring EI for first-year students is “Discussion with Diverse Others” (64%) while the lowest EI is “Student-Faculty Interactions” (26%). Specifically, this means 64% of first-year students reported having discussions with people of a different race/ethnicity, economic background, religious beliefs, and political views other than one’s own, while only 26% reported that they talked about career plans with a faculty member, worked with a faculty member on activities other than coursework, and discussed course topics, ideas, or concepts with a faculty member outside of class.

The top score assigned to “Discussion with Diverse Others” is not surprising. Given our diverse student body at SF State and the wide variety of GE courses offered in the College of Ethnic Studies, students will encounter others with different experiences and values from oneself. Likewise, the lowest score given to “Student-Faculty Interactions” is also not surprising. From my decade of experience in working with first-year students, talking to faculty about career plans or activities outside of classwork is not a student priority. Trying to acclimate to the college classroom and university,

first-year students have priorities that are more focused on logistics and maintaining good grades: how to study for exams, register for classes, find a job, and write a passing paper.

Two other top scoring EIs worth noting are (a) higher order learning: analyzing an idea, evaluating a point of view, reaching conclusions based on analysis of numerical information and (b) teacher effectiveness: feedback on a draft or work in progress, organized instruction, clear explanations. The high ratings in teacher effectiveness (63%) imply that more than half of the first-year students are content with the way professors teach in undergraduate courses. However, NSSE doesn't explain why the remaining students (37%) are discontent. Similarly, the high ratings in higher order learning (64%) show that students feel they're academically competent, yet NSSE can't explain why the remaining students (36%) don't feel academically competent. NSSE, also, doesn't have a recommendation for institutions to address this.

On the flip side, the lower performing EIs for first-year students are related to campus environment. Students across the board say SF State lacks emphasis on attending campus activities and events, on providing opportunities to be involved socially, on providing support for their overall well-being, and on academic work. The low rating (52%) in campus life and mental health services point to areas needing improvement, but what, specifically, would students like more of? What can institutions do to make campus life and psychological services better to meet their needs? In sum, findings in these areas raised more questions than answers.

High Impact Practices. In addition to the engagement indicators, NSSE also measures extracurricular activities, referred to as high-impact practices (HIPs). HIPs include service-learning, learning communities, research with faculty, internship/field experience, study abroad activities. These activities, from NSSE's standpoint, are linked to learning, retention, and engagement. In other words, participation in HIPs could improve engagement, which in turn could boost retention. According to the NSSE 2017 report, overall participation in HIPs among first-year students is low: 42% say they have not participated in any HIPs; 52% say they participated in one; and 6% say they participated in two or more.

On the surface level, NSSE tells us about the importance of HIPs and how they're measurable; however, we can also see that trying to measure HIPs could be meaningless in terms of understanding first-year students because they can't focus on career path conversations when they are just acclimating to the campus, and the university doesn't offer HIPs for them with the exception of service learning in some classes. Diving deeper, conversations about HIPs could be dependent on students' prior educational backgrounds because high resourced schools tend to offer students opportunities to participate in HIPs (career counseling, research, service learning), and such students come into the university seeking these activities in which they were groomed to participate. Even if HIPs weren't available in schools, students coming in with outside

resources will have access to HIPs through family and friends. This, then, raises a question about equity: Who tends to seek out HIPs and who has access to them?

Gaps. Among racial groups, there was a gap between Asian and Latino students in their first year. Asian students' satisfaction rating of SFSU is slightly lower (-6%) than the overall first-years; their EIs and their participation in HIPs are slightly lower across the board (-5% when compared to overall first-years). However, Latino students' satisfaction rating of SFSU is slightly higher (+5%) than the overall first-years; their EIs and their participation in HIPs are slightly higher across the board (+7%) when compared to overall first-years. I struggle to understand the differences in perception because in the retention data, Asian students had higher completion rates than Hispanic students (Shapiro et. al, 2017).

Similar to the findings between Asian and Latino students, a small gap also exists between URM students (underrepresented minorities) and non-URM students. The URM category, as defined in NSSE, is based on ethnicity: Black, African American, Latino and Native American/Alaskan Native students (NSSE, 2017). These students, according to the CSU, embody one or more of the following characteristics: Pell recipient, first-generation, non-college-proficient at entry, a member of an ethnic community (Redefining Historically Underserved, 2016). Like Asian students, non-URM students' satisfaction rating of SFSU is also slightly lower (-1%) than the overall first-years; their EIs and participation in HIPs (-3%) are slightly lower across the board when compared to

overall first-years. However, similar to Latino students, URM students' satisfaction rating of SFSU is slightly higher (+2%) than the overall first-years; their EIs and their participation in HIPs are slightly higher across the board (+7%) when compared to overall first-years. Yet, the CSU data shows that non-URM students have higher completion rates (12%) than URM students (Redefining Historically Underserved, 2016).

Conclusion. While the NSSE data can be helpful in shedding light on student needs, the fault lines are also noticeable. Knowing the percentages of how many students are involved in HIPs, and which EIs receive higher ratings than other EIs doesn't show a complete picture. Because NSSE's quantitative snapshots don't go beyond their predefined questions, NSSE obscures students' voice: their motivation, expectations, and learning. Each fault line in NSSE -- the focus on behaviors; the way HIPs don't apply to first-year students; the equity gaps it exposes but doesn't explain -- raises questions that my study will address.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The conceptual framework guiding this study is derived from NSSE's framework (NSSE, 2013) and Kahu's framework (Kahu, 2013). I've adapted their theories to create a 3-circle venn diagram that represents my thinking of how students perceive engagement in their first year. A diagram of this conceptual framework is shown in Figure 3. The first circle includes behaviors, such as oneself and peers; the second circle represents the college environment, such as student interactions with people and resources on campus; and the third contains student background, such as prior schooling and family background. My research will examine where the circle overlaps -- student perception -- the intersections of their behaviors, the college environment, and their background.

Figure 3. Conceptual framework guiding this study.

The amount of literature associated with student retention and engagement is vast, thus making an exhaustive literature review impractical. To address this issue, Randolph (2009) suggested a bounded approach to manageability. As such, the sections in this literature review will first reveal how retention issues are approached and solved in other institutions like CSU Long Beach and Georgia State University, followed by how an institution like SF State, in a process of change, approaches retention efforts. Then, I turn to the theoretical perspectives that drive institutional retention efforts anchored in the scholarship on engagement and retention.

Retention Efforts

CSU Long Beach

Cal State University, Long Beach (CSULB) received the 2014 national award from The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) for *Excellence and Innovation in Student Success and Completion*. Then in 2015, CSULB won a \$5 million *California Governor's Innovation* award. Both awards recognized CSULB for their innovation, partnerships, and commitment to students. As of 2014, CSULB's graduation rate reached 65%, a sharp contrast compared to the 26% graduation rate in the late 1990s. CSULB not only raised graduation rates, but also narrowed the achievement gap with first generation students, African American students, and Latino students doubling their graduation rates over a decade (Dowell, 2016).

Success Factors. Their success was not due to increased student selectivity but rather to the development and implementation of the “Highly Valued Degree Initiative” (HVDI), an initiative that primarily involved institutional changes in strategic planning, communication, organization, data, advising, support services, curriculum pathways, pedagogy, tenure-track hiring, and K-12 partnerships (Dowell, 2016).

Behind the scenes, the planning of HVDI involved the collaboration of units working together based on shared goals. Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and Administration and Finance broke out of their silos and collaborated to establish campus goals, resource allocation, course offerings, and student progress to degree (Dowell, 2016). While on center stage, university leaders such as the president and provost articulated their commitment to student success through public communications. These leaders used slogans to put student success at center stage. Their slogans include, “I have three priorities: students, students, students,” “Graduation Begins Today,” “We know our mission; it is student success.” This communication strategy was used to capture the attention of students and stakeholders directly (Dowell, 2016).

Faculty and staff also played a key part in the organization and implementation of HVDI. CSULB administrators brought together mostly faculty representatives and several staff from each academic college to form an institution-wide HVDI steering committee and five task forces that met bi-weekly to execute its strategic agenda through shared governance. These task forces included curriculum pathways to reduce units to

graduation; student support services to improve retention rates; academic advising to ensure that all students receive the necessary advising; faculty professional development to instill effective instructional methods that contribute to retention and learning; and research development to support all task forces in planning, implementing, and evaluating campus efforts toward graduation goals (Dowell, 2016).

The use of data was the hallmark of HVDI. The Office of Institutional Research designed a dashboard to track and monitor graduation and retention rates among first-time-students. They also worked hard on helping the campus community make sense of institutional data and of national comparative data like the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Behind the scenes, data was also used as a strategy to get faculty, staff, and administrators on board on urgent issues. For example, the data that showed achievement gaps led to consensus more quickly, which then invited discussion on problem-solving (Dowell, 2016).

Student services was the cornerstone of HVDI. Specifically, advising services, which was once neglected, reinvented itself by launching new efforts that included mandatory orientation and advising for every student. They also shifted away from faculty advising to staff advising in the form of academic counselors and added more productive services, such as electronic degree planners and e-advising, making it easier for students to track their own progress and get help when needed (Dowell, 2016). CSULB also increased specialized support programs to address the diverse needs of

students, such as the men's initiatives to support African American and Latino males, centers to support undocumented students, LGBTQ students, Veterans, and women. These support programs along with advising, learning communities, supplemental instruction, and tutoring services moved to a centralized building on campus, with the goal of creating a visible, welcoming space for students (Dowell, 2016).

At the heart of HVDI is the curriculum and professional development. By removing a second lab-life-science requirement for non-science majors as well as "hidden" prerequisites (prerequisites that have their own prerequisites), the units towards graduation were reduced to 120 semester units for all majors. While at the same time, CSULB also increased funding for high impact practices, such as internships, study abroad, and undergraduate research for students. For faculty, professional development was increased, which made way for online faculty learning communities, faculty teams redesigning gateway courses to remove bottlenecks resulting in low completion rates, and more faculty being trained in teaching flipped and hybrid courses (Dowell, 2016).

Revising tenure-track hiring practices was also a priority under HVDI. CSULB made efforts to hire faculty who were best suited for working with underrepresented, first generation, and low income student populations. The hiring committee required every candidate to provide a "student success statement" that argues for their commitment and preparation to teaching diverse students (Dowell, 2016).

Lastly, K-14 partnerships preserved local access to CSULB. The purpose of most partnerships is to expand opportunities for students through dual enrollment programs as a means to prepare for college admission. However, CSULB partnered with The Long Beach Unified School District and Long Beach City College for an alternative reason: CSULB wanted improved access for local residents by guaranteeing admission for its disadvantaged community. CSULB didn't want to be a selective school (Dowell, 2016).

In sum, CSULB is a story about a shared purpose, hard work, community, and success. There were no magic bullets. In terms of reform strategies, the lesson learned here is that CSULB implemented not just a few student initiatives, but mainly institutional-changing strategies that required the use of data, collaboration, and orchestration of campus units, as well as a shared goal of student success among faculty, staff, and university leaders.

Georgia State University

Like CSULB, Georgia State University (GSU) made gains over a decade; its graduation rates increased from 31% in 2003 to 54% in 2014. As of 2017, its graduation rate is 53.5%, maintaining its momentum. Within the last decade, GSU has received broad recognition through various media outlets for their success in graduating traditionally underserved students (Blumenstyk, 2014). Specifically, the 60% non-white students, 33% first generation, and 58% Pell grant recipients all graduate at the same rate as others (McMurtrie, 2018).

Success Factors. GSU's approach to problem-solving is one of the most important factors that contribute to student success. GSU was able to identify the two roadblocks to student graduation: academic setbacks and financial challenges. To tackle them, GSU used predictive analytics to improve retention (Kurzweil and Wu, 2015).

One use of predictive analytics is the adoption of an early-warning system for advisors, called Graduation and Progression Success (GPS). GPS is an electronic system that tags academically-risky student behaviors, which then alerts and prompts advisers to contact students. How GPS identifies these behaviors is based on data mining: ten years of student data, grades, and graduation rates, which were analyzed by the Office of Institutional Research to create a list of 800 indicators of academically at-risk behaviors. GPS uses these 800 indicators to provide a real-time analysis of each student -- signaling everything from registering for a class that doesn't count towards a major to receiving a low grade in a prerequisite class -- and flags advisors who then contact students immediately. GSU refers to the GPS process as a way to intervene obstacles before they become acute (Kurzweil and Wu, 2015). Needing an army of advisors to connect with students, GSU hires entry-level staff members, and sometimes recent college graduates, to respond quickly to hundreds of alerts each week. While the cost is high, this investment has more than paid for itself through increased retention (McMurtrie, 2018).

Another use of predictive analytics was applied to financial intervention. GSU launched the Panther Retention Grants program to provide small grants for financial aid

eligible students who owed balances of \$1,500 or less. According to the GSU Office of Institutional Research, this program was created with a gift from President Becker and his wife, when in 2014, GSU noticed that its system was automatically dropping over 1,000 students each semester who were making good progress. These students were mostly seniors, only a semester or two away from graduation, but because financial aid had eligibility limits, many of these students had a financial hold on their account that didn't allow them to stay enrolled unless the balance was removed. To address this problem, GSU now look at the data analytics before the drop period and automatically apply funds to students' account. These small grants are automatically set up to transfer \$1,500 or less into the students' account, so they can remain enrolled and graduate (Kamenetz, 2017).

In addition to helping students with financial challenges, GSU also implemented notable first-year student success initiatives on a large scale to address academic and social enrichment during their first year of study, when attrition often occurs (Kurzweil and Wu, 2015). Freshman Learning Communities bring together first-year students that are sorted into cohorts based around meta-majors like education, business, and STEM, and each cohort take all their courses together. Another initiative, Supplemental Instruction, a peer-tutoring program, hires undergraduates who excel in difficult GE courses as peer tutors to help other first-year students. Furthermore, the Panther Excellence Program helps first-year students get off to a good start by directing them to

academic coaching, leadership development, and social opportunities. Lastly, the Success Academy connects first-year students with programs, activities and services, and financial literacy training during the summer before their first year.

Among first-year students, a failing grade in their introductory course in their major could be a sign of attrition, GSU found. To help more students pass their introductory classes, GSU redesigned its introductory courses, starting with math and continuing with various STEM courses. They replaced the traditional lecture course with hybrid courses and supported them with adaptive, machine-guided instruction such as Pearson's MyMathLab, which proved to be a success (Kurzweil and Wu, 2015). Additionally, the curriculum became standardized, meaning faculty lost their autonomy to teach courses how they wanted to. While it generated pushback, hybridizing and standardizing bottleneck (low-passing) introductory courses have been successful in getting students through critical prerequisite courses and into their chosen majors. (McMurtrie, 2018).

In sum, what GSU has revealed in their reform is a commitment to the success of underserved students. However, this couldn't have happened without support from middle leaders on campus (chairs, deans, directors) who are often held accountable for making the right decisions in holding up university mandates, strategic plans, and operations. Also, this reform couldn't have happened without university leadership. President Becker and his predecessor, Carl Patton, as well as their provosts have

advocated for the initiatives and provided resources to scale them up (Kurzweil and Wu, 2015). While leadership support is important, what made GSU unique is their implementation of the GPS technology with the intervention of compassionate and caring people who reach out to students.

San Francisco State University

While CSU Long Beach and GSU have focused on solutions, SF State is still undergoing a period of change. Their renewed interest in retention is a direct response to the CSU Graduation Initiative 2025 (GI 2025), which aims to increase graduation rates. To make this happen, the CSU asked each individual campus to set graduation goals, identify barriers to graduation, and generate a student success plan in support of this initiative. Additionally, to improve retention, the CSU implemented two Executive Orders, EO 1110 and EO 1100, to GI 2025. Both orders were effective Fall 2018. EO 1110 is the elimination of the placement test and remediation program in the CSU system, which had no impact on SF State's writing program. SF State's writing program had already removed remediation a decade ago by making the stand-alone remedial classes into a two-semester "stretch" freshman composition class (Goen-Salter, 2008).

However, the second policy, EO 1100, had a direct effect on SF State's writing program. EO 1100 requires the implementation of a new general education (GE) pathway, which eliminated an area of GE (A4) that housed English 214, second semester writing. The elimination of area A4 meant that SF State could potentially lose English

214, which is not what our stakeholders across campus wanted. During this time, as part of campus retention efforts and the GI 2025 mandates, SF State launched a Foundations of Excellence first-year self-study (2017) to determine barriers to the success for first-year students and to recognize that any attempt to improve graduation rates must address the student experience during these first two years. In its final report (Foundations of Excellence, 2017), twelve recommendations emerged, but the most salient was the creation of the first-year seminar for all first-year students. Given SF State's interest in a first-year seminar course and the writing program's desire to retain second semester writing, these two courses unified into a year-long first-year writing experience (FYE) course. This "new" FYE course, thus, addresses the goals of CSU's Graduation Initiative 2025, builds on campus efforts to enhance the first-year experience, and complies with EO 1100's mandates. It is a prime example of how retention efforts from higher authority filter down to program levels like composition.

Retention Efforts in First-year Composition. Some might ask why retention efforts are targeted in the first-year writing class. The reason is self-evident. Given that first-year writing is a near universal requirement among colleges, and given that students who leave often do so in their first two years of study, it's likely that students would have enrolled in a writing course before they make any decision to leave, stay, transfer, or take a break; thus first-year writing is an optimal time and place for the university to implement interventions and improve students' experiences in order to retain them.

Powell (2009) explains why first-year writing instruction is placed at the center of retention efforts: “The unique context of the writing classroom as an interface between students' past and future educational experiences, as an introduction to the discourse practices of higher education, and as one of the only universal requirements at most institutions, makes it a prime site for retention” (p. 8). In other words, it is in first-year composition that students are introduced to a discourse community and taught specialized academic skills such as inquiry, writing, argument, clarity, and communication. And if we merge first-year writing with the first-year experience, we will have a course that gives “students a chance to begin practicing college writing, reading, analysis skills, reflect on the role and purpose of an education, articulate their goals and values, explore careers and majors” (Foundation of Excellence, 2017, p. 17).

Impact on Curriculum and Teaching. What has happened at SF State -- retention efforts from state level to campus level to program level -- is not an anomaly. Many campuses across the country have already integrated FYE goals and outcomes within the undergraduate college writing programs (Powell, 2009). To name a few, Dartmouth, Harvard, Yale, Georgetown, Sacramento State, Cal State San Bernardino and Chico State, offer FYE programs that are integrated with writing instruction. Such unification is complicated. The curricular changes in the new FYE writing course at SF State gives our program an opportunity to revise decades old student learning outcomes, to be innovative, and to consider new creative ways to meet the needs of a new

generation of learners. One change is the integration of digital tools, including Adobe Sparks, Eli Review, Hypothesis, and Portfolium, to teach reading and writing skills as well as metacognition. If students are retained as a result of the new FYE course, then it's a win-win for everyone. For students it means having an opportunity for personal/social growth and better career opportunities; for colleges it means meeting retention goals; and for faculty it means more stable class assignments and professional growth.

Many faculty, however, are reluctant to embrace this new approach. In the case of my institution, I found resistance to the new curriculum through conversations with other writing teachers. First, with its emphasis on the first-year experience assignments in the first semester and multi-modal writing in the second semester, this new curriculum challenges their philosophy about the teaching of writing. Second, the new curriculum takes away autonomy, as teachers are sometimes no longer allowed to teach reading and writing through topics of their expertise. Third, teachers are asked to do more. In addition to classroom teaching, assigning/grading papers, and holding conferences, teachers are also asked to teach digital writing, implement student-friendly designs, provide hospitality, and reconsider how they grade. These challenges are real because it's the adjunct faculty who end up working harder and shouldering more responsibilities as a result of retention efforts, yet their working conditions haven't improved at all; they still need to teach five classes to reach full-time status and their salary has not increased.

Curricular changes also come with critical questions about pedagogy. Powell (2009) argues that in our rush to retain students, we ignore students' writing needs. What Powell is referring to here is a curriculum that is constructed under the idea of "writing transfer," defined as using prior knowledge in new ways that transform and repurpose learning (Elon Statement on Writing Transfer). In the writing classroom, the premise of "transfer" is that writing can be taught, and that the knowledge/skills of writing are transferable from first-year composition to the senior capstone. Powell disagrees, arguing that there's no evidence that students take much from their composition courses to apply to other classes or situations. Instead, she asks what kinds of writing are suitable while students are still enrolled, given that we have no control over students' complicated lives, such as their well-being, financial situations, family obligations, and desires or goals. Rather than transfer, she wants an approach that offers meaningful writing to students, whether they stay or leave. Her answer is the Kairos approach, which focuses on the here and now, a pedagogy that focuses on active and engaged writing. For example, having students read, write, and join conversations about the particular issues that presently affect them. Warner (2018) argues for a similar approach, which he refers to as the "writer's practice" that is, practice what writers do. For example, having students practice rhetorical thinking, attention to audience, development of knowledge, and the habits of mind of a writer.

First-year writing is where we see how retention efforts play out. At the same time, the field of composition has its own lenses for looking at the issues underlying retention. Researchers in the field have sought to understand students' writing development in the context of the first-year classroom. For example, many of the pioneering studies in the field (Sternglass, 1997; Carroll 2002; Herrington and Curtis, 2003; Sommers and Saltz, 2004; Beaufort, 2004) have examined how students' writing ability develops alongside their acclimation to college. Sternglass's *Time to Know Them* (1997), Herrington and Curtis's *Persons in Process* (2000), and Carroll's *Rehearsing New Roles* (2002) all examined writing development from a longitudinal perspective, following the same students throughout their college years. Unanimously, they contend that student writing can be characterized differently in the first year of writing compared to the later years of their writing. Herrington and Curtis (2000) noted that college writing in the first year is more self-focused, and writing in subsequent years are more subject-focused because students' experiences increase with confidence and comfort in their disciplines. Similarly, Carroll (2002) believes that students continue to develop as writers throughout their years because literacy develops slowly, suggesting that students don't write effectively after a one-year writing course. Along the same lines, Haswell (2000) believes that writing development is a long process, one that spans a student's college years, and not necessarily learned in lower division writing. Collectively, these longitudinal studies pushed forward the learning goals in lower division writing to focus

more broadly on engaging with academic themes and content rather than the teaching of isolated reading-writing skills.

In recent years, the focus on developing habits of mind is seen as crucial for college success. Based on current research in writing and writing pedagogy, the National Writing Project's Learning Outcomes for Post-Secondary Writing cite eight habits of mind -- curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition -- that are essential for developing college writers (Council of Writing Program, 2011). Curiosity is the desire to know more; openness is the willingness to consider new ways of thinking and doing; engagement is investing in one's learning; creativity is the ability to use new approaches to communicate ideas; persistence is the ability to sustain interest in projects; responsibility is the ability to take ownership for one's behavior; flexibility is the ability to adapt to new situations; and metacognition is the ability to reflect on one's learning. These eight habits of minds are "ways of approaching learning that are both intellectual and practical" (Council of Writing Program, 2011), and the outcomes derived from them are used by programs across the country, including SF State, and cited in major textbooks in the field (Miller and Jurecic, 2016).

In sum, this section looked at how retention efforts at the institutional level take a top-down approach, making their way into first-year writing programs and complicating the curriculum and pedagogy. This section also laid out the extensive research that has

been conducted on students' experiences in the first year of college, with its own lenses for looking at the issues underlying retention (engagement, belonging, and habits of mind). In the next section, I look at the theoretical perspectives that drive institutional retention efforts anchored in the scholarship on engagement and retention.

Scholarship on Engagement and Retention

Institutional retention efforts are often anchored in two different theoretical perspectives. The first is the dominant view, which looks at student success through integration, involvement, and individualism. The second is the alternative view, which looks at student success through institutional responsibility and students' cultural strengths.

Dominant View

Integration. Negative views of struggling university students took center stage when Tinto (1975) first introduced his model of student departure, which theorizes that students who are not socially and academically integrated are more likely to be alienated and leave. Tinto defined academic integration as students' engagement in the classroom, and social integration as students' engagement outside of the classroom. He explained how integration is linked to retention: "The higher degree of integration of the individual into the college systems, the greater will be his commitment to the specific institution and to the goal of college completion" (Tinto, 1975, p. 96). The problem with this perspective is that the act of integrating becomes the responsibility of the student; and if

integration is not successful, attrition is looked upon as a personal failure rather than an institutional one. Also, some students from different racial or ethnic backgrounds don't fit into Tinto's integration model because a mismatch in values exists between their home and school communities (Rendón et al., 2000). The burden, therefore, is placed on students to conform to the institution instead of expecting institutions to change from a "monocultural" to a "multicultural" institution (Rendón et al., 2000). Still, Tinto's model, according to Powell (2009) "is a paradigm that still holds tremendous influence, both in scholarship and in the practices put into place by colleges and universities (p. 92).

Unbeknownst to most people is that Tinto's model on student departure is based on Durkheim's model on suicide, which is used to explain how a lack of academic and social integration leads to departure. In Durkheim's theory, "suicide is more likely to occur when individuals are insufficiently integrated into the fabric of society" (p. 91). Based on Durkheim's theory, Tinto (1975) argues that students should physically and culturally sever ties with former identities in order to form new academic identities to succeed in college. Tinto (1975) claimed that students who didn't perform this disconnect would devalue the purpose of their education and struggle with integration, thus decreasing the likelihood of persistence. Comparing student persistence with suicide was a far reach, and suggesting that students cut off family, friends, and home communities is damaging in the long run (I know as a parent and educator). Although Tinto has since updated his work twice, first to include interventions and policies for

different student groups such as African American students, students from low-income families, and transfer students (Tinto, 1993) and then later (Tinto, 1999) to include quality support services for first-year students, Tinto's theory, still, largely ignores the importance of students' culture and family as central to their ongoing development and transition to college.

This is where Bean and Metzner (1985) fill Tinto's void. Bean and Metzner's (1985) model argued for environmental support as a more beneficial approach to students who are struggling in the institution. According to Bean and Metzner (1985), there are four primary variables influencing the non-traditional student's decision to drop out. They include the following: (a) academic: study skills, choice of major, course availability (b) background: high school performance, parents' education level, housing distance from college (c) psychological: student perception, goal commitment, stress management and (d) environmental: finances, hours working, family responsibility, outside encouragement. The latter, environmental variables, is seen as the most significant for non-traditional students, defined as commuters, part-timers, and older students. According to Bean and Metzner's model (1985), if both academic and environmental variables are favorable, the student will persist. If both are unfavorable, the student will drop out. However, the two variables don't equate. If the academic variables are met but the environmental variables aren't, the student will not persist. This seems to suggest that non-traditional students are likely to persist if they have

environmental supports, such as financial stability (housing, food, money), outside support (family, former teachers, community members), and limited family responsibilities (no kids, no caregiving responsibilities). What's unclear in this model is how institutions can increase environmental support in order to help non-traditional students persist.

Involvement. To show how students' participation plays a critical part in college persistence, Astin (1984) introduced the theory of student involvement. It's one of the simpler theories in the literature with involvement as a single variable. Astin defines involvement as the amount of physical and psychological energy that students devote to academic experiences, using inputs-environments-outcomes as the model. For example, students enter college with a set of characteristics (input); then they involve themselves by studying, participating in campus activities, and interacting with others (environments); these involvements are supposed to produce positive change in the student (outcomes). Astin (1984) highlights these participatory behaviors as important active roles that students must do to persist in college. However, what's unclear is whether the quality of interactions matter and how might involvement for non-traditional students who persist look different for traditional students who persist. Nevertheless, Astin's involvement theory (1984) is integral to university programming, as campuses have made efforts, such as first-year programs, to provide more opportunities for students to become more involved in activities as part of a successful college experience.

Individualism. Both Tinto's (1975) and Astin's (1984) theory rely heavily on student behaviors in the college acclimation process. This view is supported by the founding director of NSSE, George Kuh (2003), who promoted the concept of student engagement as an important factor in student success. Kuh (2003) argues that what students do during their time as a student matters more than what students bring to higher education or where they study. In other words, he implies that what students bring to higher education (the hidden curriculum from previous schools, the norms and values from their culture, and the economic factors with which they are burdened) are less important than the efforts students make to participate in high impact learning. However, how behaviors of involvement were rewarded, expected, groomed, or discouraged in prior schooling could determine who will behave in engaged and, hence, successful ways, and who might not. Kuh's view, thus, negates the role of the human qualities of existing culture, community, and schooling that students bring to college and that influence one's ability to seek and access high impact practices. Despite evidence that college completion rate is based on students' entering characteristics (Astin and Osequera, 2005) and based on economics (Braxton and Hirschy, 2005; Bean and Metzner, 1985), Kuh's viewpoint remains a dominant force in higher education and is entrenched in NSSE.

In sum, the theoretical perspectives presented in this section identify the dominant views of retention and engagement, which looks at student success through the lens of

individualism, involvement, and integration. While these views are valid in the context of some institutions, they only represent one spectrum of the literature. In the next section, I present alternative viewpoints of retention and engagement, perspectives that take student culture and institutional responsibility into consideration.

Alternative View

Cultural Integrity. The first theory to counter the dominant perspective on retention is Tierney's (1999) Cultural Integrity model, which argues that colleges can increase students' literacy experiences by accommodating and honoring students' cultural differences. Tierney (1999) asserted that institutions can do this without expecting minoritized students to cut ties with their home cultures and assimilate into their dominant campus cultures, as Tinto (1975) had suggested. Tierney (1999) indicates that asking students to negate their home culture is a form of "cultural suicide" that places a disproportionate share of the burden on students and ignores the responsibility of institutions to support them. Thus, Tierney's perspective is one in which students are not seen as the problem; rather, they are people of value whom institutions should support.

Validation. In alignment with Tierney's theory is Rendón's (1994) Validation Theory. Validation is defined as "an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development" (Rendón, 1994, p. 44). Rendón (1994) argues that students benefit academically and personally when faculty and other adults on campus believe in them,

provide affirmation, support, and encouragement. Rendón (1994) believes that non traditional students need validation to take on active roles as students; this involves campus staff and faculty reaching out to students to affirm their ability to succeed and designing activities that promote active learning and interpersonal growth. Generally speaking, first-generation students and others like them who come to college without cultural capital are the kinds of students that the university is working hard to retain (Redefining Historically Underserved, 2016). So, having a sense of connection with campus staff, other students, and faculty who teach them, is key. Validation is especially important for all students, but more for low-income first-generation students, who may carry the impostor syndrome, a belief that they don't truly belong even though they've worked hard to get into college. Pedagogically, this theory calls for instructors to incorporate student cultural histories and life experiences, allow for inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives, scaffold student learning experiences, and create a supportive, caring classroom without lowering standards.

Cultural Strengths. Combining the theories of Rendón and Tierney is Chavez and Longerbeam's (2016) Cultural Strengths Framework. The Cultural Strengths model addresses student needs, with a keen focus on first-generation students, and sees classrooms as cultural spaces with intersectional values and practices. Chávez et al. (2012) explains that our American schools generally favor monoculturalism and individualism, in which processing knowledge is often cognitive, learning is the

responsibility of the students, assignments are task oriented, and teachers provide and evaluate knowledge. They say while colleges generally value these norms, students' connection to and dependency on their community and family as conduits of knowledge and learning as a collective activity are undervalued. Central to this framework (Chavez and Longerbeam, 2016) is how instructors should examine how their own personal, cultural, and educational experiences inform their teaching practices, course content, assessments, and assignments, and determine if their teaching practices advantage one group of students over another. The underlying assumption of this framework is that students come into the classroom with cultural strengths, upon which instructors should draw on.

Community. Another way to ease the cultural mismatch is through the implementation of learning communities. Strange and Banning (2001) propose that educational environments are most powerful when they offer students three fundamental conditions: a sense of security and inclusion, mechanisms for involvement, and an experience of community. Thus, numerous colleges like SF State have adopted collaborative approaches, such as learning communities, first-year cohorts, and freshmen orientations, to support incoming freshmen with the transition from a more dependent high school experience to a more independent college life. These collaborative approaches which aim to focus the learning experience around students' identities have generated positive results with students' feeling a sense of belonging, academic

engagement, and more interactions with faculty (Gonzales, et al., 2015; Jehangir, 2010; Smith et al., 2004).

It is important to point out that all of the above frameworks are not meant to be exhaustive, yet they all challenge the dominant retention and engagement perspectives in higher education (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993; Astin, 1985; Kuh, 2003) which view success as a student responsibility and ignore students' culture or background as being significant. Taking student culture and institutional responsibility into consideration, the above frameworks looked at ways educators can better support first-generation students to improve retention.

Discussion

Similar to retention studies, the composition field uses terms such as curiosity, engagement, and metacognition, broadly referred to as “habits of mind” to describe a framework for student success (Council of Writing Program, 2011). This framework is used by many institutions, including SF State, to foster the habits of mind through reading, writing, and thinking in the composition classroom (Newcomb, 2012; Sullivan, 2015). The similarity between retention and composition scholarship lies in the concept of “student engagement.” This is a shared term, a buzzword, used in both retention and composition scholarship as a marker of student success. But what does engagement mean for students? What does it look like for them? What complicates it?

Most of the literature I found on engagement and retention discussed what students need to do to be successful in college (Tinto, 1975; Astin, 1984; Pace, 1980; Kuh 2003) and the issues of mismatches between students' home and school culture (Tierney, 1999; Rendón, 1994; Chávez et al., 2012). However, what's missing is a study that uses student voice as the central data. In my study, I plan to fill this gap. I plan to follow from the tradition in composition studies of gathering rich qualitative data on students' identities as writers, with a particular focus on their engagement. My purpose is to add to our understanding of retention and engagement, by giving voice to students' experiences of engagement on campus. I use a writing class as my data source and lens because of the connection between identity and writing (Brooke, 1988), because writing courses are gatekeepers on most campuses, and because at SFSU, writing and first-year experience have been integrated into one set of course (Foundations of Excellence, 2017).

Chapter 3: Research Methods

The purpose of my study is to explore how first-year students experience engagement and learning at SF State. In 2017, NSSE provided the university with engagement data on first-year students (NSSE, 2017), from which more questions were raised than answered (see analysis in chapter one). For example, how can we know what students mean when they check a box saying their interactions with peers are "somewhat satisfactory"? In my experience as a teacher, the best way to understand student experience is to talk to students and to ask them about their learning experiences because engagement is situational and could only be understood with context. Thus, for this study, I explore the academic, social, and campus experiences of first-year, first-generation college students. I aim to uncover what sparks student engagement inside and outside of the first-year college classrooms, how student's prior schooling and background affect their view of engagement and learning, and how their experiences in the first year can help us better understand retention and student success.

Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What do students experience in their first year of college?
2. What do their experiences tell us about their engagement?
3. How do their experiences shed light on retention and student success?

Research Method

My research questions call for a qualitative approach over a quantitative approach because student voices involve subjective experiences, personal construction, and past experiences. To do this, I take a narrative inquiry methodology. My goal is to explore the experiences of individuals, collect their stories, and discuss the meaning of their stories and lived experiences. To accomplish this, I use multiple rounds of in-depth interviews as a tool to gather rich qualitative data from a limited number of students, whose voices are normally unheard. For this study, a large number of participants is not preferred because the quality lies in the depth of exploration, not necessarily in the wide range of views (Creswell, 2017).

Research Design

While a singular definition of narrative inquiry does not exist (Kohler-Riesman, 2008; Richards, 2011), scholars agree that narrative inquiries are examinations of verbal or written stories that relate to time, describe place, characters and settings, and offer an individual's subjective view of experiences (Richards, 2011; Spector-Mersel, 2010). Polkinghorne (1991) suggested that a "narrative is the cognitive process that gives meaning to temporal events" (p. 136). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe narrative inquiry as "stories lived and told" (p. 20). It's a study of experience in which participants' stories are the driving impulse. However, collecting and analyzing stories is only part of narrative inquiry; relationship is at the heart of narrative inquiry. Researchers

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) view narrative inquiry as a broad working concept with specific characteristics: “It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus (p. 20). Their lens is looking at experiences on a continuum and contextualized within a historical narrative. In other words, narrative inquiry is not just about stories and participants’ lived experiences, but it is also the histories and contexts that surround those stories: how the participants tell and understand their experiences and how their society, culture, and institutions shape their experiences. Clandinin and Connelly’s narrative inquiry approach will form the basis of my study (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Research Design. This design is Clandinin and Connelly's narrative inquiry approach.

Setting and Participants

This study was conducted at SF State, a Hispanic serving institution, the largest of the 23 CSU campuses, and the only college in the nation to offer undergraduate and graduate degree programs through the College of Ethnic Studies (established in 1969). What makes SF State unique is its commitment to social justice and its diverse student body, predominantly Hispanic and Asian students.

The five student participants in this study are representative of SF State's ethnic population. They are first-year, full-time, first-generation students of Asian and Mexican descent attending SF State. Their arrival at public colleges and universities are increasing and their numbers make up the majority of the student population (Davis, 2012). According to the CSU, more than one-third of CSU students are the first in their family to attend college (Redefining Historically Underserved, 2016). Yet little is known about their first-year experiences.

The language used to describe first-generation college students, as it appears in the literature on first-generation college students, often represents weaknesses rather than strengths. According to the CSU, first-generation students have difficulty "negotiating the collegiate environment" because they are "far less familiar with the deadlines and requirements needed to move through their college experience" (Redefining Historically Underserved, 2016). Thayer (2000) agrees. In writing about first-generation college students' experiences, he notes that first-generation students lack knowledge of time management, finances and budget management, and the bureaucratic operations of higher education. He also adds that they face obstacles, which include a lack of knowledge of the campus environment, lack of adequate academic preparation, and lack of family support (Thayer, 2000). Also, Vargas (2004) writes that low-income, minority, and first-generation students are especially likely to lack specific types of "college knowledge." In other words, they don't understand the steps necessary to prepare for

higher education, such as not knowing about how to finance a college education, to complete basic admissions procedures, and to make connections between career goals and educational requirements (Vargas, 2004).

Additionally, first-generation college students are associated with issues of retention. According to Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998), among those attending full-time and who began at 4-year schools, first-generation students were less likely than non-first-generation students to persist in school. Choy (2001) had similar conclusions. Her study shows that at four-year institutions, first-time full-time first-generation students are twice as likely than non-first-gen students to leave before their second year (23 vs. 10 percent). Even taking into account other factors associated with not returning (working full-time, financial aid, gender, race/ethnicity) first-generation status was still a significant indicator of a student leaving before their second year (Choy, 2001).

For this study, five participants were identified through a very short presentation in five freshman composition courses, using a purposeful sampling approach (Kohler-Riessman, 2008). During the presentation, I explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary and non-compensatory nature of the study, and the participants' commitment to a minimum of two interviews. Interested participants shared their names and email contacts, and I followed up via email to set the first interview. A total of twenty-two students expressed initial interest, of which five fully participated in the study after the follow-up email. Four of the five students who participated were former

students in the first-semester writing course I taught in Fall 2018, but they were not in my class during the time of the study, so a conflict of interest was avoided. The benefit of interviewing my former students is having an established rapport with them, which brings a welcoming invitation for students to share their stories.

In a narrative study, a small number of participants is preferred, due to the individual attention required to collect rich data. It is common for sample sizes to range from 2 to 25 (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) or from 2 to 10 to reach saturation (Boyd, 2001). However, there are no hard rules, as the number of participants is determined by the purpose of the study (Babbie, 1995). For my study, I have selected five participants to represent a variety of majors, gender, ethnicity, GPAs, and regions. They are illustrated in Table 1 below:

Table 1

Study Participants

Participant	Lila	Sophia	Wendy	Benji	Alex
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Male	Male
Ethnicity	Mix: White & Indonesian	Hispanic: Mexican	Asian: Chinese	Mix: Korean & Salvadorian	Hispanic: Mexican
FAFSA recipient	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Housing	on-campus	on-campus	on-campus	off-campus	off-campus
College Support Program	n/a	Metro	Metro	EOP	TRIO (applying)
College GPA	4.0	4.0	4.0	2.5	2.9
Minor	Race and Resistance	n/a	Race and Resistance	n/a	n/a
Major	Sociology	Double: Psychology and Spanish	Cinema	Hospitality and Tourism	Mathematics
Region	Alameda County	Sonoma County	Contra Costa County	Monterey County	Madera County
Number of Interviews	3	4	3	4	3

Interview Protocol

The interview questions for this study are tied directly to the research questions. Many of the interview questions were informed by first-generation literature that focused on family background, previous schooling experiences, current and recent experiences on campus, and learning in college courses (Ward et. al, 2012; Davis, 2012). To gather rich qualitative data, students were prompted to describe or to narrate their experiences. Many questions started with “tell me a story about...” or “share with me about...” or “how do you...” as a way of prompting students to share narratives (A copy of the interview questions is included in Appendix A).

Several of the interview questions were informed by the NSEE conceptual framework (NSSE, 2013), with questions corresponding to each benchmark of engagement. This was achieved by taking existing survey questions and rephrasing them to open-ended questions, with the intent to capture student stories. Here’s an example, moving from survey questions to open-ended questions, illustrated in Table 2 below:

Table 2

Question Design

<i>NSSE Survey Questions Learning with Peers</i>	<i>Open-ended Questions used for interview</i>
<p>During your freshman year, how often have you... [never, sometimes, often, very often]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -asked another student to help you understand course material -explained course material to one or more student -prepared for exam by discussing or working through course material with other students -worked with other students on course projects or assignments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Tell me about the best class you've taken in terms of interacting with other students in the class. -Tell me about the worst classes you've taken in terms of other students in the class. -Tell me about the most memorable or fun interactions you've had with peers in a classroom.
<p>During your freshman year, how often have you had discussions with students from the following groups... [never, sometimes, often, very often]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -people of a race or ethnicity other than your own -people from an academic background other than your own -people with religious or political beliefs other than your own 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Tell me about a class in which your teacher was successful in having student interaction. -Tell me about a class in which your teacher was not successful in having student interaction. -Tell me about some group work you've already done and the students involved in that group work.
<p>During your freshman year, how many hours average per week do you...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -prepare for classes -work for pay on campus -do community service or volunteer work -provide care for dependents -work for pay off campus -relax and socialize -commute to campus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Tell me how you prepared for class. -Other than attending classes, tell me what else you do on and off campus.

Prior to the actual research, I conducted a pilot of the interview protocol with a first-year student from another college. This practice round was beneficial in a number of ways. It increased my level of comfort with the interviewing process, gave me the tools to ease into interviews, and provided an opportunity to address potential complications.

Each interview started with where students were at: How are things going? What's new? What did you do last week? How are classes going for you? The main goal is to have authentic conversations between me and the students. Another goal is to keep the interviews engaging and friendly so students are willing to share and to be interviewed again. During the interviews, I did not force questions onto students but instead followed their narratives and prompting questions when an opportunity arose. To ensure that each student had a voice to speak freely, I employed interviewing strategies recommended by Seidman (2013): listen more, talk less, ask clarifying questions, use intuition, avoid leading questions, ask open-ended questions, follow-up but do not interrupt, and tolerate silence. Additionally, during the interview I took field notes, ideas for analysis, and possible follow-up questions.

After each interview, I transcribed the interviews and noted initial observations. Then, I familiarized myself with the interview transcript by rereading it, thinking about what it reveals and doesn't, and used the first interview to build the second interview.

After each interview, I prepared a thank-you note and attached it with a small gift to recognize the participants time and willingness to share their stories.

Data Collection and Analysis

For data collection, each interview was audio recorded on a laptop computer, with the students' verbal permission for each recording. Seventeen interviews were conducted face-to-face and five were conducted online using zoom web conferencing, which made a total of twenty-one interviews conducted for this study. The interviews lasted approximately 45-90 minutes. All in-person interviews were conducted in my office without the presence of other individuals. Students were given a choice to either have an interview at my office or in a study room at the library. All students either chose my office or said they had no preference.

To analyze the data, I moved from holistic content analysis (general) to thematic analysis (specific). First, I transcribed each interview without transcription services to maintain a close relationship with the data. Then, I read through the interview data multiple times over a two month period to gain a holistic picture of what each participant experienced and to read more closely with each re-reading (Leiblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). This process allowed me to look at student stories in its entirety rather in parts, noting patterns as they emerge. Then, after reading the narratives multiple times and revisiting them, I used deductive analysis to categorize the interview data (Kohler-Riessman, 2008) into the following categories: Academic Challenge, Learning

with Peers, Experiences with Faculty, Campus Environment, High Impact Practices, Obstacles to Success, Writing Instruction, High School Experiences, Family Background.

After the categorizing process, the coding process began. Coding is an ongoing circular process and a critical part of the data analysis that could help break down the data into meaningful and manageable chunks (Saldana, 2015). For this study, coding was done manually without software assistance. The three types of coding used were descriptive coding, process coding, and in-vivo coding (Saldana, 2015). Descriptive coding is a summarized word or phrase that captures a passage of the data, process coding is using gerunds to signify action in the data, and in-vivo coding is the actual word or phrase drawn from the participants' data to highlight its significance. Process and in-vivo coding were used to keep the participation and student voices at the forefront (Charmaz, 2014). Through the coding process, my goal was to look for patterns and themes and making connections across participants.

Once all data were coded, I organized the codes, looked at common themes, and got a sense of individual narratives. And from here, the drafting process began. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) indicate several approaches researchers have taken in their reporting of narratives. The first is writing research texts at the formalistic boundary; that is, to choose a category, e.g. hegemonic social structures, and place participants within this frame. The second approach is writing research texts at the reductionist boundary; that is, to write individual chapters devoted to mini biographies of

participants or to look at common themes across participants. The third approach, Clandinin and Connelly's preferred approach, is writing research texts in the midst of uncertainty; the task is not to say that people, places, and things are this way or that way but that they have a narrative history and are moving forward, keeping in mind the past, present, and future. The fourth approach is co-authoring, where the participant and researcher work in collaboration. For this study, the second approach was used. I constructed mini biographies of each student to narrate their lived experiences.

Researcher's Positionality

In qualitative research, the construct of narratives is influenced by the researcher's previous experiences, which should be recognized and embraced (Kohler-Riessman, 2008). In this study, I am an insider with personal and professional affiliations at SF State, the place of study. I entered this study with the awareness of my racial identity as a first-generation student, foreign-born Chinese, bilingual, long-term U.S. resident who has received all of her education in the public schools. I also entered this study with my professional identity as a composition teacher who is interested in people, in student stories, and in listening to people share the complexities of their lives. I have been teaching literacy for the past twenty years, first in K-5 public schools in San Francisco, then in student bridge programs like Upward Bound and EOP, followed by city college of San Francisco, and currently at SF State. I used my understanding of the socio-cultural conflicts, learning styles, and academic language and literacy challenges that historically

disadvantaged, low-income students bring to educational institutions to better infer participants' narratives. All of this gives me a variety of lenses. So in writing student narratives, I use my intersecting identities -- second language learner, low-income first-generation student, former literacy specialist, former K-5 teacher in both under-resourced and well-resourced schools, parent of two teens, and college writing teacher in both two and four year colleges -- as the narrator behind the keyboard.

My experience as a first-generation student and educator of first-generation students played a significant role in my interpretation of students' narratives. I was taught to understand people within the context of their culture. I learned to wonder, "What are the cultural expectations, societal expectations, the underlying assumptions?" I believe that talking to students with an empathetic and nonjudgmental stance is in acceptance of that person for who he/she is. When I first meet students in my classroom, I search for things about them that I can respect and ways in which I can empathize and resonate with them -- whether it's academic, social, societal, or familial -- and this is the approach I took with these five students. I was able to anchor onto something we shared in common.

Validity

The traditional idea of reliability does not fit well with narrative inquiries (Ali and Youof, 2011) because an individual's story is never complete; it's always changing and influenced by the context of their lives at any given point (Jehangir, 2010). Put in

another way, an individual's memory may or may not be reliable and their stories can't be verified; however, in capturing stories, it's less about whether students are telling the "real story" but more about what students understood or perceived to have happened (Creswell, 2017). As such, the validity of qualitative research depends on what the researcher sees and hears (Creswell, 2017). For my study, quotes and precise language, field notes, triangulation of data, coding, and construction of narratives will help ensure objective interpretations of the data and minimize bias.

Trustworthiness

For narrative inquiries, the aim should be trustworthiness (Ali and Youof, 2011). I will show trustworthiness by being transparent: using clear explanations of the methodological procedures, clear analysis of the data, and thick descriptions in the narratives. Also, trustworthiness lies in the kind of relationship and rapport that is created between researcher and participants. For this study, I have developed a professional and friendly rapport with each student, who is eager to return for more interviews if requested.

Limitations

Narratives reveal a participant's stories, memories, and experiences situated in a particular point in their lives (Spector-Mersel, 2010). Their stories are unfinished. Since this research consisted of multiple interviews with each participant during a three-month time frame of the students' first-year experience, their understanding of their learning and

engagement might differ as they inch closer to sophomore year and onward to junior and senior year. Do students perceive engagement and learning the same in their sophomore year as they do in their freshman year? My study did not address this, nor did it address how students' perceptions changed over the course of their college careers. Also, this study does not attempt to generalize the information to other nontraditional students attending other urban four-year schools like SF State. However, this limitation is not a drawback because the fundamental goal of a narrative inquiry is to understand specific individuals at a specific location to inform specific practices (Ali & Yosof, 2011).

Ethical Assurances

Prior to participant identification or data collection, permission was granted by the Institutional Review Boards at San Francisco State University. This process was completed to follow standard protocols and to minimize the risk to participants. All of the participants were at least 18 years old and were English speakers. The participants' participation was entirely voluntary, and no deception or coercion was used during the research process. Student recruitment was conducted in lower-division writing courses at SF State with the course instructor's permission. When a student volunteered for the study, I asked them to confirm their age and standing and reminded them that there are no financial incentives for their participation.

Once students replied to my email expressing their interest to be interviewed, the informed consent process began. I emailed the informed consent at least twenty-four

hours prior to the first interview to allow students time to consider their full participation. Then, when the student arrived for his/her first interview, a hard copy was available for their signature in my presence. Before each interview with students, I asked if they consented to my recording of the interview and reminded them of their ability to stop at any point. Students were also given opportunities to ask any questions about the study before, during, and after each interview.

There are no direct benefits to students for participating in the project, other than pride and an opportunity to self-reflect. To minimize this risk of confidentiality, pseudonyms were used when reporting the data, the consent forms are stored separately from the interview transcripts, and access to all electronic data required a personal password. As such, the risks for the participants are considered minimal. After five years, all paper and electronic copies will be removed.

Chapter 4: Narratives and Common Themes

The professors I had that are considered my favorite really do care. Emotionally, physically and just everything, that's what makes me love them as a person.

~Benji

The purpose of this study was to illuminate the NSSE findings by exploring the academic, social, and campus experiences of first-year first-generation college students within a 4-year college setting, using student voice as the central data. As noted in Chapter 1, the NSSE data raised more questions than answers. Although NSSE can provide significant data to institutions, it is limiting in a number of ways. First, NSSE doesn't account for significant factors -- access, socioeconomics, race, identity, academic preparation, student agency -- that play a critical role in engagement and in understanding the equity gap. Second, NSSE doesn't account for qualities that are difficult to measure quantitatively -- curiosity, interest, openness, metacognition -- yet they are key to fostering student engagement. Lastly, the way NSSE defines engagement is partly based on students' involvement in high impact practices, such as research with faculty, leadership positions, internships, and service learning; however, these high impact practices are inaccessible to most first-year students. These limitations thus narrow our ability to see the nuances and complexities of student engagement beyond the confines of NSSE. In what follows, I bring in the voices of students to fill these gaps and help us see what NSSE obscures.

Narratives

Wendy: Support, Access, and Validation

Wendy identifies as a first-generation Chinese-American student. In the largely White neighborhood where she grew up and attended middle and high school, Wendy is at a disadvantage racially and socially, which may have made her an easy target for bullies that went unnoticed for years by teachers and staff. At SF State, however, Wendy experiences a different kind of education: here she has friends who accept her, professors who can teach, and adults who show they care. On the surface, Wendy has clear goals and participates in at least four different categories of high impact practices, which makes her an anomaly since most first-year students don't engage in them. Going deeper, though, I see that Wendy brings to college a similar ambition, behavior, and resilience which mirrors that of her immigrant parents, who arrived in the U.S. with nothing, not even a high school diploma, and had to navigate the system without knowing the language, yet persevered. Wendy's work ethic combined with the support and validation of the university make her a success. She is the kind of student universities dream of, a prime example of what success looks like when everything comes together nicely as a joint effort between student and institution.

As a first-year student and a cinema major, Wendy is already thinking about what her second and third year might look like. She recently learned about *Lucasfilm* in San Francisco and has plans to intern there, a move that will bring her closer to a career. She

also wants to stay connected to her Chinese roots and plans to intern with the Asian American Studies department. And, she says, by her third year, she hopes to study abroad in Europe. By the end of her first year, Wendy will have utilized the menu of service options of advising, tutoring, career counseling, and psychological counseling to help her be successful, graduate, earn a degree, and launch a career within four years.

Wendy's journey to college, however, was rocky. Here she recounts a bullying incident that fossilized in her memory, "I remember it was in the eighth grade when two girls on the basketball courts threatened to rip my beanie off my head." Wendy was constantly bullied, "bullied at school and also online" from which she suffered "anxiety" and "depression." She didn't have "true friends," just "acquaintances." Being a Chinese American in a predominantly White community in Antioch, a small sleepy town east of San Francisco, Wendy explained the problem: "there isn't much of a community . . . it's mainly White, so I had difficulty fitting in."

Both Wendy's parents are immigrants. Her dad, from Vietnam, fled the communist government to Hong Kong and then to the United States, and her mom is from China. Despite being poor, they were emotionally rich. Through hard work, sacrifice, and risk-taking, her parents moved ahead, economically, first working at a Chinese restaurant and now ownership of a wholesale flower shop -- their success story mirrors the classic narrative of the American Dream. Given her parents' work ethics, they didn't expect less from Wendy, so obviously, college was assumed. But having had

negative experiences with schooling, Wendy was in for a surprise. She had no idea how successful she would be in her first year of college.

I first met Wendy in Fall 2018 when she was enrolled in my first-semester writing class. I recalled Wendy as a “good” student, completing all assignments, attending class, helping others, and asking questions. At the time I interviewed Wendy, she had a 4.0 GPA, was working alongside her Asian American studies professor on a documentary, involved with campus organizations like SKINS, Dragon Boat, and WAVES, active in the learning communities of Aspire and Metro, working in a student leadership position conducting campus orientations and tours, and working professionally with her advisor to launch a website. This is an example of NSSE’s high impact practices playing out in real time.

Given her acclimation to college, I was surprised to learn about her background because she’s thriving academically and socially in the university culture. How did she transition from hating school to loving college? Why is she unfazed by the typical issues that drive first-generation students out? What separates Wendy from those who don’t make it? In the sections that follow, I address these questions, looking at Wendy’s academic experiences and her interactions with peers, staff, and faculty.

Academic Challenge. According to NSSE (2019), meaningful assignments are necessary for student engagement, and Wendy’s American Indian Law professor was successful in achieving that. A course focused on Native epistemologies, worldviews,

social structures, and institutional laws, American Indian Law is offered as a GE through the College of Ethnic Studies, and it's what Wendy refers to as her "best" class. Using this course as an example, Wendy gives a personal account of the conditions for academic engagement.

In this course, Wendy appreciated that it was based on discussing, not testing, because exams put stress on her, so this course definitely took "anxiety off [her] shoulders." It also involved an aspect of deep learning where students were expected to "dive into the material, a little bit more with the intention to learn with others, but not just to pass a test." For example, to study for a quiz, students would review the materials as a group activity and talk to several people about their interpretations of the laws; students weren't asked to memorize or regurgitate the laws. Students were also expected to learn outside of the classroom, another example of deep learning: "I was kind of blown away [at] a vocal powwow in Berkeley in the beginning of October, and it was one of those field report assignments that we had to do. So you would just go [on] a field trip that you would take by yourself or with other classmates in the class and then you would write about it." This professor offered students different ways of showing what they learned, a universal design strategy: "It was really open to however you want to do [the final]. [The final] could be an art piece. It could be a paper. It could even be a dance." The final project "challenged [her] creativity" because Wendy chose to make a magazine, in which she had "put in so much time and effort." It became one of her "proudest" assignment, so

proud that she decided to print the magazine: “Living like a broke college student type of life, I was like wow, \$35, it's okay, it'll be worth it.”

Furthermore, this course also offered meaningful assignments to promote metacognition. The assignments asked for student reflection, “Like what you learned, what you observed, what you liked, what you didn't like.” It also enabled students to reflect on their identity: “I think one thing that really stood out to me [from the powwow] was the talk about missing and murdered indigenous women . . . I found that really shocking because I'm a woman myself too. So it was just crazy to see those statistics and the facts behind it.” The assignments were relevant and connected to current events: “I was really able to talk about how each law that we had to include was still influencing how our government makes laws this day and how it's so important, and relevant to the present day. So I think that was really significant.” The assignment also valued design and visuals: “I know a boring paper would not get the full effect versus like having visuals, and everything like that is more engaging. So that's what motivated me to do the newsletter.”

Another element that's fundamental in motivating student improvement is feedback from professors (NSSE, 2019). Wendy credits not one, but all her professors for providing valuable feedback: “I think all of the classes did a really good job in terms of giving feedback that's honest but also in a way that's really helpful because I think sometimes, like in high school, I get comments back on my paper and they're just so

flooded, it just sounds mean and doesn't really help.” Wendy also credits professors for offering attention and support in other ways: “I've noticed that each Professor is really kind and makes an effort to have that one-on-one in their own ways. Whether that is through answering students’ questions in a timely manner through email, or if it's like our English one-on-one conferences because it helps me figure out what to target.”

Lastly, student agency -- which isn't measured in NSSE -- is a critical part of Wendy's academic experience. When discussing writing instruction in her courses, Wendy shows the openness among professors as it relates to student choice: “in terms of writing instruction for most of the classes, it was very free for all, like, you can really write about whatever you want, or go with whichever direction that you want . . . So let's say the professor was looking for something more for social justice, they would inform the class, like oh, ‘I'm looking for something that's more on this spectrum’ . . . generally each of the classes was very open.” Wendy also illustrates how professors value student voice: “[Professors] wanted to hear what you have to say about this topic, and it was usually broad enough so that everyone was able to show their own unique personalities through them.” This was something Wendy was not “used to” but it allowed her to actively engage in writing to “broaden” her thinking.

Wendy's overall academic experiences in the classroom support one of NSSE's themes, Academic Challenge (NSSE, 2019), such as class discussions, focused group work, outside-of-class learning, relevancy of assignments, clear explanations, and

reflective learning. However, where NSSE falls short is in identifying student agency and universal design strategies; for example, letting students choose their medium (voice, print, media, multimodal) and offering flexibility (topic choice; different ways students can show what they know). These effective teacher practices were also significant in helping Wendy be successful.

Learning with Peers. Elation filled Wendy's voice when she shared her "best moment" in college: "My best moment in college so far is my group of friends. They had surprised me for my birthday. And it was like the first time that I was ever surprised for my birthday, especially by friends . . . so I think that was a big moment for me because throughout middle school and high school I was bullied a lot." Wendy was taken aback by this kind gesture from "genuine friends," all from student housing, who decorated her room just to make sure she was "happy." Even though Wendy has a large group of friends, she doesn't consider herself social. She describes herself as "introverted" especially among a large group in class. However, if she "clicks" with someone, she says she would "glue to that person for the semester." It's really about finding her kind and being cautious in the process. She would want to know what her potential friends "do on social media" and what their "interests and passions are through their posts" so she knows whom she's hanging out with.

Since having friends are important, Wendy also spoke about two classes in which the teacher was successful in having students interact with one another. One class was

Oral Communication. What made this class interactive was the creative use of physical space and opportunities for face-to-face conversations. Wendy says Oral Communication was “memorable” because she had “to move around” and “it was engaging.” Wendy described a “speed dating” group activity where students would hop from one student to another every 30 seconds to discuss reading assignments. Another successful student interaction was in Math class. Wendy says, “a couple of different times of the year we have group work” that involved students choosing a topic of their choice, and then “breaking down that topic” and illustrating how “statistics are incorporated into it” in a group presentation.

Interactive learning with peers also happens outside the classroom. One class that exemplified this was Peer Mentoring. In Peer Mentoring, students were assigned a new buddy every week to go on an outing to get to know each other. This class also provided opportunities to work with the community, and so Wendy self-selected into the social media committee. In this committee, Wendy designed a giant gator head that could display student artwork for Sneak Preview, an outdoor event for future students and their families.

However, the class with the least successful student interaction was Astronomy. Wendy acknowledges that “the professor tries” but because of its size, more than 100 students, Wendy doesn’t know who’s sitting next to or behind her. When asked what the professor can do to better engage students, Wendy had four suggestions. First, she says,

give group work: “put us into groups and have a presentation, like a ginormous presentation, I guess like each group talking about something that they choose within our galaxy or something.” Second, disrupt the physical context: “Have people switch where they're sitting. Like, I think that would be kind of nice like changing scenery.” Third, get students to teach the class: “It could be beneficial to learn from a student and have in their own words explain what a black hole is . . . I think maybe students in the class can also relate because it's probably much more simplified and a little bit more to the point.” Fourth, don't post too much on ilearn: “The astronomy class is so big, right, and like [the professor] doesn't take attendance, and he also posts the lecture PowerPoint itself on his website which I find, like it's very beneficial but also, I think there are certain students that I've seen that really take advantage of that.”

Wendy's experiences with peers with the exception of Astronomy support NSSE's assumption that collaborating with peers is central to engagement (NSSE, 2019), but her experiences don't support NSSE's claim that students need to be solving problems or mastering difficult material in order to feel engaged. None of Wendy's experience in collaboration with peers involved tackling or solving a challenging problem. Instead, learning with peers for Wendy was about having fun, meaningful conversations, academic or not, and about students working together collectively outside of class, rather than individuals doing their own discrete part.

Indeed, when I listen to Wendy, I learned several important things about engagement that aren't captured by NSSE. That is, positive peer relationships are critical to developing a sense of belonging (i.e. university connectedness). Wendy felt she belonged when she mattered to someone, such as her friends, faculty, and the campus community. Although NSSE doesn't define or address the concept of belonging, cultivating a sense of belonging in the first year is crucial to persistence (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Hoffman et al. 2002). For Wendy, having good friends, working with others, and contributing to the campus community, is her sense of belonging, and it's what made her feel accepted and respected.

Experiences with Faculty. One of Wendy's most "memorable" experiences with faculty was when she ran into her Indian Law professor outside of class. She remembered him telling her that she didn't need to "look apprehensive all the time" and that she should "believe" in herself because she's fully capable and has a lot to offer. This encouragement, coming from a "law professor" was validating and "a very big, big takeaway" for Wendy.

A personal faculty connection is what Wendy seeks in her professors. When she goes to ratemyprofessor, she is attracted to professors who are "inspiring" and "caring" and "passionate." Wendy defines a good teacher as someone who is "passionate about their subject" and "realistic with what they are teaching." She understands that most students want to get GE "over with" but she argues that GE courses are only meaningful

if professors relate course material to real life and current events; otherwise, she sighed, “it’s pointless.” Therefore, she says, it’s important that professors make their courses relevant and purposeful: “students do need that explanation of why [the subject is] important. How they can apply it into their lives. How they can teach others about what they’re learning.” Wendy also asserts that Professors can’t be “too lenient” because they have a responsibility to teach students life skills: “Give students a push, like to be timely, to be punctual, because those are skills that the students really will need to utilize once they go into the real world. So I think having that preparation is important.”

On the contrary, Wendy views an ineffective teacher as someone who embraces the “hierarchy” and has a “big ego.” In terms of SF State, Wendy makes clear that she hasn’t taken a single course that she would “consider the worst.” While she doesn’t have one at the university, she laughs, “there were a lot from high school.” Here she recalls a moment with an ineffective teacher from high school chemistry class:

I was really interested in the subject and I still am, but I think the teacher really made it to be one of those classes that would make me cry . . . It kind of felt like he was putting himself above us, like he was better than everyone else. One time I asked him a question. And he said, “well, if you were to look at your notes, you’ll know.” But [I thought to myself] it’s clear that I’m asking you that question because your notes didn’t quite make sense to me. So I don’t like that type of ego. I would say it was the worst class I had to take because I [felt] anxious to ask him

any questions after that, especially since he calls me out in front of everyone. So I just felt very embarrassed.

When asked how the high school Chemistry teacher could have responded differently, Wendy suggested that he should try to help “students be confident in themselves.” Wendy recognizes her lack of confidence yet she also believes it’s the teacher’s job to empower students, not belittle them.

Wendy’s experiences somewhat supports NSSE’s assumption that positive interactions with faculty can influence cognitive growth, development, and persistence (NSSE, 2019). With a 4.0 GPA, Wendy seems to be persisting, although we don’t know whether it’s a direct result of positive interactions with faculty. What’s obvious, though, is that Wendy feels that the faculty at SF State are “helpful” and have “exposed” her to the kind of learning that she didn’t get in her K-12 education. She credits her professors for giving her a “bigger perspective as to how our world is functioning” and for the kinds of teaching that has “made the biggest impact.” Wendy’s experiences help us flesh out what “positive experiences” actually look like. Such experiences are interacting with professors outside of class and being in a classroom environment where the professor is approachable. For Wendy, “positive interactions” refers to professors who are “passionate” about their subjects, who use words to empower students, and who respond kindly to students.

Campus Environment. NSSE defines campus environment as two things: quality of interactions with students, advisors, faculty, and staff and supportive environment including academic support, social opportunities, health and wellness (NSSE, 2019). Wendy's experience with the campus environment helps us flesh out what it means to be in supportive settings. For Wendy, a positive campus environment means having adults on campus she can count on for support, access, and validation.

Like any first-year student, Wendy has obstacles. She has "anxiety" because she struggles with "overworking" but she's mindful about it and is seeing a counselor through counseling services. While "tuition can be very expensive" she has financial aid to cover it. Guilt is perhaps what she carries around: "my parents are having to pay housing [which] is quite a lot of money and sometimes I feel guilty about that." To alleviate it, she is determined to "contribute" as much as possible through campus jobs and applying for scholarships.

Even though Wendy is not free of obstacles, her barriers have been overshadowed by her positive experiences. She has many advisers: one from Metro, a college bridge program; one from WAVES, a student organization; one from Cinema, her major; and one from Race & Resistance Studies, her minor. She utilizes all of them and sees the benefits: "I think I've definitely had a lot of people here that has offered me or kind of led me to really good opportunities and have mentored and guided me through my first semester."

Of Wendy's four advisers, two stood out in terms of going beyond their assigned duties. The first is Wendy's "cool adviser" from Metro, who offered her academic, emotional, and professional support. She credits him for being present when she needs "someone to talk" to or when she has "questions about classes" adding that he will "advocate" for students. His office is a "large" space, with "lots of students" buzzing and visiting all day long. Wendy sees her Metro advisor weekly to give him feedback on his clothing and art websites, and to receive advice on her classes. Since Wendy had created a website for her Asian American studies professor through independent studies, she offered to help this Metro advisor with his. In return, he served as a reference for campus jobs, for which Wendy applied and received offers.

The second advisor that stood out was Wendy's residential adviser, who also opened doors to professional opportunities. Wendy is in a living, learning community on campus housing, on the Aspire floor. Here, she shares how her residential adviser tapped her strengths and paved the way for more opportunities:

[The residential adviser] actually created The Residential Life club and was looking for someone to be the VP of marketing and because I had a background with YouTube. She introduced me to that position and I applied. So she definitely gave me that opportunity, that first leadership opportunity in college. And I think that kind of in a way boosted my confidence to apply for these different positions and jobs on campus.

Wendy's experiences with advisors were beyond ordinary. They cared about her and she cared about them. These are the kinds of relationships institutions hope for.

High Impact Practices. Wendy is much busier than I am on campus, and I work here. She's actively involved in not one, but three campus organizations: Dragon Boat, WAVES, and SKINS. When Wendy first joined the Dragon Boat team, she "was really surprised that the majority of the team was Chinese and also spoke Cantonese" to which she felt an immediate acknowledgement of her identity. Her response was, "Wow, like, it was strange because I've never had that happen before." In WAVES, an Asian Pacific Islander club, Wendy serves on the board to plan student events, such as the Lunar New Year celebration. In WAVES, she does the marketing and creates flyers and newsletters showcasing events, as well as managing social media and emails. In SKINS, a Native American club, Wendy occasionally attends open mic, which she describes as a "healing circle." This club also hosts field trips, the latest was to a conservancy at the Presidio of San Francisco.

Wendy also works on campus and involves herself in academic activities. She has a leadership position, where she arranges campus tours, responds to emails, and answers phone calls. For Wendy, the biggest benefit with this job is having "friends in many different areas of campus." Additionally, Wendy is equally involved in two learning communities, Metro and Aspire. Acknowledging her first-gen status, Wendy says she's "happy" to have applied for Metro because she could "get all the help and

resources” she needs. She’s also glad to be a part of Aspire, which is a living, learning community. Very often, they have “excursions together” and themed activities during certain times in the semester, like Filipino American History Month. Lastly, Wendy is doing independent study with an Asian American professor, learning and working outside of the classroom. Here, she shares her work:

Right now we just started finding music companies that we can contact for the music credit and to ensure that we have their permission to use music in the film.

So myself and another student, we've been working on that. And then we recently were having a Boba drive at the UN event to raise funds for the film.

Now we're working on finding the video credits so that we can ask for their permission and see if it's okay for us to use those clips in the movie.

NSSE assumes that high impact practices (HIPs), such as the ones Wendy is involved in, including learning communities, research with faculty, involvement in campus organizations, and leadership positions that will have positive associations with student learning and retention (NSSE 2007). The kinds of learning that Wendy seemed to have benefited from HIPs are not discipline-specific, such as reading, writing, math, science, or study skills. Instead what she may have gained are skills that are helpful both in college and beyond. For example, through WAVES, Wendy organized and advertised student events, and so some of the skills gained could be communication with the public, audience awareness, time management, and digital design. With her campus job, Wendy

responded to inquiries for campus tours and gave tours, through which she may have learned the importance of customer service skills, for instance, positive attitude, clear communication, patience, prompt response. And by working alongside her Asian American studies professor on a documentary, Wendy may have acquired experience in ethical copyright practices and raising money for projects. Equally important in Wendy's story is how she gained new friends and acceptance, which seemed to have been an integral part of her HIP experiences.

Concluding Thoughts. Wendy's story shows, qualitatively, what NSSE's engagement indicator and high impact practices look like from her point of view. Her story supports NSSE's premise that institutional conditions and student behavior form student engagement (NSSE 2013). Wendy is the perfect example of the assumptions behind NSSE, that HIPs correlate with retention and success. She didn't come in with a strong sense of self, so she is the person NSSE is trying to target, to see how universities support and provide for students at the college level, and to see how student behaviors contribute to their own engagement.

In essence, Wendy is the poster child for NSSE. She shows us what it looks like when everything comes together nicely as a joint effort between student and institution. For example, she puts in her best effort in her studies; she's involved on campus; she has mentors who offer access, support, and connections; she has friends in class, in housing, at work; she has a social life; and for these reasons, she feels like she truly belongs.

While Wendy's narrative sounds picture perfect, she is not representative of the community of first-generation students. Wendy's experience is not universal, rather it's an anomaly. The next four stories demonstrate the rarity of Wendy's experience.

Alex: Economic and Cultural Barriers

Alex, the oldest of three children and the first in his family to attend college, "want[ed] to get out of the [central] valley." He comes from under-resourced K-12 schools, a low-income Mexican family, and a household where English isn't spoken. He was encouraged by his mom to go to college so he doesn't end up working in the fields like her. Based on his background, institutions consider Alex a low-income, first-generation student who is academically, socially, culturally, and economically at a disadvantage. After arriving at SF State, overwhelmed by the responsibilities of living independently, Alex sometimes questioned whether college is the right path for him. His goal in college is to be more involved in campus life and activities, but this feels out of reach while he is juggling work, a commute, family, and classwork. However, Alex does have an advantage. The strengths he brings to college are hard work, open mindedness, curiosity, and deep reflection, all of which could contribute to his persistence.

Journey and Arrival to College. Located in California's San Joaquin valley, nestled between Notarb and Borden, and a gateway to Yosemite National Park, Madera is

home to Alex. The Madera community, laments Alex, is made up of mostly Mexicans and Catholics. He describes his lonely childhood:

I [had] no friends to play with; they were not my age. The neighborhood was really quiet. After school I did my homework and watched TV . . . We didn't leave our town very often . . . It's just literally a town where everyone [is] secluded in their own home. And, you know, for me, my parents, they didn't let me go out with friends or go out during the weekend, they were more focused on me with my education.

It wasn't until sixth grade that Alex started to leave the house more often "to the local park and meet people nearby [he] didn't know."

Madera is all Alex knew prior to attending SF State, so transitioning from a homogeneous town to a diverse city was a "huge culture shock" for him. While most people "don't dare to leave the valley" because leaving the valley meant leaving what they know and facing the unknown, Alex was "happy to get out of the valley." He explains why: "Living in a town where I am surrounded primarily by Chicano(a), Latino(a), and primarily Christian, you have to grow up knowing that you are not able to explore your self-identity 100%." This is significant, for Alex identifies as gay and his mom would "hang him" if he ever dared to come out. His mom, though, is the reason why Alex is in college:

My mom said, “you can’t end up like me, like a field worker, don’t be like me, work six in the morning to six in the evening from the field with dirty hands.”

She reminds me that she doesn’t have an education. She said she will help me and she knows about programs and support that will teach me about college.

That’s how I knew I had to go. It’s because of my mom.

Both Alex’s parents are from Mexico, and life for them in Madera, CA was hard.

Alex explains the challenges:

My parents had basic elementary education. They didn’t know what a credit card [was]. My parents didn’t know how a bank worked, like the fees, you know. It wasn’t until I started high school, I told them, banks charge a fee. Both didn’t speak English, so for me at the age of 8, I was the translator. It was hard for them and for me.

This is why his mom “pushed [him] really hard to get good grades . . . to get into the cool colleges, to top-notch colleges.” His mom believed in education as a ticket out of poverty.

Alex had access to SF State through the help of Upward Bound, a college bridge program that supports low-income, first-generation students with the college process (SAT prep, college applications, FAFSA) and with an opportunity to dorm and study on a college campus during the summer after senior year of high school. Without this program, which provided both community and access, Alex said he “wouldn’t know what

to do to get into college.” Generally speaking, many low-income students like Alex are doing it completely on their own. They don’t have a parent who speaks English to help them, give feedback on their essays, or edit for them; their parent(s) don’t drive them around from one activity to the next nor do they drive them around to tour colleges. They don’t have access to test-prep classes; in fact, if we look at the statistics, SAT scores directly correlate to how much families make (Dixon-Román et al., 2013). That’s not because wealthier kids are smarter; it’s because of the opportunities and support structures that are attached to wealth. Because of their limited resources, a lot of students like Alex have never set foot on a college campus. To them, college is a private territory even though these colleges are public spaces.

Alex is a social, outgoing young man. Given that high school was “more diverse” than his grade school, and since his mom was less “strict” during the high school years, Alex became more comfortable making new friends and participating in school activities (band, academic success club, Mexican-American club). Here also, at SF State, in his first semester, he made new friends, with whom he “created a bond” and still “hang out.” Alex refers to these friends as “important” people. Loneliness is common in college, especially for first-year students moving away from home, but Alex doesn’t seem largely affected by it; perhaps it’s because he has new friends at SF State, old friends from Madera (he sees them when he goes home), and access to his family, making him feel less like a little fish in a big pond.

On his move to San Francisco, Alex made housing decisions that were driven by his economic situation. When asked how he decided where to live, Alex said living on campus was off the table. They didn't have the money, so the family decided that Alex would live with his adult brother in the Dublin area "to save money." However, as a commuter student, Alex isn't integrated in the campus community, even though integration is what he wants. He sighs:

I don't live on campus and couldn't build relationships with professors . . . If I'm closer, I can attend CARP and LAC [campus tutoring]. . . I would love to go to the social events at school if it wasn't me commuting . . . What I hate is that I'm a commuter."

Juggling school, work, and the commute is a triple whammy:

"I'm off campus . . . like the [long] commute, getting to San Francisco is heavy traffic, and even if you're taking BART, it still takes time . . . taking the bart from here all the way back to Dublin is about an hour and a half . . . And then from [bart], going home, is about another 15 to 20 minutes and then if it is a working day [in San Jose], it is another hour to go to work.

For Alex, and other young people like him, poverty throws up a lot of barriers. They're not only barriers which make it difficult to get to and from school, but barriers that narrow and limit their opportunities to academically and socially integrate, even though they want to.

The College Classroom Experience. Some students have experienced a class that's poorly taught and stressful. For Alex, that class is Math 198, pre-calculus, the "worst" class. He tells the story of a normal day in Math class, of how students showed "disinterest" and would "talk over" the professor and "walk out in the middle of his lessons" or "watch videos" or "take a phone call during class." Alex says these behaviors are "distracting" and that the professor "could set more strict rules" because it affected Alex's "focus" and caused him to "miss something important" that is needed for a test or homework. He felt the professor is partly to be blamed:

[The professor] mentioned that we would be using technology in his class like once in a while, but he, like, never mentioned, you know, the technology shouldn't be taken out of your bags when we're not using it, or like [the] phone should be put away during lecture. So I felt like he was a bit too lenient on the rules.

Alex felt this class "really sucked" and "affected [his] learning and grade. Adding to the disruptive classroom environment, Alex also felt the professor "didn't teach" yet expected students to come to class with certain math knowledge. Alex explains:

He puts us into groups to help each other with the worksheet instead of giving lessons. He said that we were put into groups to help one another and see if one person is able to recognize what was going on and help the rest of the group. It

turned out to be wrong since all semester not [only] was I struggling, but the people who were in my group were struggling too, either not knowing what to do with the worksheet or not having a high school background about precalculus. As a result, Alex perceived the entire course to be a “waste.” From Alex’s point of view, the group work failed because the instruction wasn’t clear, and the students didn’t know the content or didn’t know it well enough to help one another.

When I asked Alex what the professor could have done differently to improve group work, Alex advocated for a classroom that incorporates active learning and community building to enhance the teacher-student and student-student relationship:

I felt like, you know, [the professor] should have probably had a little bit more interaction with the class . . . Not many people are really into math. And so, when [students] see a worksheet and they see, like, all these problems, they don't want to talk to one another because they don't understand. They don't want to interact because, you know, the professor hasn't successfully been able to make the students interact with one another.

Alex felt the professor was partly responsible for having ineffective group work and that the professor should have “start[ed] off the semester with successfully trying to interact with the students” in order to build a classroom environment that would improve students’ comfort level in working with each other.

Throughout the semester in Math class, Alex has had several conversations with the professor regarding his Math quizzes, yet Alex didn't want to hint to his dissatisfaction of the class or of his peers' disrespectful behaviors. This might be due to his cultural upbringing in which questioning the teacher is not one of the cultural norms (Chávez and Longerbeam, 2016). Also, coming from a family of field workers, Alex isn't groomed to feel entitled to questions, answers, or access, and so he's unlikely to make the first steps in advocating for himself. This complicates NSSE because the NSSE survey frames engagement as a student responsibility: "how often have you . . ." or "to what extent have you . . ." or "have you participated . . ."

While Math was Alex's least memorable class, his other classes like Philosophy, Communication, and English deserve recognition. Alex considers Philosophy 101 his "most memorable" class. He felt the Philosophy professor's lessons were relevant, purposeful, coherent, and interactive:

Intro to Philosophy is really interesting, just because of how the professor structured his lessons [with] other different types of philosophers, the types of readings, the types of videos, the way he organized it, and then he tries to relate everything to modern music, videos, or assignments . . . just hearing the different views from my peers when it came to Philosophy was really interesting because, you know, for me, I got a new view that I probably wouldn't have thought of, to think about, um, and I thought that was really cool.

When I asked for an example, Alex highlighted the professor's ability to engage in discussion with students and in getting students to verbally engage with each other:

The professor brought up the trolley problem, which was, if you were on the trolley and you couldn't control it. And on one track you see five people, on another track you would see one person. And you would be the person that decide where the trolley would go and who you would sacrifice (laughs). And so what I thought was really interesting was the different views that each student had. They said they would kill that one person and or some would say kill the five people, and some other side said, like well, it depends on how are the people, like are they criminals? Are they actually innocent people? And then others were like, why can't we stop it ourselves? Isn't there any other method trying to stop it ourselves or can we sacrifice yourself in front of [the] trolley to save all six people? And so we thought, you know, we had the solution to it. But then our professor would add, what if it was someone you knew?

When I asked how else the professor engages students, Alex explains that the professor disrupts the context to provide opportunities for students to sit in places where they're not self-segregating: "Students would be changing their seats every time. So it was, you know, not one student would be sitting in the same spot." Alex also explains that the professor promotes and facilitates critical thinking: "The professor was very interactive with the students. [He introduced] topics that students will be engaged in . . .

once we think we figured it out, he brings in more questions to challenge us. This professor is trying to get us to think deeper; he tries to get a response out of everyone. Hearing other people's responses make me think too." Based off Alex's interpretation of the Philosophy professor's teaching practices, Alex helps us see that multiple NSSE engagement indicators (EIs) are happening in conjunction with one another, which supports NSSE's assumption that the more engagement boxes checked, the more engaged students are. Specifically for Alex, higher-order thinking and reflective learning spark intellectual engagement, but it's also tied to hearing diverse views and being in a supportive learning environment.

Another professor that Alex equally praises is his Oral Communication professor. He finds her engaging, personable, interactive, confident, open-minded, pleasant, and passionate:

Comm 150 would be a class that everybody's really excited [about] . . . [the professor] really tries to interact with students, you know, she's not afraid to share some parts of her personal life, and that feels a little bit more comforting. And she's really open minded . . . Every time she enters, she's always really cheery, even if it's one of those mornings that the students are just tired, or not really into it. She always comes in with a positive attitude, like, good morning brilliant students, and she's just really open-minded about class and I really love that.

Alex credits this communication professor with her positive attitude in making a “big difference” for the class, giving off a “positive feeling” which shows she is “devoted to students” and “devoted to the subject.” These characteristics -- a positive attitude, an emotional connection to students, a perky personality -- which engage Alex to want to “learn and participate” are not captured in NSSE.

One class that Alex found to be especially “memorable” was ENG 114, first-semester composition, because students were given choice and agency:

A memorable assignment was in my English 114 . . . and it was basically a storytelling speech where we got to select a simple topic and make it into a story because we were doing a lesson on satirical proposals, so [the professor] wanted us to explore what we could [create] . . . I got to choose how I structured the essay and assignment.

He also voted this English professor as his “favorite” because she was “open-minded;” her class “wasn’t structured;” the essays weren’t “based on a certain criteria;” her readings “engaged” students; and in her class, students “laughed.” Here, Alex shares a single moment in ENG 114:

She would take modern readings or maybe even old readings. She just won't choose it because it seems entertaining. But she chose it because she knows it's modern, that students will have some type of interaction [with them] . . . You'll get a lesson that you're able to write an essay on, and when we come to class after

watching videos or reading certain stories, everybody wants to talk about it because it's interesting.

Alex has similar sentiments for his ENG 214 class, second-semester composition.

Lessons that are well-scaffolded and peer reviewed by an anonymous person seem to help his learning:

For the activities we do in class, I find them very useful. There hasn't been an activity that doesn't relate to the essays . . . [Having] Eli review [a web-based peer review platform] to critique my essay, to see if it's on track, was really helpful in providing useful feedback. Not only that but about upping the game, we could also [give feedback] like 'go deeper' and push each other.

It is from this class, ENG 214, that Alex produced his "proudest" assignment, an argument essay on "food insecurity on campus," a topic about which he cared deeply. The flexibility in choosing his own topic and the fact that the assignment wasn't "restricting" yet required him to "look at different viewpoints" were reasons why he was "proud" of his work.

Alex's perspective of the teaching practices in his English classes supports and contrasts NSSE. While both his English professors are meeting NSSE's EIs -- in this case, effective teaching strategies, higher order thinking, and reflective learning -- the professors are also instructing in ways that are not often seen in standard schooling practices. Specifically, these professors are providing hospitality by considering

emotional and social needs, making their assignments less constrained by offering choice and agency, and minimizing regulation in order to teach writing as an act of engagement (Soliday and Trainor, 2016).

From Alex's experiences in the first-year classroom, it seems that he enjoyed classes where students interacted with each other (professor included) and engaged with relevant course materials. For Alex, the teacher's attitude and instruction also played a dominant role in his first-year experiences. The professor that Alex didn't appreciate was content-based (Math) while the ones he loved were process-based (Philosophy, English, Oral Communication). Listening to Alex describe his experiences in the classroom suggests to me that students perceive NSSE's engagement indicators in surprising ways. Students like Alex feel supported in their learning when pedagogy and content are delivered in a hospitable classroom environment that demonstrates care and attention.

Mentors. Developmentally, as first-year students are in the transitioning period from adolescence to adulthood, they try to make sense of their life and who they are.

Alex reflects on this:

So I feel like for first-years, it's that mindset of trying to figure out who you are as a person and trying to identify yourself in society. And then at the same time it's trying to figure out, like, is this the right major for me? Is it worth my time, or should I just, you know, just leave the university and get a job?

Alex's economic barrier is highlighted in the last line. For him, time is money and if college is not going to be the kind of investment he envisions, then, staying in college is not practical. For Alex and students like him, the longer they stay in school, the more it costs, and very often they're compelled to leave college for a job instead. Economics play a critical role in their decision making, and so having an experienced other as a guiding force, ideally one who is racially and economically representative of them and who knows the rewards of college, might help them persist. Alex's major advisor might be that person. He shares his experience with his advisor:

The first time I went in there, he had a requirement of, like, you know, trying to make a four-year plan. And for me, I was really indecisive and told him I don't have a four year plan and he's like, let's make one right now and let's make a rough draft of what you want to take, what you're taking right now, what you need to take, and how we're going to plan it. And so, we made a rough draft and what I liked about him is that he was really comforting. You know, he was really nice and welcoming. And he told me, like if you ever need help just come to my office and I'll be able to help you. And if you ever need help with your courses, just come in and we'll figure something out.

Lucky for Alex, his college advisor was not the first supportive adult. Prior to college, he also had high school mentors who helped him see that college is an option and a possibility:

The [Math] teacher I had for three years was very important to me. I didn't know what I wanted to be or to major in. This teacher portrayed math in a way that no other teacher did. He made math really fun; he integrated it to real life experience. Another one would be my band director. He wasn't typical. He was very straightforward, would understand students, [and knew] what advice to give . . . My counselor [was] one who helped me apply for Upward Bound. What I loved about her is that she really cared about me. When she saw that I was failing, she tried to figure out what's going on. She took the time.

For many first-generation students like Alex, it takes more than hard work, intelligence, and willpower to survive the first year -- it takes a village. In Alex's case, persistence involved parents who supported him unconditionally, a college bridge program that offered resources and access to college, college professors who made efforts to build a hospitable classroom community, and advisors who responded with care and empathy. Even with all this, one side of Alex wonders if he should be working full-time instead. He wonders if college is worth it, given that he has to figure out the fastest and cheapest way to get to and from school, find the next meal, manage housing, and attend school full-time -- all while being broke.

Benji: Against Grades

Born and raised in Monterey, Benji adores his family. His mother is Salvadoran and father is Korean, neither of whom attended college yet they supported Benji's preparation for it. By going to college, Benji hopes to make them "proud" which hints to the enormous pressure he puts on himself. Because Benji doesn't come from a high-resourced family or community, he doesn't arrive at SF State with economic, racial, or academic advantages. He has to work during the school year to support himself because financial aid only covers tuition. Benji started his first semester at SF State living on campus housing but moved out mid-semester due to his concerns about a roommate's drug use and his discomfort in being one of the few Asians (Benji identifies as Asian) living on a predominantly White floor. Unable to maintain high grades or test scores, Benji appears discouraged by feelings of personal inadequacy and by interactions with "heartless" professors. What seems to keep Benji in college, however, are the friendships he has created and his desire to make his parents happy.

Reaching towards me with open arms, Benji walked into his first interview ten minutes late with a huge smile, bangs covering his youthful face. I hadn't seen him for two months. His creamy white zipper sweater snuggled his petite frame and complimented his loose jeans and black loafers. Benji is a small guy with a big personality and resembles a K-pop artist.

Benji is the first in his family to attend college. His parents raised their family in Monterey, a city known for its agriculture and a diverse marine life, just two hours south of San Francisco. Early on, Benji's parents told him, "you should go [to college] we're saving up money," and so this was his "motivation" to be here. During his first year of college, Benji's newfound sense of independence quickly "got old" and he found himself "homesick," wanting his parents, especially his mom, for whom he doesn't hold back affection: "My mom just means everything to me . . . I want her to have joy, what I can do for her just makes me in general feel great. This could be anything, like taking care of my baby brother. You know, doing the groceries for her or cleaning the house for her, whatever she asks. If it makes her happy, that's everything to me."

Also, Benji struggles with money. There were days when Benji skipped class because of work, and one day he came to class in tears because financial aid was giving him a hard time about a "hold" on his account. This past semester he chose to take a hybrid writing class so he could "work more and make more money." He also understands that school and work is a juggling act: "If I don't have enough money to support myself, you know, this is going to affect my school life . . . if I focus too much on my job, my school life is affected. You know, I run the chance of losing my financial aid. And then I'm going to have to pay out of pocket." This need to be self-supporting affects his ability to attend campus activities. When events are in the evening, he has to work, and when events are during school hours, he has class.

Benji was my former student. I had him in ENG 114, first-semester writing, in Fall 2018. I remember him as fashionable type of guy. He worked at Zara, a trendy retail clothing store and was naturally intuned with people's fashion choices. I got to know Benji quite well throughout the course of a semester. In my class, Benji approached reading and writing with enthusiasm. I know this because he asked all kinds of questions in order to be more successful with his written assignments. His questions were not about how to get an "A" or how to pass. What I saw was a curious student who had lots of questions about content and ideas, which led to even more questions, and which then led to learning. In my view, Benji was fully engaged. By that, I mean he cared about his work, he put in effort, worked with peers, attended tutoring, and asked for my help.

Jovial and social, Benji's extroverted personality enabled him to freely chat with others in class, so it's not a surprise that having a "study buddy" is Benji's approach to learning. In every class, with the exception of Political Science, Benji had found someone who wanted to "exchange numbers" and with whom he ends up "sitting together" or "becoming good friends." Even in Accounting, the class from "hell," he and his study buddies "stress out together," "enjoy each other's company," and "have fun with a tutor." Reminiscing about his friends from our class, Benji said, "We were so sad that when the semester ended and like we weren't going to see each other as much anymore."

Having friends is important to Benji. It not only helped him feel connected to others, but he also reaped the benefits of learning:

In college, work was a little bit more challenging to me. There's so much to remember. You can remember a lot more when you have a study buddy, combine your thoughts or compare your work against the other and it's like filling in for each person. Studying with people who are taking the class is like super beneficial for me to learn it. That's how I ended up getting through midterms and projects.

This is an example of collaborative learning in real time, which NSSE defines as working on projects with others, asking others for help with difficult material or explaining it to others, and working through course material in preparation for exams (NSSE, 2019).

In addition to collaborative learning, Benji also thrives in having discussions with diverse others, another engagement indicator (NSSE, 2019). Benji said the best part of English class was the “group project” because it was “more like getting to know people in your class. It was like showing them your personality, your inner true self, rather than like your school self, and have fun.” Benji expressed similar sentiments about his Communications class, in which the professor was “successful” in having students interact. It involved students writing and delivering their speech and receiving feedback from multiple people, a teaching strategy that Benji “appreciated” because it helped him

with the “timing” and “editing.” Benji values the opportunity to work with others because for him, it’s not to “gain points” but to utilize the “best way of learning.”

Other than courses like first-semester English and Communication, which tapped Benji’s learning style, there were several courses which he found “enjoyable.” These courses were Astronomy, second-semester English, and Hospitality, all of which didn’t involve memorization or high stakes exams. From Benji’s perspective, his Astronomy professor did a good job implementing learning strategies (Benji analyzed materials rather than passively taking down notes); reflective and integrative learning (Benji made personal connections to course material); effective teaching (the instruction was organized, and the professor gave clear explanations and examples); and high-order learning (Benji applied, judged, and synthesized course material rather than memorizing facts). This is why Astronomy tickled his fancy. Initially Benji didn’t think Astronomy would be interesting but that changed quickly: “learning how to read the stars is really fascinating.” Now when he looks at the calendar and sees a little moon icon, he knows “it has something to do with the moon,” which prior to this class, he “never really paid much attention to it.” When Benji talks about Astronomy, his eyes glow with enthusiasm: “When the moon phases, almost like literally split in half, it’s not even called a half moon. I literally thought it was called a half moon, but it’s either called like a first quarter or third quarter. I’m actually really excited to go in to the class and learn something new every day.”

The other two classes, English and Hospitality, were equally engaging because these courses valued his authorship. From Benji's perspective, the English assignments were more "about 'you' kind of thing" (reflective learning) and not forced topics like "Trump and Russia" which "bores [him] to the bottom of his core." The assignments in English didn't give him "writer's block" because he was asked to analyze and make judgement that demonstrates higher order learning: "It asks like what are your thoughts on this. Why did you choose this quote. What does it mean to you. Can you relate to it and like, what's the experience and what is this article really telling." Additionally, Benji received feedback from both his professor and peers followed by opportunities to revise (effective teaching practices): "We also have people online that comment on our paper. There's like a little section that [the professor] comments. The week afterwards is when we get to revise it." Equally honoring of his voice was his Hospitality course: "I remember every time finishing an assignment for that class, I just felt good. It was fun writing. Just because our Professor let us relate [writing assignments] to our experience and opinion."

Dissatisfactions. However, despite Benji's genuine engagement, he is unhappy at SF State. He's engaged and does his work, but he's not passing the courses in which the final grade is weighted on exams only. Even though Benji received an "A" in my class, he didn't perform well in several classes.

The “worst class ever,” he says, was Political Science, the only class in which he didn’t have a study buddy. Benji struggled because this course was scheduled in the evening and was taught in a traditional style (three-hour lecture and exams). He sounded powerless when talking about this class:

I tried coming as much as I can [sigh]. But it was hard, just because it was at night and the professor lectured through the whole thing and not to mention the class was only based off tests . . . There were no class assignments, no projects, no extra credit. There was no practice, nothing. I didn't study with anybody. I tried to do it on my own. It turned out really bad. I didn't pass the class.

Benji’s struggle to comprehend the materials in Political Science was agonizing. He “didn’t understand the reading” and didn’t feel he was “learning anything in this class.” He found himself “writing random stuff” that he “didn’t even understand.” To make matters worse, exams trigger anxiety, which in turn affect his grades:

Like when I was taking the midterm, I was literally struggling because I'm not a good test taker. Whenever I end up taking a test, I have a brain freeze. I take the midterm and I had nothing that I can look back on. I can't remember anything. And that's when I start panicking and I start to get really scared. I would write at least three to four pages of the essays and I still get a failing grade . . . I'm just like, Jesus Christ, this is terrible. I hate this.

Upon reflection, Benji questions the system: “I don't know who came up with that system. At school, or in college in general, to take a three-hour class and just hopefully hope for the best that you'll manage through the entire amount is kind of absurd.”

Another course that Benji struggled in was Accounting, his “least favorite” class, because the content was constraining and based off memory skills: “I don't like math . . . You have to learn it [one] way and then hope for the best that you can learn it. And I think that's what's hard for my brain to grasp, because there's so much to remember and there's only a specific way.” Benji ended up withdrawing from this class to avoid a failing grade.

Benji's experiences in both Political Science and Accounting illustrate a pedagogical and an equity issue. These professors focused on products in the form of exams rather than process in the form of scaffolded activities. Instead of engaging in complex cognitive tasks, such as application, analysis, judgment, and synthesis, they valued memorization of facts. And, their single method of teaching and assessing where students listen, take notes, memorize, and take a test, sets up some students to succeed and others to fail.

The act of doing school work just for a grade wears down Benji and deadens his spirit. Benji struggles to find the “best moment” of college: “I still haven't found it . . . I will admit [college] is very stressful. Really, I really want to get [college] over with. I don't ever want to deal with homework or midterms or finals ever again. I'm so done

with doing this.” Benji’s frustration with grades and testing affects his sense of self and is a barrier to improving his self-efficacy: “When you have a bad grade after you worked hard [studying for an exam], it just brings your self-esteem lower than it should. I suppose people could say you should learn from it and you should try to do better the next time, but that motivation is lost because I already did the best I can do. This is why I don’t like the grading system.”

Benji doesn’t think grades should exist. A more “common approach” to grading, he says, “should be based off of what you learned from it, like, rather than being tested.” Benji’s views on grades echo those of Ken Bain (2012), author of *What the Best College Students Do*. Bain quotes an engineer to show how grades don’t equate to learning, “To this day . . . I don’t understand that material, but I made A’s in both of those classes. I learned to study in the right way and pass the examinations with flying colors, but I never really learned anything” and Bain comments that “those who receive good grades become no more productive [in life] than their friends who receive C’s and D’s” (p. 10). In agreement with Bain, Benji argues that “grades don’t define you as a person. It doesn’t define how smart you are. It just means that you understood the material at that very moment, but if you were to take the test again, like maybe a month, or a year later, you’re probably not going to get the score that you got the first time.” Benji’s perspective is that grades don’t determine, predict, or define academic success. Instead, it’s about the deep personal learning that, again, Ken Bain (2012) also advocates for. Benji explains:

To me [academic success] is that you have the feeling of happiness, of the hard work that you put in that has paid off . . . So I feel that academic success is more of what you learned and how did you learn it, like what effort did you put in to understand it, rather than, like, oh yeah, I'm gonna read this and take note of this and try to memorize it.

Benji is also dissatisfied with General Education (GE) classes that are disconnected to students' majors and personal goals. Benji thinks GE courses are “wasteful” because he hasn’t found one that’s “exciting,” which is why he tries to take a class “to get an easy A” so he could get GE credits “done and over with.” Thus, he argues that the purpose of college is to study for one’s major:

I feel the purpose of college should be mostly focused on like upper division Classes. There shouldn’t be an upper division or lower division; just call it your major classes because this is why you pick this and it’s what you want to pursue in your life, your career, like for me it’s hospitality. I want to take more hospitality classes; I want to learn more of the airline industry. I want to add more of like, you know, culinary classes, and I want to learn more about hotels and tourism.

Benji’s reality contradicts NSSE’s claims that “higher engagement levels and higher grades go hand-in-hand” (NSSE, 2002). If Benji took the NSSE survey, he would probably score high on the engagement indicators (EIs). His input of engagement and

output of a 2.5 GPA challenge NSSE's assumption that EIs are strongly linked to GPA. Even though Benji doesn't have a high GPA, he is a successful student -- he is creative, has team working skills, puts in effort, and exhibits social and emotional intelligence. Students like Benji are not the problem; rather, how institutions measure success and how that is communicated to students in the form of grades is where things fall apart.

Faculty can do Wonders, or not. It's clear that Benji doesn't like Math or exams, but I wondered if having a different kind of Math teacher, one that isn't "scary" or "serious" or "intimidating" would change his perspective. Turns out there was one, a professor from Elementary Statistics, whom he speaks fondly of:

I like my professor, she's really, really funny. She was a little hard to understand because she had a heavy accent, but I still really liked her teaching. Her grading was fair and like the tests were just what she taught . . . I'm not good at math. I've mentioned that before. She went through the book, but she kind of changed it up her way which I appreciated . . . I wished the professor would teach maybe upper division. If she did, I would definitely take her again.

The Statistics professor made Benji "think" and taught beyond the "book" so students could comprehend. This is what engages him. Benji is not a proponent of rote learning or cranking out assignments for the sake of a grade. He wants more. He doesn't want to complete "steps" in an assignment or "memorize" for a test.

The professors -- their attitudes and teaching styles -- were reasons why Benji chose English, Hospitality, and Communication as his “favorites.” He adds, “it’s really about the teacher, the teacher makes a difference for me.” In these classes, Benji said he was able to “ask questions” and didn’t “leave class feeling confused.” He “always knew what [he] had to do next for [his] assignment or what to study for. The notes made sense.” These experiences support NSSE’s assumption that student learning is heavily dependent on effective teaching (NSSE, 2019). What these professors have in common, continues Benji, is that they “show how much they care” and will “go out of their way” to help students succeed; you can “go to their office hours” and “talk to them and explain what was going on” and the professors would “understand” and ask “Is there anything I can do for you?” They don’t “throw” students out. These humane qualities of caring and validation are captured in Rendon’s theory of validation (1994), which are especially important to first-generation students’ outcome and persistence. However, validation is not captured in NSSE as an important element for student success.

Benji is disappointed that not every student-faculty interaction is positive. After talking to his Accounting professor about his progress in class, Benji said the professor simply “did not care,” “was not nice,” and “not sympathetic towards students.” When Benji inquired about opportunities to pass the class after he “bombed” a test, his professor said to “try harder” and didn’t consider “what he can do on [his] end” to help. Following that, Benji went to his office hours for help, but the professor was “focused on

whatever he was doing on his laptop” and replied with “really simple answers.” At that point, Benji was afraid to ask more “dumb questions” fearing that the professor would “get really annoyed.” Benji’s last attempt was to turn to a business advisor for help who was also a faculty member and equally as “heartless” as his Accounting professor. Instead of showing empathy, this advisor advised Bejni to “reconsider a different major.” Such negative attitudes and interactions with faculty are not captured in NSSE. NSSE’s definition of engagement assumes that students must take the initiative to engage with faculty, which Benji had, even though it was hard. However, NSSE doesn’t take into account of how a professor’s poor or indifferent behavior could drastically affect student growth, development, and persistence. Benji concluded that “it’s probably the professors [fault] on why nobody’s passing” because they “don’t want to help failing students.”

As I reflect on Benji’s experiences in his first year, I wonder if Benji will return to school next semester. He’s already experienced a great deal of drama dealing with difficult professors. But that was not the whole story. On campus housing, Benji didn’t feel “safe,” citing “drug use” and being one of the few nonwhite students on his floor. Back in student services, he felt “discouraged” after interacting with financial aid and academic advisors, who he said “were not nice” and “not helpful.” More revealing, he gave an honest answer about why he’s in college: “I don’t know if I’m here because I really want to be here, like I’m really here just because of my parents. That’s like my motivation. I feel that’s the reason why I’m here . . . I want them to be proud.” If Benji’s

first-year experiences were more positive, would his reply have been the same? From difficult professors to unimpactful GE courses to unhelpful staff to parental expectations, Benji's first year in college was disheartening.

Sophia: Motivated by Grades

Sophia is a first-generation student with parents from Mexico. She describes herself as "organized," "honest," "down to earth," and "compassionate." She arrived at SF State with a clear goal: "I'm getting a degree here so I [can] get my masters and then my PhD." Sophia wants to be a psychologist because she believes "everyone should be able to get help without being judged." Specifically, she wants to address the "stigma" of "getting mental help" in "the Hispanic community." And as a "younger generation" she feels she has the power to do it. It's clear that Sophia doesn't have second thoughts about college. She came here with a purpose. Questions that run through the minds of other first-generation, like "Is college for me? Will I fit in? Can I handle the work?" didn't faze Sophia. She walked into SF State with full confidence.

Sophia's confidence could be a result of early literacy. As a toddler, Sophia was read to in English and Spanish by her parents, who actively supported literacy, taking Sophia and her older brother to the library, so it's not surprising that her family is an important part of her life. Sophia chose SF State because of its proximity to her home in

Cloverdale, an hour and a half north of San Francisco. She's happy that "[her] parents can just pick [her] up or [she] can just go home whenever [she] want[s] to."

Her parents were born in Mexico, dad a former migrant worker and mom a medical assistant; neither has college degrees. Her dad wanted Sophia to go to a community college to "save money" but Sophia was adamant about going to a four-year college because her brother never transferred out of the community college, so she fears, like him, she will "lose motivation." Now that she's at SF State, and with financial aid covering tuition, her parents are willing to shoulder the cost of housing. She says, "they will pay for it as long as they can."

Her parents didn't force or expect college but it was conveyed through her school. "It's what you do after high school" is how Sophia puts it, "like it's the norm." Most people go to college and then figure out what they want to do. For Sophia, she came in knowing what she wanted to do. She wants to be a psychologist so she can "help" people in the Hispanic community. To do this, she hopes to get a PhD in psychology and a minor in Spanish. Her goal is to have a job where she "could help others" and "pay [her] bills."

Sophia's focus on her career is perhaps the result of her schooling. In high school she was an honors student enrolled in a string of AP courses in a well-resourced public school that gave her access to certain teachers and opportunities not available to non-honor students. One advantage Sophia had was building close relationships with her

teachers, whom she described as “fun, relatable, kind of like friends.” Sophia shares about her relationship with a “chill” science teacher: “I always brought her rice crispy treats. I did that for three years. Every year I’d bring her a whole box from Costco. Every year I did that. I don’t think it helped my grades though (smile). But she gave her class the hang out spot. That’s where we went during lunch time.”

In her prior schooling, Sophia also learned to work hard to get A’s, participate in school activities as student body vice president, serve her community through volunteering and service learning, and earn awards like a first prize in an essay contest. Having these experiences, Sophia arrived at college with academic advantages and survival skills.

Belonging. Upon her arrival to SF state, Sophia made an effort -- in a variety of ways -- to feel connected on campus. On move-in day, she rushed to a campus dance to “meet new people.” Soon after that, she joined the Catholic Club, a campus organization with whom she’ll be going to Tijuana to assist migrants at the border. She wants to do this because of her parents: “my parents are immigrants. I can relate to that and [so] I want to help [migrants].” During the holidays, she participated in arts and crafts, a nostalgic activity, something she did back home. And having been the senior class vice president in high school, Sophia ran -- and won -- for office to be the 7th floor representative at the campus dorm. As a representative, she participates in government and activity planning.

While SF State exposes Sophia to rich social experiences, it also disappoints her that students don't partake in campus activities. She sighed, "if people want to be involved, it's easy, there's like 20 clubs. You're not going to be turned away because most of them are pretty small clubs and welcome more people . . . Students here just don't want to do anything." At the same time, she criticizes how SF State fails to bring students together as a community. Sophia laments: "I think it's not a close-knit community, but I don't feel left out or separated. The school is not that connected. There's no school spirit or anything like that . . . Nobody goes to the campus events. We planned a Halloween party, a few people on our floor put it together. And then it was just mostly us who were there. There were more of us than them." This aside, Sophia concludes, "I have nothing to complain about."

Even though Sophia feels the campus is disconnected, she doesn't feel alone. She finds opportunities to build friendships. For example, even though she disliked her Geology class, she didn't dislike her classmates; she continued to "hang out" with them. She also has a group of campus housing friends with whom she dines at "shitty eats." This "thing," laughs Sophia, is what "keeps us together." And she also has friends from campus organizations like the Catholic Club.

Sophia is also in cohorted classes through Metro, a learning community, where she says the classes are "smaller than regular classes," and students get more attention and "opportunities to ask questions." Although Sophia doesn't use all the services

available to her, such as the Metro hub where students go for help, Sophia does reach out to her advisor twice a semester. At her first meeting, her Metro adviser educated Sophia on “how the whole system worked and the GE's and everything.” Sophia was grateful for that and is satisfied with Metro, especially with the “perks,” which is getting a spot in all the courses she needs towards graduation, making Sophia less affected by program impaction and more likely to graduate. Metro seems to be helping her get what she came for: a degree.

“I want the A.” Sophia views grades and learning as two distinct things. She emphasizes that “grades are important but it doesn't mean you're smart, you can do good at school, on assignments and taking tests, and cram everything in but it doesn't say you're smart.” Learning, on the other hand, she says, is owning it: “if you could teach something to someone, you know it.”

However, grades for Sophia seems to be more important than learning. Her “worst” class was Geology, but she had perfect attendance and did the work because she “want[ed] the A.” She comments that Geology is a “boring” class nobody attends, something that wasn't going to “help [her] in life” unless she was studying it “as a profession.” Yet Sophia was able and willing to tough it out for the grade. Even in her “favorite” class, English, Sophia worried that her course grade would lower her GPA. When asked if she revised her essays just to improve her grade, she replies, “uh-hum. Yeah.” When asked about her “best” moment in college, Sophia says it's “getting a 4.0.”

Sophia's perception of grades was acquired prior to college. When Sophia told a story of receiving second prize in an essay contest, what's striking was that she was more proud to beat a classmate than to receive the prize: "I was just happy that I beat Conway. He's like, this guy, he's smart. He was really good at studying. His mom was a teacher. So everyone's like, oh yeah, he's the smartest because of his parents. His mom and his older sister [are] genius[es]. Beating him was the best. He got third place." For Sophia, it was the recognition that mattered.

To stay on top of her grades, Sophia resorted to cheating, a behavior she thought "didn't feel right." Her story involved top-performing students cheating in AP statistics. When the school lost its AP teacher and couldn't find a replacement, students had to enroll in an online class. Instead of each student doing their part, Sophia said she and her classmates became "lazy" and "copied" off each other via group chat. "It was a whole system" she explained, and to cover their tracks, students would "miss one or two questions so it didn't look suspicious." During finals, an online proctor monitored students, but Sophia quipped, "it was really easy to cheat." Through this process, Sophia was also concerned about protecting the school's reputation: "if we're caught, it would look really bad on the school."

This cheating behavior doesn't necessarily make Sophia a bad person. Instead of judging her, we should question the pressures that schools place on honors students. Her behavior is a manifestation of the kinds of messages that students receive from schools,

society, and families about future success being dependent on high grades and test scores, referred to as “the grade-trap” (Pope, 2008). I echo Pope, as in my own teaching experience, I see students resort to plagiarism when they are stuck, are afraid to ask for help, and terrified of failing. But they need the grade, so they feel the need to cheat. If grades weren’t assigned, and assessments were replaced with student learning, effort, and labor, students would have little reason to cheat.

What this dishonest behavior does do, however, is frame Sophia’s lens on engagement. Reflecting on her own experiences, Sophia feels engagement is a student, not a faculty, responsibility. For example, in her Geology class, Sophia blames students for their lack of involvement: “it’s not really [the professor’s] fault that [students] don’t show up to class . . . they just don’t want to learn.”

Enjoyment of Learning. Even though Sophia is a 4.0 student, she is hesitant about her abilities: “I don’t consider anything that I’ve written to be good. I mean, it’s just like good enough for the class.” One thing that might interfere with her success is “not knowing how to learn,” adding, “like, I never had to study. [Now] I have to learn how to learn the information.” For Sophia, learning is important but she feels she’s lacking tools and strategies.

This is where English fulfills her needs. In college English, Sophia walked away with writing strategies: “I remember that exploding the sentence thing we did . . . we read different author examples so we can learn from each one . . . we learned brainstorming

techniques and ways to grow our ideas and so I like that.” In this class, Sophia was able to see a direct connection between writing and achieving personal goals: “I know I’ll have to write in my job . . . I think writing in general will help my future.” Her “most memorable” and “proudest” assignment was the graduation plan she drafted in English, an assignment that asked students to reflect on their strengths and skills, to evaluate campus resources, to map out an academic plan, and to consider potential next steps after college. Sophia said this assignment gave her “ideas” about what she wanted to do after college and helped her figure out how her classes will fit into four years: “I enjoy planning out the four years, it was really fun for me. It forced me to think about myself . . . It helped me plan out which ones I need to take for my major and minor . . . I’ve been using it every time I do my schedules again.”

Another assignment that Sophia found to be relevant, enjoyable, and fun was a reflective assignment in Holistic Health, a class that Sophia refers to as a “community” and a “safe space.” The assignment was a final project in which students were asked to write a two-page personal health story accompanied with a collage. Sophia decided to go all the way out with her creativity: “I wrote about how I’ve had skin problems . . . so I’m like, how can I do that on to this mannequin head. And so I printed out different shades of brown skin tones, with light and darkness . . . and I cut them out because I did a paper mache. Overall, it’s pretty cool . . . most people here don’t have the chance to do art

stuff.” This student-centered assignment was meaningful because it gave Sophia the flexibility to blend arts with academics.

Sophia also credits this same class, Holistic Health, for interactive learning. One example was when the professor encouraged students to go outside of their comfort zone to engage with peers by having deep conversations: “We have to do, like, not awkward interactions, but you're just out of your comfort zone to talk about personal feelings and personal experiences. And so, like, people have opened up a lot in that class.” While the professor gave students a choice to “sit out” Sophia says this authentic experience of communicating and interacting draws people in: “No one's ever like left, maybe just go to the bathroom or whatever. But they always like came back.” Another example of interactive learning is when groups of students are assigned to teach a topic of their choice that's related to health. Without projectors or connections to technology, students had to come up with a creative approach to teach and convey their topic in a meaningful way. Sophia's group teaching was on “How to Boost your Immune System” and they did their “teaching” by setting up interactive “stations” where fellow students stop by to “engage” with the material.

One class that took Sophia by surprise was her Language and Power class. She hadn't thought about her linguistic history until this class: “I never really felt different about White or Hispanic. But I wrote about being an English language learner . . . my whole elementary school experience was in ELL classes. But I was born here. I speak

English. I wrote about that, I mean, I don't know, I never would have looked back."

After writing this paper, Sophia declared, "I wasn't the same." This reflective assignment was meaningful to Sophia because she learned something new about herself. She also got a confidence boost from her professor's "motivational" feedback.

Concluding Thoughts. In analyzing Sophia's engagement in her college classes, we see that Sophia is interested in courses rich with peer discussions and interactions (Holistic Health) and with student-centered assignments (English, Holistic Health, and Language and Power) in which she was given agency to follow her line of inquiry. What's worth noting is that even in her "worst" class, Geology, Sophia stuck it out and finished with an A. And even though "getting work done" is Sophia's greatest challenge in college, she still holds a 4.0 GPA. All this is to show that while Sophia enjoyed the classroom engagement strategies, they weren't the reasons for her success. Instead, it's what Sophia brought with her from prior schooling that made her successful -- early literacy, working the system, interacting with teachers, sticking it out -- yet these are not captured in NSSE.

Lila: Fitting In

Lila comes to college with a strong sense of self -- who she is, why she's here, and what she wants to study. She is biracial. Her mom is Indonesian, and her dad, who passed away when she was five years old, was White. Raised in a predominantly White

neighborhood by a tight-knit family, Lila arrives to college with many advantages: socioeconomically she's comfortable; academically she's well-prepared; racially she's at an advantage; and behaviorally she's a go-getter. These advantages enable her to be on top of her game in college, knowing how to engage in her studies, approach professors, and access resources. Through Lila, we witness a student who is engaged and successful, and needs little hand-holding.

Lila walked quietly in my office and took a seat. I didn't notice her arrival until an office mate alerted me. When I turned around, I recognized Lila immediately, her long brown hair hanging down her slender shoulders. Not saying a word, she greeted me with a big smile. I walked over to my desk as she was placing her bag from her lap to the floor. She glanced over at me, my desk, and my family pictures with a smile that cues familiarity. We exchanged greetings. Like Wendy, Benji, and Sophia, Lila was a former student, the quietest of the four. In her first interview, Lila talked about her upbringing.

What stood out was Lila's unusual, intricate background. Born in Maryland, Lila's dad passed away when she was five. Remaining close to her dad's family and raised by a single mom, an immigrant from Indonesia without a college degree, Lila stayed in Maryland until her midteens and then moved to Pleasanton, California when her mom remarried. Lila settled for SF State even though she was accepted to nine colleges. To name a few, they were University of Illinois, University of Missouri, Lesley University in Cambridge, Notre Dame in Maryland. Ultimately, Lila chose SF State

because she likes “being close to [her] step dad and mom” and “wasn’t ready to leave [them].” Living on campus, Lila also liked that SF State is “super diverse” and “a BART ride away from home.”

Lila doesn’t consider herself a full-on first-generation student because her dad and members of his family went to college. However, she explains, her experiences identify her as a first-generation student: “I could not have my mom review or help me with my essays and fix my grammar. That’s something first gen kids usually can’t do as opposed to, like, kids whose parents were born here, the parents will check their essay and fix their grammar. But usually I’m fixing my mom’s grammar.”

Lila went to a high school where the ethnic makeup was primarily White and Asian, with only a handful of students of color in the entire school. She considers her high school “a good school.” There, Lila participated in the AVID program, which she describes as “a program for smart students who just don’t have good organization skills.” For four years Lila studied with the same group of students, a community of learners, to whom she “got to be really close” because “it was just like a family,” adding “our teacher was amazing too.” Her high school offered hands-on learning with courses rich in science and social science. It also gave students a voice: “I’ve spoken out a lot in high school about societal issues and stuff. And I just read the news a lot and it’s like surrounded on social media by social issues.”

Unlike Wendy, Alex, Benji, and Sophia, Lila was not expected to go straight into college. She had options. At one point, Lila seriously considered taking a gap year to “work on an organic farm,” but then she had an “aha” moment, realizing she could go to college and “learn about how society is set up,” which prompted her to major in sociology. This thinking, then, led to her considering a potential career. Lila said she’d like to be a social worker but had second thoughts because “they’re not paid very well” and so she had the idea of wanting to be a professor: “it’s a cool job . . . they get to organize their class and run it for us.”

Given Lila’s background, it’s no surprise that she’s thriving. Like Sophia, Lila doesn’t have to worry about her next meal, commuting to and from school, finding work, or managing her mental health. She had the ability of finding herself, of knowing who she is, of figuring out her identity.

Thriving in College. The fact that SF State has a College of Ethnic Studies excites Lila: “We are the first university to have a College of Ethnic Studies. And so we’re very clearly prioritizing education that isn’t just from one point of view. Because sometimes academia is tailored towards white straight sis gendered men, at SFSU we really focus or make an effort to look at other points of views.” Courses in ethnic studies suits her interest: “my interest would be social problems and social structures.” Lila feels that SF State is a good fit because she’s surrounded by a community with a shared interest around race and inequities. In classes that involve peer interactions, Lila says she

can “hold group discussions” and “make comments and people will be able to respond to those comments.” Equally important, she adds, “I see a lot of people that I think I can be friends with.”

For social activities, Lila attends campus events, reasoning that “they’re there for us students to go to. And they’re always so welcoming.” To name a few, Lila has enjoyed painting, smores on a fire pit, live music at the Depot. Her plan for next semester is to join a campus organization, one that will maximize her confidence and community: “I realized from my experience [in an Indonesian dancing community] that identity related clubs boost my confidence and you get a really tight sense of community. And when you’re in a community and caring about others, it just makes you happy.” Furthermore, Lila has developed “new hobbies” such as playing the piano and tennis, and has maintained old hobbies like journaling, adding to her stamp collection, and writing to her penpals. Lastly, as a sociology major invested in understanding systems of oppression and power, Lila wants to see how “those values show themselves on other parts of the campus.” Right now, she says, these systems only “show in race and resistance classes.”

Aside from one negative experience with a rude staff member in the sociology department, Lila rates SF State a “10 out of 10.” Cheerfully, she said SF State was a happy discovery: “I remember in high school I was told that the SF State campus is so dead. Everyone commutes and when it’s past 6pm you’re going to feel so alone, but I’ve

never felt that way.” Additionally, Lila sees how GEs could fit within her major and be used for double counting towards graduation: “I love how [major courses] fit into your general ed requirements, like you can take a lot of interesting classes to affiliate with your general ed.” Yet she also acknowledges that this doesn’t apply to everyone: “Some people are there just because it fulfills their GE and they don’t really care about the other content, they just want to pass the class.”

Lila’s time at SF State has been flooded with positive experiences in the classroom. For example, Lila’s “favorite” professor is the one who taught Race and Resistance, whom Lila “felt close to.” Lila appreciated that this professor “asked a lot of questions all the time” and during a class debate one time, someone let out the phrase “white people are crazy” which her professor “dissected” and took “every aspect of that sentence and questioned each part,” unpacking it with the class. Feeling comfortable around this professor, Lila decided to see her during office hours to seek advice for her own future career: “I actually visited her after winter break and I had a really good talk with her, like, cuz she’s teaching in my minor . . . I told her about wanting to be a professor and she was like, hey, you know, it’s a good thing to do. And then she offered me to be a TA for her.” Lila’s confidence in seeking out the professor is what she brought with her to college. It’s the kind of confidence that are markers of someone with economic or educational advantages. In this case, Lila got a job and an opportunity to be involved in a high impact practice as a result of an office hour visit.

Capitalizing on her confidence and hard work, Lila is also getting straight A's in college. Because of her daily journaling, she has "[daily] practice in constructing sentences" and is not bothered by writing papers for school. Writing, also, is an act of engagement which Lila brings to college. Even in her "worst class," Environmental Geology, where she says the professor was "confusing" and "unclear," Lila managed to pass with an A grade. For Lila, having a 4.0 GPA is "an affirmation" that she is "smart" and "college is the right place." Even if she doesn't receive an A, Lila says "it's not like the end of the world. It's a goal. Like, I work for it. I work to do my best work and then the grade just stands for that." Lila is also aware that "college is a really specific environment" implying that to do well, one has to excel in knowing the moves of school, like writing papers, participating in class, getting involved on campus.

An Advocate. I was waiting for Lila in my office on a Thursday afternoon for our scheduled interview. Thirty-minutes passed and then an hour. No voicemail, no email. I was concerned about Lila because it's not her style to stand someone up, so I send her an email to check in. Lila responded several days later and apologized. She said she didn't forget about our scheduled interview but would like to tell me in person why she missed it. Our interview started with what happened the day she missed her interview. Lila shares: "I had my first argument with the professor and it wasn't even about my work or anything. It was just about something that was said in class. I brought

it up to her, and then it kind of turned into a debate and so I stayed after class for an hour and we talked it out.”

This happened in her second-semester English class. Lila challenged her English professor on how the word “slut” is used in a societal context:

So, we have a new assignment, called the cultural essay, and we have to pick a cultural topic that we ask a question about, and then we do our research based on that question. For one of the examples of a question that was asked was: “When did it become cool for girls to dress like sluts on Halloween?” And I thought, that use of that word in that way felt kind of like judgmental and uncomfortable. So I just raised my hand and I asked, “can you talk more about what the essay content was because just from this question, it sounds like it's being judgmental of other women, using a misogynistic term.” The class was almost over. So she kind of felt rushed to defend this girl's essay and she told me it's my philosophy. Like, it's my philosophy that the word slut is bad when really it's just like, that's how it's always been used in my experience, except when it's being reclaimed by other women. But, like, the way it was used in that question felt offensive, and I didn't like how she switched it on me and said it was my fault for getting offended when it was not used in a good way.

Lila believed she wasn't the only one feeling this way and so she requested that the professor opened this up for a class discussion, to which the professor declined:

[The professor] would interrupt me a little, I'd be in the middle of getting something out and then she pounces on that before I get to finish. During the conversation, she asked me, like, what I wanted from her, what I wanted to do to resolve this, which was nice. And I said, I'd like to ask the class what they think of that word. And so today on Monday, she kind of mentioned it, but she didn't really open it up for discussion.

Lila tried to understand why her professor's position didn't click with hers:

[The professor] thinks that it just means promiscuous and she thinks it can be a positive word. For me, I think it can be a positive word, if a woman is saying it about herself. But to me, it's always used negatively. It means more than promiscuous. It means, like, you're promiscuous, and you are bad and unworthy because of it.

When class ended, Lila was pleased that she was able to speak on others' behalf and was willing to leave this debate as is without pursuing it any further: "I was happy because one girl texted me after class. And she was like, 'thank you for speaking up about that. That bothers me too' . . . I feel like (sigh) I'll just put it to rest. I don't want to write my entire cultural essay about slut shaming."

In analyzing this encounter, I see how Lila's advantages -- socioeconomics, affluent high school structure, and resources -- play out in full view. They've helped Lila come into a public institution on a stronger footing, and this is what NSSE fails to

measure and capture: how her behaviors came to be and how her confidence is groomed to challenge teachers and advocate for herself. Her advantages go back to what Jean Anyon (1980) researched on social class and the hidden curriculum of schooling, that is, schools are not socially neutral; race, gender, and social class do impact student behaviors and learning. And students like Lila who come from middle-class or affluent schools benefit from that kind of background.

The NSSE checklist of engagement strategies clicks with Lila because of the hidden curriculum that's been taught to her through her schools. If we were able to see Lila's NSSE results, she would probably indicate high engagement because she started from a stronger background. Lila challenged her professor, whereas someone like Benji would just not go to class rather than to deal with that. Lila's high school, upbringing, neighborhood, economics -- all feed into a certain culture that does not show up on a NSSE checklist yet they enable her to advocate for herself and others. I wonder, how could institutions use the strengths of these students to inform first year initiatives?

Common Themes

In these five variations, I shared stories that are untold. Each student brought a unique story that's complicated and nuanced. Together, their narratives uncover the barriers that affect their learning, the adults in college who disappoint and lift them, the kinds of pedagogy that engages/disengages them, and the hidden curriculum from which

they view school. In this final variation, I bring their stories together by exploring common themes.

Lens of Cultural Backgrounds

Wendy and Alex perceive their education through the lens of their economic and cultural backgrounds but with different outcomes. Both arrived without privileged experiences and both have strong roots to their culture; their identity matters to them greatly. However, Wendy thrives while Alex hits roadblocks. Wendy's behavior reflected her parents, who worked hard, overcame obstacles, and maximized opportunities that came their way. Wendy mirrored them by integrating herself in the culture of the university and by seeking social and academic opportunities, all while reaping the rewards through her professors and advisors for her efforts. On the other hand, Alex, who comes from a family of field workers, doesn't share the same experience as Wendy. Although Alex's parents worked hard too, they weren't presented with the same opportunities. Because of their ethnic background, language differences, and farm worker status, they face prejudice and discrimination in schools, communities, and the larger society (Romanowski, 2003). So, even though Alex desires to participate in high impact activities to immerse himself in university culture like Wendy does, Alex's own cultural upbringing and economic barriers do not provide a scaffold for that. These implicit structures of societal oppression are what complicate the university's efforts to help students like Alex.

Lens of Exclusion

From an institutional standpoint, Alex and Benji are disadvantaged in a number of ways -- socioeconomically, racially, culturally -- because none of their experiences fit with a traditional middle class existence. Alex and Benji bring a lot with them to college including their engagement with others, knowledge of culture, and dependence on family, but just not the white middle-class values of independent learning, cognitive processes, and linear thinking that institutions see as strengths. Alex perceives school through the lens of his economic situation -- the choices he makes are dependent on affordability. And Benji perceives school through the lens of stress -- the choices he makes are dependent on whether he will be validated and supported. Both of these lenses, in turn, connect to the unique challenges -- access, affordability, and imposter syndrome -- surrounding first-generation college students which make it easy for students like Alex and Benji to want to give up school.

Lens of Grades

Sophia and Benji experience SF State through the lens of grades, but with different outcomes. When testing is overemphasized in class, Benji stresses out and surrenders. In an attempt to pass all exams (many of which he doesn't pass) Benji gives up sleep, copying down notes he took from lectures that he didn't understand, a process that repeats itself and places him in a constant state of stress. Sophia, on the other hand, will find ways to game the system so she doesn't need to surrender. To deal with grades,

Sophia form alliances with classmates and resorts to cheating (something she isn't proud of) when she learns that her grades could be at risk. Both Benji and Sophia do what they do because they realize that they're caught in a system that places high values on grades rather than actual learning.

Lens of Cultural Capital

Sophia and Lila aren't privileged in the traditional sense, but they perceive education in ways that are more typical in privileged communities. Neither are privileged in terms of race, gender, or economics -- they are not wealthy white males -- yet their middle-class schooling has prepared them to perceive school in more productive ways. They come into college with groomed behaviors and advantages, like high resourced schools, early literacy, socioeconomics, which matter greatly because we know that students from advantaged backgrounds are far more likely to persist than their counterparts. Coming in with advantaged preparation gives Sophia and Lila a stronger footing. They have cultural capital, the know-hows of navigating school systems, of appropriate interactions with others, all of which enable them to do well in any college, whether or not the system is serving them. We know this because Sophia and Lila thrived in classes that are both engaging (Race and Resistance) and disengaging (Geology).

Lens of the Hidden Curriculum

As we see in all five students, they don't come into college with the same background, preparation, level of experience or equal access to resources and opportunities. All five students view their experiences at SF State through the lens of the hidden curricula from past institutions, which they bring to bear on their SF State experiences. The hidden curricula they bring are unspoken or implicit academic, social, and cultural messages that they encounter while in school and are often correlated with economic class (Anyon, 1980). Some examples of the hidden curricula include how students should interact with peers, teachers, and other adults; how students should perceive different races or gender; or how students should know what ideas and behaviors are considered acceptable or not.

All five students come from different places and we see it in their behaviors and mannerisms. Something as fundamental as saying, "I deserve to go to office hours every week to see professors for extra help" is not fundamental for Benji and Alex, because they're from backgrounds and schools that don't encourage this mindset. On the other hand, Wendy, Sophia, and Lila are comfortable talking to professors and asking for help and opportunities beyond the classroom. They also confidently walk around campus knowing who they are and what they want to do. Yet, all five students chose SF State because of its proximity to their family, whose support was vital to the students' transition to college. For these five students, having people on campus who care about

them, are proud of their success, advocate for them, and can empathize with their concerns, fears, and frustrations are important to their development and learning first year.

All five students, also, have had their share of “bad” teachers, but they perceived the effect of these teachers differently. For Benji, bad teachers were more of a roadblock than for Wendy, Sophia, Lila, and Alex. Because of their experience with hidden curricula, Lila learned to fight the system, Sophia learned to game the system, and Wendy learned to stand up for herself. However, Alex and Benji were defeated by these teachers; their self-confidence diminished and frustration mounted.

The narratives of these five students, collectively, help us see that their experiences and perceptions are the results of their hidden curricula, which not only deepens how we think about engagement and academic success but also complicates our efforts to improve retention and students’ experiences in the first year of college.

Chapter 5: Implications, Recommendations, and Further Research

In Chapter 4, I shed light on the NSSE findings by exploring the academic, social, and campus experiences of first-year, first-generation college students, using student voice as the central data. The key findings were categorized into five narratives and common themes: cultural backgrounds, exclusion, grades, cultural capital, and the hidden curriculum. The findings show how these students experience their first year and what those experiences can tell us about engagement and academic success. Specifically, students' stories reveal the connections between engagement and students' home and class background, prior schooling, and sense of campus belonging. In this chapter, I use my findings from Chapter 4 to provide implications, recommendations, and further research for SF State.

Implications for SF State

My study suggests we need new ways of defining engagement, as NSSE's definition of engagement is limiting. NSSE's view on engagement is through a dominant lens, which means student success is determined by student involvement (Astin, 1984) and student integration (Tinto, 1975). However, this view doesn't help us understand first-year students, as what they bring to college matters as much as what they do in college. Students' background -- their family, socio-economics, culture, prior schooling -- all have a direct bearing on their experiences here at SF State. Take for example, Alex and Benji. They are engaged students because they complete most assignments, try to do

their best, work with their peers, and want to be involved in campus life, yet forces are working against them, such as finances, housing, and unhelpful teachers. For Benji and Alex, something as fundamental as saying, “I deserve to go to office hours for help” is not fundamental for them because they’re from backgrounds and schools that don’t encourage this mindset. On the other hand, Lila, Wendy, and Sophia, are comfortable talking to professors and asking for help and opportunities beyond the classroom. That’s because their background gave them that advantage. NSSE’s student behavior driven approach to engagement obscures these complexities.

Also, my study suggests we need alternative ways of measuring engagement. NSSE emphasizes academic engagement but negates the socio-emotional aspects that complete it. Take for example, peer learning. From NSSE’s point of view, peer learning is engaging with peers on the content to learn the subject matter. But from the students’ point of view, peer learning means having friends because they’re less concerned about the content and more interested in the social. NSSE’s narrow focus on academic engagement thus reveals only part of the story. It doesn’t unveil the student perspective nor does it deepen our understanding of engagement. My study uncovered what were significant in helping students be successful. To name a few, students felt successful when they were offered the following: a) student choice and agency: meaningful, relevant assignments, and learning that’s driven by student interests; b) a hospitalitable classroom: a welcoming environment where students felt comfortable expressing themselves and

working with others; c) genuine friends: peers who are interested in studying and being together d) family support: families who encourage and provide for students and e) campus support: adults on campus who show they care. All of these factors were based on what students say in Chapter 4, and while they are not captured in NSSE, they are well-supported by Rendon's theory of validation (1994).

Recommendations for SF State

Based on my implications, the first recommendation to SF State is to broaden the definition of engagement to include the social, emotional, cultural aspects of engagement that are important for students. I found in my research that the SF State's definition of engagement, drawn from NSSE, is too narrowly focused on academic engagement, and thus misses the complexities and important factors that keep students in school. One way to look at engagement in a more encompassing way is through the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group). They developed the six success factors framework as part of the Student Support (Re)defined study (2013). The factors that enable student success are the following: a) directed: students have a goal and know how to achieve it; b) focused: students stay on track; c) nurtured: students feel somebody wants and helps them to succeed; d) engaged: students actively participate in class and extracurricular activities; e) connected: students feel like they are part of the college community; and f) valued: students' skills, talents, abilities and experiences are recognized; they have opportunities to contribute on campus and feel their contributions

are appreciated. These six factors define engagement in a more complete way to include academic, social, and emotional factors, and SF State should use them to understand how our students come to succeed in an institution such as ours.

My second recommendation to SF State is to improve its data collection on engagement so we don't rely exclusively on NSSE. My study has revealed the limitations of NSSE: it has a low response rate (13%), doesn't account for students' background, only measures engagement qualities that are observable, can't explain equity gaps, and has no supportive data for its claim that engagement predicts student success. I echo Gordon, Ludlum, and Hoey's (2008) advice to institutional researchers and policymakers, that institutions should carefully examine the extent to which NSSE is reliable and valid for their own contexts before committing themselves to major organizational changes and decision making. Because of these reasons, the university shouldn't rely on NSSE as much as it does to inform first-year programs or any program. Instead, SF State should conduct more qualitative-journey based studies to hear students speak about their experiences in real time. My study raises the importance of having qualitative studies to capture students' perception and to understand students' full journey of the student experience. The notion of qualitative studies should be embraced, as my study provided an important opportunity to engage with students' about their classroom experiences through their perspectives and behaviors. If SF State invests in qualitative methodologies -- the studies could be periodic and not long term -- it can better

understand the first year experience, and thus open opportunities to pursue new questions related to retention and success in the first year.

In sum, this section revealed that my findings suggest that student engagement is driven not only or even primarily in terms of academics but of social and emotional factors. Because these findings are not captured in NSSE, institutions should broaden the definition of engagement and the use of qualitative studies to better measure student engagement. In the next and final section, I discuss further research and conclude with a final thought on engagement.

Further Research

While my study did not explicitly address gender, females in my study were more successful than males, yet it's not clear exactly why. What we do know from national data on college graduation rates is that women had a higher completion rate than men, 40.5 versus 35.7 percent (Shapiro et. al, 2017). Furthermore, according to the Public Policy Institute of California, "Female students in California tend to have stronger high school records and greater rates of college attendance and completion than male students do" (Johnson, 2018, p. 1). Yet we don't have sufficient evidence to explain why. Perhaps more in depth qualitative studies would better capture this phenomenon.

If I had more time with the current study, I would have liked to interview more students in the 1.9 -2.2 GPA range, students similar to Alex and Benji. These students

and others like them who come to college without cultural capital are the kinds of students that the university is working hard to retain, and they are struggling, which makes it much easier for them and students like them to give up college. Often times, poverty is their foe -- it's what brings them in yet it's also what pushes them out -- although that may not be the complete story. Therefore, having a deeper understanding of students' barriers and resilience would be very useful for the university as they continue to build efforts to retain students.

Conclusion

Professional learning is equally as important as student learning. All five students in my study have talked about at least one faculty who encouraged, advised, pushed, cared, and made content exciting for them. Their interactions with faculty who exhibited warm, pleasant attitudes and behaviors were impactful, which supports the notion that responding to students in a caring, humanizing way is a key dimension of student learning in college (Kuh et al. 2010). As a seasoned teacher, I know faculty behaviors and attitudes have a direct link to student engagement. We spend the most time with students, facilitate what students come to college for, control course grades, and ally with tutors/advisors to support students -- so our opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and pedagogy matter greatly. In order to help faculty understand this, they need targeted professional development to know what matters to student learning.

As an intervention to first-year attrition, SF State is currently rolling out recommendations that emerged from SF State's self-study, the Foundations of Excellence (2017), which determined barriers to success for first-year students. In its final report (Foundations of Excellence, 2017), twelve recommendations emerged, the most salient were the appointment of a first-year director and the creation of the first-year seminar for all first-year students, both of which have been implemented, serving as our current solution to solve our retention issue. However, when we turn to other campuses such as Georgia State University and CSU Long Beach -- both colleges nationally recognized for raising graduation rates and narrowing the achievement gap without changing the student body -- we learn they approached retention issues with the absence of addressing student engagement. Instead, improving graduation rates were primarily anchored in using data to track student progress, changing organizational structure, revising curriculum pathways, and using alert systems for advising. After looking at their success factors, we see that maybe student engagement is both more complex, and perhaps not as important, as we've assumed at SF State. Listening to the voices of students like Benji, Lila, Sophia, Alex, and Wendy complicates our understanding of engagement and shows us potential new routes for improvement and change.

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Appendix A

Interview questions

(not asked in this specific order)

- Tell the story of how you knew you were going to college
- Tell me about your best moment in college so far
- What do grades mean for you?
- How would you define academic success?
- What are your impressions of ENG 214?
- Tell me a story about the worst class you ever took
- Tell me a story about the best class you ever took
- Tell me about the most stressful aspect of college
- What's the one thing that might interfere with your educational success?
- When you encounter a writing assignment, what are the most important points or strategies do you keep in mind?
- What kinds of writing do you like most? Why?
- What kinds of writing do you least like to do? Why?
- What kinds of instructions did you receive about writing?
- What writing assignments are you most proud of? Why?
- How do you know when your writing is good? Or if other people's writing is good?
- How do you think your classwork will help or connect to your personal or future goals?
- Tell me about your family background

- Share about the community in which you grew up
- Describe the people important to your high school experience
- What brought you to SF State?
- Can you describe the people important to your SF State experience
- What were your observations of SF State before the first day of class, and your observations after one semester of attendance?
- If SF State is looking for ways to keep students from dropping out, what should the university consider doing and why?
- were any of your college assignments memorable? If yes, tell me about them
- What kinds of assignments are memorable in your view?
- Tell me about the best class you've taken in terms of interacting with other students in the class.
- Tell me about the worst classes you've taken in terms of other students in the class.
- Tell me about the most memorable or fun interactions you've had with peers in a classroom
- Tell me about a class in which your teacher was successful in having student interaction
- Tell me about a class in which your teacher was not successful in having student interaction.
- Tell me about some group work you've already done
- Tell me how you prepared for class
- Other than attending classes, tell me what else you do on and off campus
- Tell me about your favorite professor. Why was he/she your favorite?
- Tell me about your least favorite professor. Why was he/she your least favorite?
- Do you attend social events on campus? Why / why not? If yes, tell me about what it was like.

-Do you know who your adviser is?

-How often did you meet with your adviser?

-Have you participated in any of these: internship, co-op, field experience, student teaching, clinical placement, work with a faculty member on a research project, formal leadership role in a student organization or group, study abroad program, learning community? If yes, tell me about what it was like.