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SUPPORTING FIRST-GENERATION WRITERS IN THE COMPOSITION
CLASSROOM: EXPLORING THE PRACTICES OF THE BOISE STATE
UNIVERSITY MCNAIR SCHOLARS PROGRAM

by

Bernice M. Olivas

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
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For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English
Under the Supervision of Professor Robert Brooke

Lincoln, Nebraska
November, 2016

SUPPORTING FIRST-GENERATION WRITERS IN THE COMPOSITION
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UNIVERSITY MCNAIR SCHOLARS PROGRAM

Bernice Olivas, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2016

Advisor: Robert Brooke

First Generation students face disproportionate challenges in college. Their graduation rate is much lower than continuing generation students even though the majority of First-generation students perform at the same level as their continuing generation peers. Existing research suggests that First-generation students perceive their writing skills as lower than their peers' skills and current composition research suggests that First-generation students struggle to develop an academic identity which contributes to their drop-out rate (Penrose 437-61). However, there is little research at the classroom level concerning First-generation students and their academic identity. This indicates a gap in composition research. This dissertation seeks to address this gap using participant observation of the Boise State University McNair program.

The Boise State University McNair program is a learning community with a high rate of success with First-generation students. This dissertation argues that Boise State McNair Scholars Program faculty members focus on building academic identity among their First-generation students which contributes to their high success rates. This dissertation utilizes four years of participant observation, two as a McNair Scholar and two as a McNair writing teacher, in order to contextualize the strategies used in the Boise State McNair curriculum for a First-Year writing class.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Logan Carraway. It's a cliché to say that the first step of any journey is the hardest but there is a grain of true to cliché. In 2004, I had repeatedly voiced my desire to go back to school but insecurity and fear stopped me from filling out the online application to Boise State University. My husband drove to the university, picked up a paper copy, and sat at the kitchen table with me as I filled them out. I would not have done it without him. Thank you for making me take the first step, for rolling with me when things got hard, for staying when they things became nearly impossible, and for leaving me behind to finish the work when leaving was the only choice. I could not have done this with without you. I love you.

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CHAPTER I: FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

My views are grounded in experience, elaborated upon by theory, and tested in research.

-Victor Villanueva

INTRODUCTION

First-generation students are a growing population in college, and historically, they are an important demographic. Unfortunately, current research shows that First-generation students face disproportionate challenges on their path to graduation. In 2005, Lia Schauer writes in *Academic Advising Today*, a scholarly journal for academic advisers, that:

research continually suggests that First-generation College Students are at a definite disadvantage when compared to students from a family with previous college experience....First Gens are twice as likely to leave college before the 2nd year. Yet quantitative studies that indicate which interventions actually help are almost non-existent beyond those of TRIO sponsored programs. (Schauer)

Schauer's observation that most research fails to offer concrete interventions is particularly true in the writing classroom.

The large majority of research in composition studies focuses around basic writers (Rose, Shaughnessy), multiculturalism (Lu, Pratt, Villanueva) or English Language Learners (Mastuda, Guerra, Severino, Xi). The general perception of struggling writers is that their struggles stem from a combination of preparedness, imposter syndrome, and language concerns that vary from low language acquisition to the struggle to value home

languages in institutional spaces. Shaughnessy sums this perception up when she introduces the *Journal of Basic writers* in 1975. She says:

The plight of such students—of young men and women who want to be in college, who have the intelligence to do college work, but who are not skilled enough when they arrive on campus to survive in a rigorously academic environment—has begun to reshape the freshman English course in many colleges, expanding it, linking it to the work being done in other disciplines such as linguistics and psychology, and most important, challenging teachers who came into their departments of English to teach poems or novels, plays or criticism, to take a closer look at the job of teaching writing.

Shaughnessy clearly frames composition studies as a site of research, rich with scholars who are interested in better understanding the reasons writer succeed or fail. However, because so much of this research is linked with other disciplines it is easy to see why so much of it is about students that have been identified or recognized as part of specific groups—first year writers, ELL or ESL students, underrepresented (Latino, African-American, Native) students. First-generation lack such classification college students lack such classification. Due to the fact that First-generation students remain an unidentified and often unclassified group of students the majority of the research about their college experience comes from either a retention perspective (Engle, Tinto) or from scholars who are working with groups of students with high overlap like Mike Rose, whose interest in working class writers places him in contact with a large number of First-Generation writers.

Most research is more like the work Jennifer Engle and Vincent Tinto did for the Pell Institute in 2008. They focused on the risk factors that affect low-income first generation students and found that:

For most of the 4.5 million low-income, first-generation students enrolled in post-secondary education today (approximately 24 percent of the undergraduate population), the path to the bachelor's degree will be long, indirect, and uncertain. For many, the journey will end where it begins. Using data from the National Center for Education Statistics' Beginning Postsecondary Study (BPS:96/01), we found that low-income, first-generation students experience less success than their peers right from the start. Across all institution types.

Or, research like Linda Banks-Santilli's, author of "First-generation College Students and Their Pursuit of the American Dream." She conducted a qualitative research study at a small, private college in the Northeast. She drew on the analyses of demographics, interviews, and case study data to examine the experiences of First-generation students and then to compares them to related research in the fields of sociology, psychology, and education. The study resulted in insights into the individual lives of first-generation students. From those insights, they designed specific steps the institution could take to respond to the needs of the growing population on their campus. Banks-Santilli's research showed that "First-generation college students rank themselves lower than their non-first-generation peers in ratings of math and writing ability, self-confidence, and leadership" (3). However, her research fails to comment on interventions at the classroom level (1-32).

What is most important about the research done about First-generation students is that it shows two important things. First, as Engle and Tinto say, “previous research has also shown, however, that even after taking their demographic backgrounds, enrollment characteristics, and academic preparation into consideration, low-income and first-generation students are still at greater risk of failure in postsecondary education. This suggests that the problem is as much the result of the experiences these students have *during* college as it is attributable to the experiences they have *before* they enroll” (3). And second as Banks-Santilli shows, First-generation students cite writing as a problem area. Taken together, this information tells us that something in the first-year classroom that is part of this problem which means that we, composition teachers, can be part of the solution. As most First-generation students will attend First-Year Writing, this student population represents a gap in composition studies research.

This dissertation seeks to address this gap by observing writing pedagogy used the Boise State McNair program, a TRIO program with a proven success rate of graduating and advancing First-generation students’ into graduate programs. This dissertation focuses on writing pedagogy used in the Boise State McNair Scholars program because it is a writing intensive, learning community with a high rate of success with First-generation students and because it is a TRIO program—TRIO programs have produced reliable data on first-generation students and has a proven success rate of graduating First-generation students. These factors make TRIO programs particularly rich sites to research this situation. The McNair program is a writing intensive TRIO program which makes it an ideal place to study the writing challenges that First-Generation students face.

The Federal TRIO Program is an umbrella term for a variety of federally funded outreach and support programs that create access to higher education for underrepresented populations. The Ronald E. McNair Post baccalaureate Achievement Program (The McNair Scholars Program) is one program under the TRIO umbrella. The objective of the Ronald E. McNair Post baccalaureate Achievement Program is to prepare students to apply to graduate programs in academic fields. In order to qualify for a TRIO grant, a college must create a program with the express purpose of recruiting and preparing eligible participants for doctoral studies programs. This becomes their McNair Scholars Program. In 2013, the 152 McNair programs in the USA reported 1,339 BA recipients enrolled in graduate programs, 72.5% of their collective graduating cohorts.

The TRIO program grant requires that each McNair Program build a support system that will help scholars through the graduate school application process. The complex student body and writing tasks in the McNair Program create a unique teaching and learning environment that offers rich material for pedagogical research. This is particularly true about research concerning the writing needs and practices of First-generation and underrepresented student populations because many McNair Scholars nationwide are also First Generation-generation students (Department of Education).

FIRST GENERATION-STUDENTS AND COMPOSITION RESEARCH

Current composition studies research suggests that First-generation students struggle to situate themselves in the academic community because they struggle to develop an academic identity. It also suggests that the lack of an academic identity is a serious contributing factor to dropout rates and contributes to the financial and academic challenges that First-generation students already face (Penrose 437-61). This is best

represented by Dr. Ann M. Penrose's 2002, "quantitative descriptive study" that examined "[First-generation students'] perceptions of their academic literacy skills and their performance and persistence in college (437)." Penrose is a composition and writing center scholar at North Carolina State University. Her research focused on the differences between the ways First-generation students and continuing generation students perceived their abilities in the areas of preparedness, retention rates, and their own perceptions of their academic literacy skills. Her "results indicate[d] that First-generation students' self-perceptions represent critical factors in the college experience, *underscoring the importance of helping students forge identities as members of academic communities*" (437; emphasis mine).

Penrose argues that First-generation student's perception of their own literacy had a distinct effect on their graduation rates. She says, "...what distinguishes FG students from Continuing Generation students is not whether they can succeed but the cost of their success" (446-7).

Penrose's case study and her exploration of the quantitative literature shows first-Generation students,

seem to pay higher costs than other students to succeed in college.... In short, they must make themselves comfortable in an unfamiliar academic environment where they can spend little time; they must derive support, confidence, and inspiration for learning from a thin network of sometimes intermittent connections to the university community. (455)

The same data suggests,

that despite the challenges they face, [First Generation] students who persist in college do succeed—perhaps even at higher rates than Continuing Generation students, given the unexpectedly high proportion of [First Generation] students in the four-year graduation sample. (455)

Penrose argues that First-generation students who fail to figure out where they belong in an academic community are much less likely to graduate because they lack a generational history—a parent’s college narrative, returning to a family member’s university, or connections made through their family’s college networks—to help guide them through the institution of higher learning. Therefore, First-generation students must develop an academic identity on their own. They must somehow answer the questions—what does it mean to be an academic on this campus, in this place, with these people? Writing instructors are in the ideal position to help First-generation students begin to answer those questions and to find their place in the university.

Penrose concludes that “writing teachers in particular should take this challenge to heart—not just because we have access and opportunity by virtue of the near-universal freshman requirement and small class size, but because the source of [First Generation]students’ insecurities may be situated very specifically in composition teachers’ domain of academic concern” (457). Although this is just one study, the implications are important because as Penrose points out, *“helping students see themselves as members of the academic community may be the most important challenge faced in the university at large and in writing classrooms in particular”* (458; emphasis mine).

CURRENT RESEARCH ON FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS NATION-WIDE

Penrose's findings are even more important in light of Jeff Davis's, author of *The First-generation Student Experience: Implications for Campus Practice and Strategies for Improving Persistence and Success*, findings in 2010. He says, "the statistics describing the success of First-generation students are not good; in fact, they are succeeding at a rate roughly half that of their non-First-generation counterparts" (XIV). That means that students who are performing at the same level as their peers are leaving at twice the rate. Clearly, it is critical to understand why they leave the university and to address those concerns. As Davis argues, "Even though the research describing the issues facing first-generation college students contains gaps and areas of deficiency, we cannot wait any longer to begin addressing these issues fully. We need to get serious about practice now; we have to start making an impact on low retention and graduation rates now" (Xxiii). Penrose makes a clear case for compositionists to take Davis' call to action seriously.

Furthermore, in 2012, Vincent Tinto updated research on student retention in college with a current six-year longitudinal study. The resulting book, *Completing College: Rethinking Institutional Action*, supports Penrose's results. Tinto says, "I have come to appreciate the centrality of the classroom to student success and the critical role the faculty play in retaining students. But I also learned that the classroom was the domain of institutional action that was given the least attention" (vii). Tinto's update highlights a gap in research when he points out the role the classroom and faculty play in student success gets the "least attention." Compositionists need to help fill this gap because First-generation students are faltering in our writing classes.

Filling this gap means going to the sites on campus where First-generation students are succeeding as writers. The McNair Scholars Program is one such site. The McNair Scholars Program offers a rich, unique site to learn more about classroom practices that help First-generation students develop their academic identity. The Boise State McNair Program offers compositionists the opportunity to understand the benefits of identity agents in the writing classroom.

IDENTITY BUILDING IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

Research shows that First-generation students need support in building an academic identity in their first year on campus. Taking this research into account, this dissertation proposes that first-year writing teachers are in the ideal position to help First-generation students situate themselves in the academic community and help them develop an academic identity (Penrose 437-61). For the purposes of this dissertation, the term “academic identity” refers to the ways a student answers the question “what does it mean to be valuable member of my university” and the ways they see themselves as belonging to the university community.

This dissertation argues that the Boise State McNair Scholars Program faculty members have fashioned an approach that helps First-generation students situate themselves in the academic community and develop their academic identity. Furthermore, the methods and materials the McNair writing program uses in their curriculum can be adapted for the First-Year writing class. This dissertation utilizes four years of participant observation, two as a McNair Scholar and two as a McNair writing teacher, in order to contextualize the strategies and pedagogical approach used in the

Boise State McNair seminar. The objective of this project is to show how the Boise State McNair Program's practices can be adapted for the First-Year writing classroom.

IDENTITY AGENTS

The core premise of this dissertation is that the Boise State McNair Program's faculty, staff, and writing instructors are identity agents to their students. As a team, they use research, reflection, and discussion to create curriculum that helps students develop the role identity of McNair scholar. The role of McNair scholar becomes the students' academic identity. They become a part of the history of the McNair scholars, they become a part of an existing community, and they inherit a set of values and expectation that include their success as academics.

The term identity agent stems from sociologist Peter Burke's Identity Control Theory (ICT) (5-15). ICT, as a theory, helps us to understand how identity develops. Identity theory argues that we have many identities. It goes on to break our many identities into four categories: personal, role, social, and collective. Our role identity connects us to the roles we perform in society. In the case of First-generation students, their academic identity is a role identity. It is rooted in how they understand the role of college student. Therefore, we can extrapolate that when First-generation students attempt to answer the questions, "what does it mean to be a college student" or "what does it mean to be a part of the university" they either come up empty handed, or they are offered images, stories, and examples that they find alien and impossible to attain.

Without answers to these questions, First-generation students struggle to define themselves as college students and they struggle to find a place in the academic community. This results in homesickness, loneliness, and depression and it makes it

harder for First-generation students to master the institutional knowledge that they need to succeed. In addition, there is rarely anyone in their home communities who can offer them narratives, images, or advice for being a successful college student. This dissertation focuses on the way identity agents can help First-generation students develop their role identity of college student.

Burke suggests that individuals learn to associate certain behaviors with certain identities. Once they invest in those behaviors, they will see those behaviors as critical characteristics of the identity and they will incorporate those behaviors into their own their identity. An Identity agent is a person who uses a reflective method of research and instruction to guide an adolescent or student to invest in specific behaviors which have been linked to specific roles.

In broad strokes, Burke argues that society directly influences the ways identity develops because society provides the materials from which we construct identity. For example, society gives us university sports and sports teams and we construct an identity around a sports team. Society, our parents, and the stories we hear, and the images we see all offer us possible materials to construct identity. Burke tells us that we construct identity by asking, “What does it mean” questions like “what does it mean to be a student?” Then we find the answers to those questions in the world around us. For every question we ask, we eventually build an answer set. Once we have an answer set that is deeply meaningful to us, we strive to behave in ways that honor that answer set.

ICT theory also offers us the concept of the identity agent. An identity agent is a person who is in the position to intentionally help students access meaningful answers to their “what does it mean” questions. By doing so, they help the student develop their role

identity as a college student. Burke suggests that an identity agent is any member of society who exerts control over adolescent behavior by intentionally influencing the ways they define themselves (5-15). In a 2008 article, "Identity Agents: Parents As Active and Reflective Participants in Their Children's Identity Formation," Elli P. Schechter and Jonathan J. Ventura, sociologists, take the notion of identity agents a step further. They define identity agents as members of society who use researched methods, practices, and heuristics to create environments, situations, and activities with the express purpose of influencing the development of adolescent identity. Typically, identity agents are parents or members of the community who have an invested interest in our "moral" development, such as clergy (449-476).

Intentionality is the defining feature of the identity agent. This is what makes an identity agent more than a literacy sponsor or role model. An identity agent reflects and researches the best possible ways to encourage an adolescent or student to develop an identity with very specific characteristics. Identity agents are aware of their ability to affect identity formation and they use that ability to encourage young people to develop in very specific ways (449). Burke labels religious teachers in a community as identity agents—a pastor or priest focuses on the adolescent's spiritual growth and they use texts like the Bible, they encourage study, and they have concrete definitions of "spiritual" that they apply to the identity of "Christian" or "Catholic" to which they expect the student to uphold.

In the 2010 article "Identity Process and Transformative Pedagogy: Teachers as Agents of Identity Formation," sociologists Marinda K. Harrell-Levy and Jennifer L. Kerpelman claim teachers can also be identity agents for their students. They argue,

“Teachers can be purposeful co-constructors of adolescents’ identities when they use a transformative pedagogical approach that involves fostering collaborative learning and empowering students to think creatively and critically.” They argue that when teachers use research and reflection to devise curriculum that creates change in student identity, teachers are acting as identity agents. For example, teachers who focus on social, emotional, and learning are helping students develop answers for the question, “what does it mean to be compassionate?” Coaches help student develop answers to, “what does it mean to be part of a team?” The McNair Scholar program’s faculty, staff, and writing instructors use research and reflection to design curriculum that helps their students answer the question “what does it mean to be a scholar” (70-75).

In composition studies, Deborah Brandt’s literacy sponsors are partially comparable to identity agents. Deborah Brandt’s sponsors of literacy are people who sponsor literacy for another in a wide variety of ways. Intentionality is not a key factor. They may be an employer who buys an employee a computer for office work but allows them to take it home for online class work (165-85). An identity agent is a version of the literacy sponsor who has very specific objectives and uses a methodological approach to obtain those objectives. Brandt says “Sponsors, as I have come to think of them, are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, or model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (166).

An identity agent, on the other hand, reflects on characteristics of the identity they want the student to develop. Then they research ways to help the student to develop those characteristics. I would argue that we could better understand identity agents if we

modify Brandt's literacy sponsor definition so that identity agents ... "are any agents, local or distant... who [use reflection and research to]... enable, support, teach, or model" specific aspects of identity for another to adopt.

This dissertation asserts that Boise State McNair faculty members are identity agents because they have developed curriculum that specifically targets the way their students understand the role identity of scholar. Their objectives are to show students how they are valuable members of academia who should continue on to graduate education. As identity agents, the faculty provides opportunities for students that:

- Offers students opportunities to recognize how their lived experiences have prepared them to be valuable, needed members of academia.
- Offers students opportunities to discover successful representations of First Generation-generations in academia.
- Offers students opportunities to explore the ways they can reinvest into to their communities using their education and unique perspectives.

Furthermore, this dissertation argues recognition, representation, and opportunities to reinvest act as the answer that the McNair faculty give students to the question "what does it mean to be a scholar." In essence the answers are:

- Scholars are members of academia who use their unique lived experience to make and share knowledge.
- Scholars are members of academia who go on to mentor, teach, and represent students from their own communities.
- Scholars are members of academia who reinvest their education into their communities.

These concepts are the foundation on which the McNair faculty builds the teaching practices they use to help First-generation students develop their academic identity.

METHODOLOGY

This project uses participant observation as its core methodology. I was a participant in the Boise State University McNair Scholars program for two years, and after I finished my Master's degree, I returned as a writing teacher for two more years. In my time as a participating scholar, I noticed the methodological way the faculty approached identity development, which they referred to as the "transition from student to scholar." I noticed how that approach succeeded with McNair scholars. This success is reflected the program's graduation rates. As of June 2015, the twelve-year-old Boise State McNair Program has graduated 124 students, with 95 students entering graduate programs, 54 completing Master's Degree, and with 6 completing Doctorates. Their success rate ranges between 75% and 80% and is high even among other McNair Scholars programs (Greg Martinez).

This dissertation seeks to contextualize the strategies and pedagogical practices that shape the Boise State McNair Scholar "Student to Scholar Transition." In order to do so, I draw on interviews with faculty leaders Greg Martinez and Helen Barnes to understand their thinking moves while building the writing curriculum. I conduct an auto-ethnographic self-study of the writing I produced as a McNair scholar from 2008-2010 to analyze my own development of the role identity of a scholar. Finally, I analyze materials collected from the 2013 McNair scholar cohort during fall 2013, spring 2014, summer 2014, and fall 2014, at which time I taught the McNair seminar, in order to show patterns of development among the students.

- Chapter 1 is an overview of First-generation students and the challenges they face.
- Chapter 2 explores the Boise State McNair Program.
- Chapter 3 describes the Boise State McNair Scholars experience from my perspective as a successful participant.
- Chapter 4 focuses on my perspective as a teacher in the program and analyzes student writing of the 2012-2014 Boise State McNair cohort.
- Chapter 5 discusses the benefit of identity agents in the First-Year writing classroom and names sites where identity agents already exist in composition studies.

HISTORICAL FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

First-generation students are not a new population at the university. In fact, they are as old as the public university itself. First-generation students connect directly to the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890. The Morrill Acts of 1862 allotted funds for agricultural colleges and public universities beginning with the University of California in 1862. This fundamentally changed the way higher education functions in America. The Acts “offered every state ...lands ... to be sold and the proceeds used to establish “at least one college” in each state (Knoll 1-10).” These universities were “designed to promote liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in several pursuits and professions of life” (qtd. in Knoll 1).The industrial classes are none other than the nation’s first wave of First-generation students. They were mostly the sons of laborers and immigrants. Their parents were rarely educated beyond basic reading and writing, and no one in their family

had access to the private colleges that served the wealthy and distinguished families both in the USA and abroad.

The most important change to higher education brought about by the Morrill Acts is the presence of students who were unaffiliated with the right families or the right social circles. It is not a stretch, or a hyperbolic utterance, to say that the needs of First-generation students drove the creation of the modern public university through the Morrill Acts of 1862. These Land-grant universities did not emerge to house third and fourth generations of alumni, or students sponsored by board members and families who had buildings named after them. These universities specifically intended to create access to higher education to the First-generation students of their time. First-generation students have always been an important presence at the public university.

Jim Davis tells us that current First-generation students came to the university in search of a better life. They are the children of farmers, factory workers, minorities, and immigrants. They are the working class and those struggling beneath the poverty line. These students lack the privileges their college bound counterparts take for granted. In 1862, these students would not have had access to tutors, books, or ready funds. They would have had no training in Latin or Greek; they would not have studied Philosophy or higher math.

Today these students come from underfunded schools, small towns, and inner cities. They lack cultural capital and ready funds. Many of them have not read Shakespeare and their ACT test scores are low. The founders of Land-grant universities did not view lack of cultural capital as a good enough reason to bar early students from higher education in 1862 and we should not view lack of cultural capital as a good

enough reason to bar First-generation students from higher education today. The success of the Morrill Acts has proven that everyone benefits when we actively support First-generation students so they can bring their ideas, their work ethic, and their imaginations to the wider community.

Studies show that our present First-generation students may have grown up in poverty and come from a rainbow of families of color. They come from the city and reservations. They may attend schools that struggle to provide adequate materials, space, and teachers. They may attend quality Catholic schools or private schools. Many of them juggle a forty-hour workweek, a full load of classes and in many cases they parent or care for other dependent family members. However, like their historical counterparts, they struggle to navigate the institutional literacies surrounding the application process, financial aid, and housing.

The reasons that drove the creation of the public university system are as relevant today as they were in 1862. The public university still bears the responsibility to create access to higher education for the children of underrepresented populations. These are still the children of Native Americans, immigrants, and the children of the working classes. The majority of students to walk in the doors of Land-grant universities as they opened were First-generation students. Nationally, they were the children of Italian or Irish immigrants, or the sons of slaves, or the daughters of textile factory workers. Here in Nebraska they were the sons of farmers. Their parents did not have college degrees, and their family had no tradition of higher education. Those students and their descendants have benefited American society through their innovations, work ethic, and creativity, all of which were encouraged and supported by the Land-grant University.

Many of those universities were deeply committed to that calling. For example, the founders of University of Nebraska-Lincoln knew that they were not giving their incoming students handouts; they were investing in a wealth of human potential. Robert Knoll's book *Prairie University: A History of the University of Nebraska* offers an insight into the ramifications of the Morrill Acts. Knoll tells us the story of the University of Nebraska University founders who worked to educate students with a wide variety of skills, from a wide variety of backgrounds. Although it may not be evident in the policies today—UNL has since moved to a merit based admissions policy and awards a great deal of legacy funding every year—universities like UNL invested in the idea that the First-generation students could rise to the academic occasion and in doing so would bring innovation to the university.

For example, in 1869 University of Nebraska Lincoln actually worked to be more inclusive than the original Acts demanded. The original wording in the University of Nebraska charter actually broadens the aims of the Morrill Acts to include an even wider range of more diverse groups of people. The 1869 charter document pointedly uses the term “inhabitants” of Nebraska rather than youth or citizens and makes a special provision for women, “No person shall, because of age, sex, color, or nationality, be deprived of the privileges of this institution” (1-11). This commitment to the spirit of the Morrill Acts is in the first UNL yearbook in 1884, which proudly proclaims

This University aims to secure to all who may avail themselves of its advantages, an opportunity for liberal culture in literature, science, and such technical and professional courses as may from time to time be established. These advantages are offered to all free of charge for tuition,

without regard to race or sex, or place of residence, on the condition of their possessing the intellectual and moral qualifications requisite for admissions to such an institution. (*Sombrero* 10)

In fact, the University of Nebraska is an example of how universities across the nation moved aggressively towards a more inclusive atmosphere in the 1880s. The first class was 130 students from diverse backgrounds. As Knoll documents, places like the University of Minnesota and the University of Missouri saw incoming classes ranging from twenty-six into the hundreds, and most had situations like University of Kansas where “not a single student was prepared for college work” (9-11). Yet somehow they managed to educate those students and send them into the world to innovate and build a nation that is—for all of its shortcomings—one of the most inventive and imaginative nations in history.

Looking back, it is clear to me that the ideals expressed by the founders of schools like University of Nebraska have proven their worth to society. They have proven that the farm kids, the factory workers, the children of slaves, the children of indigenous folk, and the children of immigrants bring a wealth of new ideas and new ways of thinking to our communities. Ronald E. McNair, the McNair program, the scholars, and people like me are examples of the return the USA has seen for their investment in Land-grant universities.

CURRENT FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

I am a writing teacher at a R1 public land-grant university located in the Midwest and Penrose's study struck close to home. I know first-hand that First-generation students are a unique and important student population who deserve more than luck. They deserve more than disjointed, disconnected support and policies. I am a first-generation scholar. I emerged from poverty; I am non-traditional; I am indigenous Mexican-American, and I come from the working poor. I have a GED, a B.A., and a M.A. I will soon have a Ph.D. I work at a university ranked in the top 100 public universities in the nation and many of my writers seem to be the stereotype of the "American college student." They are mostly white and they radiate good health. They are well dressed and clean cut. The large majority of these students come from a wide variety of Christian denominations. In the mix are hyphenated-Americans—African, Latino, Asian, and Native. We have a rich community of second-generation immigrants whose parents hail from over 100 countries. We have a rich mix of international students.

However, because we currently do not have a nation-wide definition for First-generation student or a nationwide way of identifying these students, we have no way of knowing which of my students are First-generation. No visible detail indicates First-generation students. Truthfully, there is no way to tell which of these students come from families with a history of higher education. It is not only possible, but also likely, that in this group, a white male student, who grew up on a small Nebraska farm is First Generation. At the same time, a second-generation Iranian immigrant may come from a family who has two or three generations of higher education. In addition, an international student may come from a family with very old traditions of higher education, like some

of our Chinese students, or be a First-generation student. A student's access to the traditions of education is not easily visible.

That invisibility is part of the problem. There is yet to be a universally accepted definition for the term “first-generation college student.” First-generation students are from everywhere; they are white, black, brown, and native. They are rural and suburban. They are male, female, cis-gendered, and genderqueer, traditional and nontraditional. The College Board defines First-generation Students as students “who are in the first First-generation of their families to go to college (College Board First Generation students).” Harvard University says, “We consider you a First-generation college student—or “first-gen” for short—if you will be in the first generation of your immediate family to graduate from a four-year college or the equivalent (Harvard University First Generation students).” Krista M. Soria and Laura Segrue Gorny, institutional analysts at the University of Minnesota, break the definition down by degrees in a presentation for the American Institute for Research Forum in 2012 (Gorny and Soria AIR Forum).

Gorny and Soria looked at the “Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) web-based survey administered 2001” with a “Institutional level response rate [of] 38.1% (n=81,135)” which consisted of “70,741 non-transfer students from nine large, public research universities” in order to better understand if “differences observed warrant[ed] more nuanced definitions of first-generation students.” They suggest that First-generation students come from families where their parents combine the three following categories:

- less than a bachelor degree.
- less than an associate degree.

- no postsecondary education.

Soria and Gorny show that a conservative definition, meaning that the highest level of educational attainment is less than the Associate Degree, offered one result.

- 14.1% less than AA (n= 7,568).
- 85.9% AA or higher (n= 46,203).

While a liberal definition, the highest level of educational attainment is less than the Bachelor Degree, offered another.

- 22.2% less than BA (n= 11,951).
- 77.8% BA or higher (n= 41,820).

Then they break it down further by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class. What Soria and Gorny's research showed was that the First-generation student population is deeply diverse and spans every race, ethnicity, and economic status (Soria and Gorny).

FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS AND OTHERING

My experience supports Soria and Gorny's research. My writers are from rural spaces, from family farms, and from large city centers both nation and worldwide. They are from suburban centers and midsize college towns. Some emerge from the middle class, others from deep poverty, and still others straddle the strange cusp between the middle and the working class—that odd place where embracing middle class ideology is part of the strategy for upward social mobility, but working class and working poor challenges are part of everyday real life. They are from a wide variety of underrepresented populations. They are bright, eager, engaged, young people who carry with them the hopes and dreams of generations.

On the surface, my students are the poster children for the notion that if a person just works hard enough we can achieve the American dream. Just by being in the classroom, they seem to prove that hard work and persistence will pay off. Due to that perception, most of my students fail to recognize themselves as either privileged or disadvantaged. They are right. They are neither and they are both. They are survivors with good luck. They are people who stumbled into the right literacy sponsors at the right time; they had First-generation peer mentors or counselors who pointed them in the direction of scholarships, grants, and supports. Many of my students began their college career with little or no institutional knowledge and with few community ties. These students are a major part of our classroom and we often overlook the unique challenges they face.

One challenge many First-generation students face is othering because they come from so many different communities. In the humanities, many scholars have argued that we all hold unconscious, deeply buried social biases (Bonilla-Silva, Omni and Winant, and Wise). These biases make us more vulnerable to supporting injustice. Othering happens when we use difference as a way of distancing ourselves from our shared humanity. Once we dehumanize and distance ourselves for the “other” it becomes easy to treat them in ways we would view as criminal if it were happening to a member of our own family or community. Racism is undergirded by othering.

In *Racial Formation in the United States*, Omni and Winant argue, “Our ability to interpret racial meanings depends on preconceived notions of a racialized social structure.... We expect people to act out their apparent racial identities; indeed, we

become disoriented when they do not.” They also show how we code preconceived notions, transfer them unconsciously, and rarely examine them.

Othering undergirds other forms of oppression as well because we connect these biases to identity markers such as race, gender, sexuality, ability, and class. They influence the way we react, respond, and interact with people. The hidden nature of these biases makes them difficult to disrupt. Othering is how we can argue that that “everyone deserves a fair shot” and still vote to close Head Start programs in low-income neighborhoods. These injustices happen even though it is widely agreed that early education is a critical part of a “fair” shot. Othering is a critical component in what Dr. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls racism without racists (57-74).

Bonilla-Silva argues that when people express social bias rooted in racial factors while simultaneously agreeing with and even advocating progressive social ethics like “I believe everyone is equal” and “I don’t think about race, I just think about people” that is the result of color blind racism. When people vote in favor of laws that disadvantage people of color, blame social inequity on what they perceive to be weaknesses of character rather than systemic inequity, and actively avoid interactions with people based on race while simultaneously advocating for “equality” that is the result of othering (57-75).

Part of the difficulty for many First-generation students is that they exist in an in-between space; they are simultaneously them and us. Many First-generation students are simultaneously privileged and marginalized. At the same time, they often face othering in a variety of spaces, regardless of color or gender. This leads to a number of challenges in the classroom as well as out of it. For example, I once worked with a Native student who

was taking a Native American history class taught by a white professor. Although the professor was aware that Native peoples still exist and are living, fighting, and struggling in the modern world, she constantly spoke of Natives as if they were dead peoples. This began to grate on my student. She struggled to bring it up because all of her classmates were white, and the student herself did not feel like she “looked” native enough so that her presence in the room would encourage her professor to be more careful with her words. Although her ability to “pass” as white had given her some privilege, in this situation it made it that much harder to articulate what she was experiencing in class. In the end, even after trying to talk to the professor, she dropped the class.

This experience is one that most First-generation students are familiar with—if to lesser degrees. It affects the farm kid who hears endless conversations about “the working class” or the “poor.” It affects the returning mom who feels totally outside of youth culture, and the returning vet dealing with PTSD who cannot speak up in a class discussing war. These experiences do not fit in neatly checked boxes of “racism,” or “sexism” or “ageism,” and they are not explicit or violent or even obvious to the most people but they do add to a sense of not belonging. First-generation students are more complicated than those boxes, and so are the challenges they face in the classroom. Being othered takes its toll on First-generation students and developing an academic identity as a student, as a person who is valued, and belongs in college gives First-generation students agency and authority to speak for themselves and their communities.

As a writing teacher, I look at the research, I listen to my First-generation students, and I ask, what can I do—in my classroom—to help First-generation Students’ develop a robust and healthy identity as students who belong at the university, and are

valued by the university? I especially consider how crucial it is for First-generation students retain their personal, ethnic, and racial identities in the face of othering and identity blind ideology. The acquisition of a strong, resilient, academic identity must not happen at the expense of their First-generation students' identity. Instead, it must come as an addition to the rich, wonderful identities they bring with them. After all, it is the First-generation Students' new, complex perspectives that allow them to add a rich layer of knowledge to the academic community. To destroy those perspectives and identities in order to create an academic identity would be destructive to the student and a loss to the university. For answers to these questions I look back to the intellectual environment where I developed my identity as First-generation Latina scholar—The Boise State McNair Program.

CHAPTER II: THE BOISE STATE MCNAIR PROGRAM

The current research on First-generation students tends to follow one of two paths. Either it focuses on institution wide initiatives or it focuses on case studies and interviews of individuals. The gap in the research exists on the classroom level. What we need to know is how writing teachers are succeeding with First-generation students and how we might replicate those practices on a wider scale. Schauer tells us “quantitative studies that indicate which interventions actually help are almost non-existent beyond those of TRIO sponsored programs (Schauer).” Therefore, it seems logical to locate sites on campus where we can research First-generation writers who are succeeding or excelling and where we can observe and learn from the writing teachers in those spaces. Schauer indicates that TRIO sponsored programs are a good place to begin. TRIO sponsors a number of sites that offer rich research opportunities. However, I have chosen to focus on the Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Achievement Program at Boise State University for three reasons:

- All McNair programs require their students to participate in large quantities of complex and varied writing tasks.
- All McNair programs work with scholars who demonstrate a wide variety of writing skill levels from beginning to expert.
- The Boise State McNair Scholars program uses a series of scaffolded writing projects as a way of preparing their scholars for the graduate experience.

These three factors are very similar to what we might see in a first year writing classroom. This chapter offers an overview of the history, objectives, and requirements of

the Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Achievement Program as a TRIO program. It also offers an overview on the history, objectives, and curriculum of the Boise State McNair Program in particular, it focuses on the conception, design, and objectives of the writing tasks the Boise State McNair Scholars use to prepare scholars for the graduate experience.

Finally, it names the Boise State McNair Scholars Program faculty as identity agents who use three key strategies to develop academic the identity of the scholars. First, faculty celebrate difference by recognizing the way each scholar's lived experience has helped the scholar to develop skills, positive qualities, and characteristics that will help them succeed in graduate school. Second, faculty creates opportunities for students to locate positive representations of members of their communities in their fields and in academia. Finally, the faculty frame graduate education as cultural capital that to be re-invested into their communities. These three strategies, **recognition**, **representation**, and **reinvestment** frames the McNair Scholar as a valuable member of academia *without* asking them to distance themselves from their home communities, replace their ways of knowing with mainstream ways of knowing, or asking them to leave their communities behind in their journey. These strategies reduce the cost of an education for the McNair scholar while helping them situating themselves as a member of the academic community.

THE RONALD E. MCNAIR POST BACCALAUREATE ACHIEVEMENT PROGRAM

The Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Achievement Program is dedicated to Ronald E. McNair who died in the Challenger in 1989. After his death, members of Congress provided funding for the McNair Scholars program. TRIO continues to honor his memory by awarding funds, through a competitive grant, to institutions of higher education that are dedicated to guiding students onto the same path as Dr. McNair. The large goal of the program is to encourage underrepresented ethnic groups, low-income and first-generation college students to enroll in graduate programs. Institutions awarded a McNair grant must work closely with participants as they complete their undergraduate requirements and apply to graduate programs. Finally, these programs track participant progress through to the successful completion of advanced degrees.

The McNair Scholars program offers support in four key areas: GRE preparation, research, access to faculty mentoring, and writing. Every program must offer research opportunities and each program must follow a set of specific rules about how they use grant money. All McNair Scholars programs must provide the following activities: opportunities for research or other scholarly activities; summer research opportunities; seminars, and other educational activities designed to prepare students for doctoral study. Each program can use the fund for tutoring; academic counseling, and activities designed to assist students in securing admission and financial assistance in graduate programs. They may also provide education or counseling services designed to improve financial and economic literacy of students, mentoring programs involving faculty members at

institutions of higher education or students, or any combination of such persons. They may also use funds to expose students to cultural events and academic programs not usually available to disadvantaged students (Department of Education).

Greg Martinez initiated the Boise State University McNair Scholars' program because he recognized that Boise State University students needed more research opportunities in order to provide some forward progress toward graduate school opportunities. Like all schools that have a McNair program, Boise State University had no uniform or specific curriculum or set of standards to work with. Given these parameters, all programs end up looking different on each campus, depending on their unique political and situational structures (Greg Martinez).

Given the parameters of the program and the complex task set before them, a McNair Program is one of the most interdisciplinary spaces in a university. Given these parameters every program is, in fact, greater than the sum of its parts while wholly dependent on the commitment of each member of its team. Faculty comes from all departments, levels, and fields. Students, and the faculty members they seek out to mentor them, do the same. They share common goals; they support each other in the tasks they need to accomplish to reach those goals. The goal is to support between 10-25 students from diverse backgrounds, diverse majors, and with diverse skill sets as they apply to graduate programs and for full funding.

THE BOISE STATE MCNAIR PROGRAM CURRICULUM

The Boise State McNair Program takes place the final two years of the bachelor's degree. It is a 21-month program. The program guides students through an integrated set of program activities, opportunities, and seminars designed to facilitate their successful entry into post baccalaureate programs immediately following their graduation from Boise State University. Following congressional mandate, McNair Scholars must come from at least one of two of the following groups: Low-Income and First-Generation College students and/or members of the following minority groups: African American/Black, Hispanic/Latino, American Indian/Alaskan Native, or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. They must also be a US citizen or have established permanent residency (Department of Education).

Prospective scholars must have a minimum cumulative GPA of 3.00 or show significant academic progress toward a competitive GPA for graduate studies in their field (Boise State McNair Scholars Program). They must also expect to graduate from Boise State and immediately enter an academic/research graduate program; this does not include professional degrees such as MD, JD, DVM, or MBA. The program can serve as many as 25 students per cohort but typically recruits between 10 and 15 students and sends between 8-10 students to fully funded graduate programs (Boise State McNair Scholars Program). The 75%-80% success rate of the Boise State program is a reflection of the carefully planned curriculum. Unlike many of the McNair programs, the Boise State McNair Program also requires the students to attend seminars for credit (Department of Education).

Boise State McNair Scholars enroll in the McNair Seminar each semester of program participation. Program faculty members from a variety of disciplines teach the seminar. The program draws upon the expertise of faculty and staff across campus. Seminar curriculum addresses various aspects of research, academic culture, and graduate preparation. The seminar focuses on ongoing development of skills, knowledge, and dispositions key to graduate admission and success in a doctoral program. Seminars emphasize instruction and application of reading, writing, and other scholarly skills – including library research, academic technology, scholarly dispositions, and academic-cultural capital. The seminars guide scholars through the key phases and activities of the program and provide structure for their graduate preparation (Boise State McNair Scholars Program). During the two-year course, scholars will use writing to explore their identity, develop their academic interest, write a research article, and write the statement of academic purpose.

YEAR ONE – FALL: McNair Scholars Seminar:

Seminar explores advanced issues relating to graduate school preparation and application, the craft of scholarly research, and the structure and processes of academic life. Activities center on scholarly development, graduate program exploration, development of the faculty mentor relationship, and exploration of topics for the upcoming summer research project (BSU McNair Scholars Program).

- Scholars read, reflect, and write about the graduate school experience.

The scholars engage with variety of texts from scholars who emerged from similar backgrounds. They also engage with writers who have conducted research or written about the challenges facing marginalized

peoples in graduate school such as bell hooks, Adrienne Rich, and Richard Rodriguez.

- Scholars read, reflect, and write about the characteristics that they will need to develop to succeed in graduate school. McNair Scholars discuss support building, networking, and professionalism, self-care, and study habits with the faculty. Staff guide and counsel the scholars as they develop a two-year course of study. The course of study supports graduating, and puts them in contact with faculty in their field. Scholars are encouraged to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses.
- Scholars read, write, and reflect on their own interests and goals in order to develop a research proposal. This includes reading one peer reviewed journal article per week from their field and taking extensive notes. It also includes collecting articles that interest them.
- Scholars begin researching graduate programs, focusing on schools that support their interests, offer funding, and are in areas that offer supportive communities.
- Scholars begin researching conferences, associations, and possible networking opportunities in their fields.
- Scholars spend one hour a week with a research librarian learning how to utilize the university resources, online resources, and learning to organize, note-take, and build bibliographies.

The McNair Scholars Seminar Year One

SPRING:

This seminar prepares participants in the McNair Scholars Program for their upcoming summer research projects. The course guides scholars through the process of developing a research proposal including formulation of a topic, review of the literature, research design, and writing of the proposal. Scholars work with McNair faculty and their Faculty Mentors in their field to development their proposal. The seminar emphasizes writing and library skills development as key features of the research design process. Scholars begin GRE test preparation (Boise State McNair Scholars Program).

- Scholars begin writing early drafts of their statement of academic purpose.
- Scholars begin developing a research project.
- Scholars approach faculty and officially request mentorship. Eventually these mentors will oversee the scholars' research projects.
- Scholars write a conference proposal.
- Scholars attend a McNair research conference.
- Scholars continue researching graduate programs.
- Scholars present their research proposal as part of their application to be included in the McNair Summer Research Seminar. The seminar includes research stipend for living expenses.

McNair Summer Research Seminar

SUMMER

This seminar is part of the Summer Research Program and encompassed under the 3-credit Independent Study under the guidance of a Faculty Mentor. The seminar meets one or two times weekly, focusing on research support, and graduate school application development. McNair facilitates fee waivers for the 3-credit Independent Study for Summer Research Program participants. GRE test is scheduled and taken (BSU McNair Scholars Program).

- Scholars participate in a writing workshop to develop their statements of academic purpose.
- Scholars conduct a research project of their own design.
- Scholars develop a journal article about their research.
- Scholars prep for and take the GRE.
- Scholars begin reaching out to faculty at graduate programs of interest.
- Scholars apply to conferences in their fields.

The McNair Scholars Seminar Year Two

FALL:

This seminar centers on issues relating to the graduate school application process and development of the graduate school application package. Topics include identification of programs and funding sources, development of the application package and supporting documents: the statement of purpose, CVs, letters of recommendation, etc. Secondary

seminar topics involve support for McNair Scholars in writing of the research paper and McNair journal article derived from summer research (Boise State McNair Scholars Program).

- Scholars apply to graduate programs.
- Scholars go to conferences.
- Scholars revise, refine, and peer review application documents.
- Scholars build relationships with faculty at graduate programs of interest.
- Scholars visit programs of interest.

SPRING:

McNair Senior Seminar Senior level scholars who have completed their individual summer research projects participate in a seminar. The course examines the production and dissemination of scholarship, focusing on the processes of writing, presentation, and publication of research reports. The core task is the development of a conference presentation based on their McNair summer research project. The seminar also explores advanced topics relating to graduate studies, academic research, and the ongoing graduate application process (Boise State McNair Scholars Program).

- Scholars participate in service activities such as recruitment, mentoring the incoming cohort, creating panel discussions and round table discussions for the incoming cohort.
- Scholars document information about programs, conferences, and networking opportunities for future scholars.

- Scholars participate in a weekly support session as they negotiate acceptances, deal with rejections, and work out funding.
- Scholars present their research at the BSU Undergraduate Research Conference.
- Scholars prepare their research for publication with in the Boise State McNair Research Journal.

THE BOISE STATE MCNAIR PROGRAM WRITING TASKS

There is one absolute for all McNair Scholars—writing is critical. The program focuses their writing instruction on developing materials that will help students gain funded entry into graduate school. This includes a statement of academic purpose, a researched based writing sample, a CV and often a personal statement. McNair Scholars must engage in a complicated conversation with an admission committee strictly through their writing.

For McNair Scholars the writing begins, and ends, with a set of documents that admissions committees, SRO (Summer Research Opportunities) and scholarship committees will use to determine the value of the scholar. Scholars understand that these documents will result in the dollar amount they will receive towards their future. Eventually this set of documents will represent their complete intellectual beings to folks who have a great deal of power over their future. A McNair scholar succeeds or fails based on the strength of these documents. All the work done in the classroom setting focuses on developing these materials with this truth in mind. The work they do outside of the classroom—work with their mentor, and networking, influences the production of

these documents, or helps to frame the reception of these documents. The documents that go in the packet are:

The Statement of academic purpose (aka the SAP)

The personal statement (if needed)

The CV

The writing sample (The research article)

The GRE test score

The program designed the day-to-day work requirements, the personal exploration writing, research, reading, and discussion, with these documents in mind.

MCNAIR SCHOLARS PROGRAM AND INQUIRY

In response to the complex writing demands of a McNair cohort, the Boise State McNair Program relies heavily on the process of inquiry in the seminar. This means that the scholars are urged approach all aspects of their scholarship by asking questions. John Dewey, in *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, tells us that inquiry starts with questions, or as Dewey said, “Inquiry and questioning, up to a certain point, are synonymous terms (105).” They begin with questions, but not just any questions—they begin with questions that are part of larger problems and are solvable through the process of inquiry. The process usually follows a pattern: it begins by locating a problematic situation. The inquiry process suggests that we break larger problems into smaller problems in order to disrupt our assumptions about the problem. Next, the process asks us to question the validity of our instinctual and habitual responses to the situation. Inquiry asks us to assume that those responses are not valid, and to move into the research process from that

stance. In many ways, the first phase of inquiry is a process in which we ask the question: what if what everybody knows about this situation is not what everybody needs to know about this situation. What does it mean to look at this situation from multiple perspectives?

The second phase of the process asks us to unlearn what we know. This is the stage when we ask, how did I come to know what I know? In the third, reflective phase of the process, we must imagine the possible answers to our problematic situation. The goal is to break away from the habitual and instinctive response of fixating on what we already “know” and, instead, ask “what if.” The goal is to entertain hypothetical solutions and their implications. It is only after the process of inquiry we should pick a solution and attempt to validate it by putting it into action. The process of inquiry is a cognitive process that readies McNair scholars to develop and initiate a research plan.

Beginning with a question is a foundational skill for McNair scholars. They begin designing their research projects by reflection on the following questions:

1. I want to research about _____ because I want to better understand _____.
2. I want to write about _____ because I want my readers to better understand _____.

They begin researching graduate schools by reflecting on,

1. What do I need to succeed in graduate school?
 - a. Academically
 - b. Financially

c. Emotionally

They begin writing their academic writing statement by reflecting on their personal experiences and asking,

1. What in my lived experience will help make me a successful graduate student?

Inquiry is a consistent process during their research and professional development. For example, students write a short inquire essay about their discourse community in order to situate their research interests in the ongoing conversation in their field. One scholar writes,

My research will be based on the effects of an ignited plasma field generated inside a device and the complexities that come with it such as magnetic reconnection, MHD instabilities, and control/confinement of the plasma. One of the devices is called a tokamak. I would like to know what happens to the plasma as the aspect ratio (that is, the major radius of the device measured from its axis divided by the minor radius which describes the space that the plasma is confined in) is reduced and what the dimensions are when the plasma is stable or non-stable. (Nevil Franco)

Another scholar finishes his essay by challenging the idea that people just need to see objective evidence in order to change their behavior. He looks at the problem multiple and muses about the differences between information, knowledge, and belief:

The problem that comes to mind during the course of [my] topic is that it seems difficult to change people's beliefs about their impact on this planet.

Even in the face of truth some people sadly disregard what's against their values or concept of reality (Richard Martinez).

Finally a third scholar reflects on finding a way to change Idahoan's perceptions by trying to predict how slowly/quickly those perceptions might change because understanding them might allow her to subtly influence policy change in ways that would benefit the LGBT community.

I would like to study to LGBT social movements at the local level. Based on what I have read so far, research has shown certain trends in the predictability of a presence of the LGBT student group on college campuses, how open a state is to accepting same-sex marriage, and how likely a city is to be diverse depending on geography. I would like to apply all predictors to a more conservative state like Idaho to see where it stands compared to another liberal state like California. This will be the base of my formulated hypothesis predicting how long it will take for Idaho to become fully accepting of an LGBT presence, have anti-discrimination laws at a state level and be accepting of same-sex marriage. (Perhaps, this prediction could potentially lead to policy recommendations for to diversify Idaho's populous) (Megyn Rodriguez).

I took these excerpts from writing done early in the fall semester of their first year when the scholars were just learning the inquiry process and beginning to develop their research. They continue using an inquiry process through the program.

THE BOISE STATE MCNAIR SCHOLARS AND OTHERING

The McNair Scholars use same process of inquiry in their thinking and writing about their identities. Inquiry-based writing about identity and lived experiences help McNair Scholars to negotiate their own agency and encourage thoughtful and empathetic engagement with difficult and complex conversations about identity. This is particularly true as they begin to read, write, and discuss the graduate experience. McNair Scholars need to understand, explicitly, the challenges they may face, the way access to graduate education shapes society, and the ways intersectional systemic inequality contributes to the uneven representations of class, race, and gender in graduate school. The Boise State McNair Program functions on the premise that McNair Scholars are more successful when we validate their identity and show them that how they are valuable and beneficial to the university because of their difference, not in spite of it. The Boise State McNair faculty actively includes reading, writing, and discussion about identity and higher education in their curriculum.

These can be difficult discussions because most of the McNair Scholars come from backgrounds that identify with the American dream mythology—they are deeply committed to seeing it as infallible and are often frustrated when it is suggested that the individual cannot actually control critical factors in their own upwards social mobility. However, the Boise state McNair faculty are aware of how many McNair Scholars are affected by a type of othering that is much like color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, hooks, Wise, Williams). Color-blind racism refers to the negative results of “treating everyone the same” without accounting for the ways privilege creates systems of failures for people of color while supporting the success of white people. Monnica T. Williams is a

licensed clinical psychologist and Director of the Center for Mental Health Disparities at the University of Louisville in the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences. She says, “Colorblindness is the racial ideology that posits the best way to end discrimination is by treating individuals as equally as possible, without regard to race, culture, or ethnicity.”

In 1997 Leslie G. Carr, PhD., examined the ways that the rhetorical argument for colorblindness emerged from the notion that the constitution is “colorblind.” She cites Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* as the foundation of the rhetorical argument that “color-blindness” is something we should see as a progressive goal. Judge Harlan wrote in his dissent that “Our constitution is color-blind and neither knows nor tolerates class among citizens” and he also says that the law “takes no account of” color.” What most people do not look at is that also he argues that the white race will remain dominant as long as they hold fast to the constitution. Carr argues that this is true because “The constitution is “racist” and ... color blindness is actually a racist ideology.” This is because the being “color-blind” also means being blind to the circumstances, systems of failure, and systems of oppression that do not affect white people but do affect people of color (ix).

Many people believe that “the law does not see or judge based on color” and therefore we should not take race consider race in the justice system. Eventually this notion evolved into the idea that if we do not “see color” we are not enacting racism. In academia this can manifest as “if we don’t see differences” we cannot be isolating, dismissing, or devaluing people with different lived experiences. This “identity-blindness” can make it difficult to see the reasons McNair Scholars experience

difficulties accessing information, resources, and support. Ignoring McNair Scholar's identities risks enacting "identity-blind" ideology that becomes a barrier to the scholars. Therefore, McNair Scholars begin to reflect on their statement of academic purpose by flipping that narrative and asking themselves how their differences might make them a better scholars and more valuable members of the academic community.

BOISE STATE MCNAIR PROGRAM IDENTITY AGENTS

Peter Burke tells us that Identity agents are members of society who intentionally influences the way another defines themselves (5-15). Schechter and Ventura, sociologists, argue that identity agents, typically in the parent-child relationship, use researched methods, practices, and heuristics to create environments, situations, and activities with the express purpose of influencing the development of adolescent identity (449-476). Harrell-Levy and Kerpelman further argue that teachers are identity agents when they co-construct adolescents' identities through transformative pedagogical approaches that involve collaborative learning and empowering students (70-75). All three agree that the defining characteristic of the identity agents is intentionality. The identity agent poses the "what does it mean" question and then co-constructs the answer. Teachers who are identity agents they pose the "what does it mean" question and then use reading, writing, reflection, and discussion as a means to co-construct the answer with the student.

The Boise State McNair faculty are identity agents because they pose the question "what does it mean to be a scholar" and then offer the McNair scholar reading writing, reflection, and discussion with which they can construct an answer set. The reading,

writing, reflection, and discussion offer the McNair scholar opportunities to recognize the cultural capital they bring to the table, opportunities to see themselves represented in academia, and opportunities to contextualize their education as cultural capital they can reinvest into their communities.

RECOGNITION, REPRESENTATION, AND REINVESTMENT

In order to offset othering the McNair Scholars program the McNair program seeks to celebrate each scholars' difference and to **recognize** the skills, character strengths, and positive characteristics their difference helped them develop. The McNair program seeks to show scholars how those skills, character strengths, and positive characteristics will benefit them in graduate school and then benefit the academic community through the work they produce during their career.

This is can be a difficult and emotional time as students work through their own worldviews, and their relationships to communities, institutions, and governing bodies. In this time, students from every perspective begin to see how they have simultaneously supported a system of inequality and how that system affected them. They begin to see how that same system has harmed them. Often students of color and female scholars feel empowered when the faculty acknowledge that incidents the scholars have encountered were racist or sexist because the scholars often question their own perceptions and feelings in the face of coded bigotry. It is also common for male scholars to feel frustrated when they come to realize that being white and male does not mean that they are immune to the challenges faced in education by the working class and working poor. Unfortunately, the privilege embedded in being white and male might actually render

them invisible in graduate school because no one expects them to struggle in the same way as other underrepresented or First-generation students struggle.

Therefore, the McNair Scholars read a wide variety of narratives of scholars who are writing about the graduate experience. They are specifically offered **representations** of people like them themselves—other First-generation scholars, and underrepresented scholars—who have undergone the same journey into higher education. These writers come from the same backgrounds, communities, and struggles. They give voice to some of the concerns the McNair scholars face. Locating representations of people like themselves in academia often makes it easier to talk about the challenges the McNair scholars face. For example, many of male students begin to feel like they can actually share their experiences with women and scholars of color only after we read Mike Rose's account of being a working class scholar. In these moments, the cohort begins to understand how intersectionality actually works and they can share narratives.

Finally, in order to combat othering the Boise State McNair faculty asks students to reflect on the ways their struggles, accomplishments, and successes will resonate in their own communities. They discuss what it might mean to younger siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews, to see their McNair scholar earn their graduate degree. They discuss the role models and inspirations that helped the McNair scholar succeed as an undergraduate. Finally, they introduce the idea cultural capital and the frame an education as cultural capital the scholar can **reinvest** into their own communities.

However, creating a space that encourages this kind of discussion is not easy. McNair Scholars invest in being just like everyone else on campus even though it can have a negative effect on them. Their desire to be just like everyone else puts them at risk

of internalizing identity blindness and causes them to blame themselves for issues outside of their control. As much as McNair Scholars want to acceptance from their college communities, they will often find themselves dealing with identity-blindness about their status as First-generation scholars. This reality can make it even more difficult for them to navigate their new communities.

These three strategies; **recognizing** each scholar's strengths as a positive, valuable result of their culture and lived experience; locating positive, empowering **representations** of scholars from underrepresented backgrounds; framing graduate school as cultural capital that the McNair scholar can **reinvest** into their own community, are consistently reinforced throughout the two-year program. These strategies are the core ways that the McNair Program faculty situates the McNair scholars as valuable members of the academic community. Therefore, the writing assignments they work through must do three things:

- Demystify the ways systemic inequality affects opportunities and access to higher education so students can **recognize** the lived experiences that have benefited them as scholars and celebrate the skills, qualities, and characteristics the scholar developed due to those lived experiences.
- Help scholars to locate **representation** of themselves and First-generation students in academia.
- Motivate Scholars to control every possible factor within their control in their own social upward mobility and contribute to their

communities' social upward mobility by **reinvesting** their education into their communities.

The McNair faculty accomplishes these goals by constantly thinking about these needs, and reflecting on how the reading, writing, and discussion they are asking of the McNair scholars accomplish these goals. They offer students ways to recognize the value of their unique skills, perspectives, and ways of knowing, and discover representation of First-generation scholars in academia finally; they remind the scholars that, at the end of journey, the scholars will be in a position to re-invest into their communities.

Recognition:

In an interview, Helen Barnes, a composition teacher who started out as a faculty member and eventually became the program coordinator, remembered the long conversations she had with the other members of the faculty in the beginning of the second year. They talked about what they learned in the first year, what issues they encountered, and what they thought the students needed. The faculty realized from their combined personal experiences, their shared research from their fields, and their observations of the first year of the program that identity was a key factor. Frequently, these conversations centered on identity, and how McNair scholars negotiated identity.

The faculty recognized that McNair scholars and other underrepresented students faced insecurities, imposter syndrome, and struggled to feel as if they belonged in graduate school. They also realized that many of these same people felt like they needed to give up their identities in for others to accept them as scholars. Helen realized that the scholars would need an identity anchor in graduate school. The McNair scholars would need to be rooted in where they came from in order to negotiate graduate school. They

realized that the program could serve as a part of that identity but that they also needed to maintain strong ties to their communities and culture. “We decided that maybe taking stock of who they [the students] were... at this [the very beginning] stage of their academic career, [asking] what that meant to them, would help them identify what they would/would not negotiate in the academic track they were headed into.”

These conversations eventually led to the conceptualization and design of the “Letter to Self” writing assignment, which provides a benchmark— a snapshot in time. It provided a space for them to reflect their origins, their challenges, and their successes. It creates a written testament to their current identity. It helps them extract and name skills, characteristics, and personal qualities they might not have realized they had (persistence, motivation, etc.); recognize how their culture and lives experience helped to develop those skills, characteristics, and personal qualities. The assignment asked them to think about how those skills made them strong applicants for graduate school and to think on how they could use those qualities to become a stronger graduate school applicant (Barnes)

In order to write the paper the scholars would need to reflect on their culture, their past, and the ways those aspects of their identities might affect the academic identity they were creating. “Our hope, I think, was for them to try to understand the academic transformation that they were headed into. [T]he Letter to Self ... [is] a stock check of identity, culture, family, roots and what [they] refuse to let go/change.” The “Letter to Self” is the first step in helping students to recognize their lived experiences as a powerful, positive, and valid in academia.

Representation:

A former program director, David Hall, a sociologist, felt the scholars needed readings about racism, sexism, and classism. For many students these readings were the first time they heard anyone voice, in the classroom, the struggles they negotiated every day. At the same time Helen recognized that that the students' experience included racism and classism that hers did not, and realized that, they would also need to see themselves in the graduate experience. She said, "I tried to find more readings that combined race, class, and education, more specifically graduate education, so [I added] hooks, Rodriguez, etc. to [help them] understand that grad school may be a condensed version of what they are experiencing on a day to day basis. [I wanted] to plant seeds to help them persist in grad school."

The faculty designed the follow-up writing project, the "Student to Scholar" essay, in the same way. They reflected, the researched, and discussed the best ways to help students figure out the steps they would need to take to develop the characteristics, skills, and habits of the mind that they would need to succeed in the graduate experience. The Student to Scholar essay both acknowledged and validated what the student was unwilling to give up or risk for a graduate education and laid out, clearly, the transformations they needed to make to succeed (Barnes Interview 2015). One key feature of this essay is that it asks students to locate people on campus who share their identity and have a conversation with them about graduate school. I specifically remember the impact of talking to Dora Ramirez-Dhoore while I was writing the Student to Scholar essay. I had never been in a class taught by a Latina and talking to Dr. Ramirez-Dhoore was much like seeing a unicorn.

Reinvestment:

Finally, the McNair faculty asked students to read, write, and discuss the ways they would be able to use their education to give back, to bring their communities up with them. Repeatedly, they asked the scholars to consider the demographics they would be able to serve. They created peer mentoring and peer review session to bring the cohort together. They asked second year members to help recruit the new cohorts. More importantly, they used the statement of academic purpose to develop the connection between research and serving their community.

Looking back, I can clearly see the power in this approach to teaching the McNair seminar through my own experience, and I can see it in my interactions with my own McNair scholars. Particularly, I can see the power in idea of reinvesting our education into our communities. After all, by name ng and contextualizing these strategies for teaching First-Year writers' I am reinvesting, not just back into the McNair scholars, but also into the wider community First-generation scholars.

CHAPTER III: MCNAIR SCHOLAR

There is one, crystal clear moment in my McNair trajectory when the power of the combination of representation and reinvestment came together for me. It was the moment when this project began, the moment when I truly understood, not what I was hoping to do with my scholarship, but how I hoped to do it. I was at a reading by Dr. Victor Villanueva at Boise State in 2009. The English department hosted the reading and Helen urged me to attend. She said that Dr. Villanueva was exactly the kind of scholar I needed in my body of knowledge. He was First Generation, he was Latino, he was in my field, and he is a teacher. However, it was not until I read the article he was presenting that I realized that he was writing about many of the issues I grappled with then, and continue to grapple with now.

In preparation for the reading, I dived into his work and became more and more enamored with his perspective. He was articulating concepts, issues, and questions that hovered just out of my reach. That night he read “Memoria’ Is a Friend of Ours: On the Discourse of Color.” The article is a beautifully segmented essay that carefully meshes not just languages—English, Spanish and Spanglish—but genre as well. He mixes poetry, narrative, and formal academic discourse to explain why people, especially people of color, need to be able to utilize “Memoria.” Ultimately, the “thesis” statement is simply, “Memory simply cannot be adequately portrayed in the conventional discourse of the academy (12).”

Memoria, according to Villanueva, is a forgotten or ignored rhetorical strategy typically interpreted as a literal translation either of memory (meaning things we have memorized) or as the body of knowledge of a rhetor. Villanueva re-imagines Memoria as

a richer form of memory. Memoria encompasses our individual memories and lived experience as well as our cultural and historical memories. He suggests that—these memories, our histories—are as important to our scholarly writing as logos, pathos, or ethos. What I have learned, and keep learning, is that memory—memories—are always present. They are always at the tip of our tongue, the edge of our consciousness. We write the important ones repeatedly as we explore academic discourse. I have written this memory, Villanueva on stage, a thousand times in the last six years. I have written and rewritten this memory of him reading in a voice that sounds like home, using expressions that I know but do not understand because he is Puerto Rican and I am Mexican and neither of us really speaks Spanish. I have written of the power of his words, the charisma of his personality, of the things I learned. I have written it in many ways, some of them so coded in academic language that only I knew they were about this memory.

Villanueva challenges readers to re-see the importance of memory, lived experience, and history for the marginalized scholar, researcher, and teacher of writing and rhetoric. He describes Memoria as a sharp edged tool that allows us to rip through the layers of indifference and ignorance so an academic system that remains disproportionately white and male can hear us. He asks readers to conceptualize writing as a process in which the writer engages in analysis that simultaneously explores *what* the writer knows and *how* the writer has acquired that knowledge. He says:

For the person of color, it does more. The narrative of the person of color validates. It resonates. It awakens, particularly for those of us who are in institutions where our numbers are few. We know that though we really are Gramsci's exceptions—those who “through ‘chance’ [...have] had

opportunities that the thousand others in reality could not or did not have” —our experiences are in no sense unique but are always analogous to other experiences from among those exceptions. So more than narrating the life of one of color so that “one creates this possibility, suggests the process, indicates the opening,” in Gramsci’s terms... we remember the results of our having realized the possibility, discovered the process, found the opening, while finding that there is in some sense very little change on the other side. (15)

In many ways, this passage speaks to the First-generation experience as much as it speaks to the person of color. Even though there are large numbers of First-generation students on campus, few graduate. Although a rich history of First-generation students exists in the ongoing history of academia, time and assimilation renders them invisible. At the time, I am struck by the argument that narratives, memory, our history, and our ways of telling stories are academic when they are used to do the work of academics—questioning, critiquing, and creating new knowledge.

It was in that moment I started to understand that I wanted to use my scholarship to make Memoria more available to more students; I wanted to open up more space for students to use their narratives, memory, history, and ways of telling stories as a tool in their pursuit of knowledge. Some of the lines of the essay are, “Looking back, we look ahead, and giving ourselves up to the looking back and the looking ahead, knowing the self, and, critically, knowing the self in relation to others, maybe we can be an instrument whereby students can hear the call.” It is only now, that I understand these lines as a call to be the identity agent in the writing classroom (17).

In order to show how the writing projects developed by the McNair Program encourage students to develop their academic identity, I have to follow Villanueva's lead;

I have to write:

autobiography with political, theoretical, pedagogical considerations...story [that] includes ethnographic research... story [that] includes things tried in classrooms. This is the personal made public and the public personalized, not for self-glory nor to point fingers, but to suggest how, maybe, to make the exception the rule. (10)

Ultimately, the identity agent guides the student to the resources they need to make *their* "personal public and the public personalized" on their terms, in their own voices (10).

The student is not "inventing the university" for themselves, the student is not learning to "speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community" in place of their own. Instead, the student is student using our ways of "knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing" in order to support their voices and to validate their ways of knowing (Bartholomae 4).

FIRST GENERATION BACKGROUND

In many ways, I was the poster child for McNair. I am First-generation, I am indigenous Mexican American, and I grew up in that grey space between working poor and poverty. My father was a crew boss for a large potato farmer for most of my childhood. My mother played support. She ran the food truck that fed the workers on-site. When I was twelve my father lost that job, two years later my parents bought a small

piece of land on the very edge of the southern Idaho/Nevada border. There is a small hot spring on this land. My folks hoped to make a go out of the small restaurant/hotel business model. There was no Jr. High. Only a single room school house with classes through the sixth grade. My older sister attended a high school out of the area, getting up early to make a long commute to the nearest hint of civilization. My parents withdrew me from school and I took over much of the day-to-day work of the restaurant/hotel work. A few years later, at sixteen, I left home with my eldest sister. I bounced around after that, living with my sister, a friend, eventually on my own.

Currently, in the university classes I teach, I always play “two truths and a lie” with my students. The truth my students never pick out as truth is the fact that I have a GED. I dropped out in the ninth grade, worked through my teens, tested for the GED at nineteen because my mother convinced my boss to tell me that a promotion I wanted was contingent on the GED. It was not. However, my mother was determined to get me back in the classroom even though I had long since decided not to return. I married at twenty-one, had my first child at twenty-four and returned to college because I took one look at my son and realized that he deserved more than I could give him. I knew that his chances of graduating with a college degree doubled or more if one of his parents attended college.

Even though I wanted more for my son, I was still so reluctant to step into the classroom that my husband literally picked up the college admission forms, put them on the table, and stood over me as I filled them out. My reluctance had nothing to do with my intellect. I was a straight A student before I dropped out, my choir teacher was pushing me hard to start working on college apps and scholarships. I didn’t want to fill

out those papers because I was twenty-four, married, with a baby—how would I ever fit in on a college campus? I was awkward and out of place when I was the same age as my peers. I could not image ever feeling like I belonged on campus.

I struggled then, and continue to struggle now, to see myself as an academic who genuinely belongs at the university. I was sure that my writing, and more importantly the ways I put thinking into words, the way I worked thorough my thoughts wasn't good enough. For a long time I was sure that the way I made knowledge was wrong. I considered dropping out. However, I was a good student with a GPA that never dipped under a 3.0. My actual grades did not reflect my perception of my abilities and yet I felt out of place, I worried that my grades were gifts from kindhearted teachers given to the Mexican girl for the sake of maintaining diversity in the classroom. I was usually the only person of color in any given classroom, especially in my sophomore year and in my writing classes. I was sure that every semester was my last.

The first two years are an incredible blur. My oldest son was six months old when I began school and my second son was born in September of my second year. It was an uphill battle. My grades over those four semesters varied from 3.75 to 3.0. I exceled in English, communication, and foundations of education but I plummeted in math, philosophy and logic. I was bone weary. My plan during that time was simple. I would get my BA. In the first year, I imagined a double major in theater and English but dropped theater as a major at the end of my first year. I wanted to teach high school. Teaching high school felt safe, attainable, and stable. These goals seemed high to me considering that no one in my family had ever finished a B.A. Even though I exceled at school, easily maintain a GPA above a 3.0, I never thought of higher education as a path

open to me. If pushed, I occasionally joked about getting a PhD on the ten-year plan while I was teaching and raising my family.

On a whim, near the end of my sophomore year, I attended a graduate exchange open house and the director of the McNair Program gave a presentation. Professor David Hall introduced the McNair Scholars program by telling us a story about a young African American student who wanted to be laser physicist and astronaut and how, despite incredible odds, he reached that goal. After his death, his family helped to create a program to help other students like him reach the stars. This young man was first in his family, poor, and the only black man in his program. His college and graduate school experience convinced him that students of the working class and underrepresented ethnicities were less likely to succeed in attaining PhD's because they were coming from lifestyles, communities, and schools that did not prepare them for the graduate school environment. He was determined to change that. He wanted to build a program that supported promising students as they worked through the graduate school application process. This was the McNair Program. After Professor Hall's presentation, I impulsively filled out an application.

I joined the McNair Scholars in a whirlwind rush because the presentation I attended was not intended for recruitment for that year—it was for the following year—but I did not want to wait. In order to get an application in under the deadline I needed to fill it out, write the essay, and find three letters of recommendation in twenty-four hours. I will forever be indebted to the professors who wrote those letters. I interviewed a week later and in less than two weeks from hearing the words “The Boise State McNair Program” I was accepted. In order to join I had to drop my education major and give up

my plan to teach high school. I had to take on an extra year to complete the program, stretching my undergrad career from four years to five. I had to re-imagine myself as an academic, a person who, if things went well, would always be part of academia even though at the time I did not really feel like I fit in. McNair was my turning point. The writing projects I am describing had a profound effect on me.

Looking back, I can see that, in a very broad way Ronald E. McNair was an identity agent. He understood that in order to be successful, students needed to begin to re-imagine themselves as journeymen scholars instead of students. He recognized how important it was for students to develop an academic identity that supported their own complex identity but also helped them to situate themselves in the larger community of the university. His lived experience as a graduate student, particularly his lack of mentors and faculty of color, drove him to conceive of a program that would develop more mentors and faculty of color for the next generation.

I also realize that I have no way to cite or “prove” that Ronald E. McNair was an identity agent. Everything I know about him beyond what is easily available online was gleaned from McNair conferences, stories told by people like Astronaut Barbara Morgan—a friend to McNair who spoke to us about his vision—and from my own interpretation of the stories we were told. This is program mythology. Now, as I near the end of my PhD program, I have no doubt that McNair understood the critical role identity agents play for First-generation students in academia.

RECOGNITION: THE LETTER TO SELF

As a Mexican American woman from a large family, I had long since learned that service defined a good daughter, wife, and mother. It is my job to facilitate the wellbeing of others. In one sense that work is very physical. Keeping my home, caring for my children, working in a way that added to the income of my family, but in another the role was also emotional. As daughter number three I was the hinge—the person who connected all the others to the family. I played peacekeeper and interpreter, I cracked the joke at the right time, used just the right words during prayer at the family table to soothe hurt feelings, I played the doting baby to my big sisters, amplifying their self-esteem, and I cuddled and read to the little ones.

In big families, and I generalize, of all races and types, there is always someone like me—that person who serves to keep the family in harmony as best they can. In order to be the hinge one must always be deeply aware of the other people. We watch, listen, and connect to other people's needs and wants. In some sense, a hinge can be manipulative, because it is their job to persuade folks to get along under a variety of tensions. I developed my role as a hinge into a strong set of people skills that I knew would serve me in any service job, but I wanted to do something useful, and I felt they would serve me in the high school classroom as well. Given the skills I developed in my lived experience—storytelling, persuasion, compromise, it not particularly surprising that I was drawn to writing and teaching.

Although I already had a strong set of people skills that served me well outside of an academic setting, I had a great deal of social anxiety in college. For example, in my first year I was actually terrified to go to office hours, especially those of a white male

professor. The fear that I would do or say something wrong was so strong I would become physically ill. I avoided office hours, one to one conversations, and any situation where I needed to speak to a professor, at all costs. I found myself comfortable in the McNair dynamic and being part of the program reduced my social anxiety in the rest of my college environment. Just being accepted, learning the history of the program, meeting other people like me, and hearing that my lived experience was an asset, not a drawback, gave me a new way of looking at my education. In McNair, we explicitly discussed these our concerns, we made them transparent, and we named those fears as legitimate. My lived experience had taught me to be very careful of people, particularly men, in powerful positions. McNair showed me that I was not the only person who felt that way, showed me why it was important to work through it. They also suggested that I make a habit of bringing those experiences back to my mentors or cohort to talk through them—decode them. They also gave me an opportunity to sit down, think through, and write about the fears and challenges that might hold me back. More importantly, they pressed me to think about what steps I needed to take to control as many factors in my situation as possible. These discussions—about our strengths, weakness, and anxieties—led to the Letter to Self.

The Letter to Self is the best example of the way the program encourages students to recognize the skills, personality traits, and characteristics they developed in their culture and lived experiences. It is also an example of how the McNair program helps students to focus on how those skills, traits, and characteristic make them stronger graduate school applicants. It did create a snapshot of who I was the first semester of the McNair program. The snapshot shows a smart, decent, writer who was insecure, out of

place, and terrified of what she might lose in pursuit of a higher degree. It shows Penrose's First-generation student. It also asked me to engage in very specific thinking moves. It made me reflect on my skills, my weakness, and it made me articulate what I wanted in my future. It also made me reflect on what I needed to do to take as much control as possible. One of the most important things I learned about myself while writing that letter, a lesson that has resonated through my graduate experience, is that I can accept and work through almost any challenge once I separate the things I can control and the things I cannot control. I can let go of the factors that I have no control over, focus on what I can control, and accept the outcome.

First, they offer us the concept of "cultural capital." I had never heard the term before McNair. Cultural capital refers to the variety of unseen capital we carry with us. This includes generational wealth and education. Then they asked us to read a series of studies and basic statistics that showed us how few First-generation, working class, and people of color work in higher education. Finally, they led us through conversation about this data in context to cultural capital. We talked about the unseen cultural capital people carry with them that acts as a tool to make the journey to higher education easier. Having a parent who went to college is cultural capital. Having parents who maintained a steady job and growing up in the same neighborhood school is cultural capital, belonging to clubs or teams is cultural capital. Then there is the more visible cultural capital—generational wealth, being white, middle class, or male—that people carry with them. We also talked about the ways systemic racism and sexism downplays, disregards, or ignores the cultural capital that marginalized peoples carry with them. My skill as the family

“hinge” is cultural capital. Bilingualism is cultural capital. The patience, determination, and endurance of young parents or working class farm kids are cultural capital.

The Letter to Self asks the writer to think about their cultural capital, to reflect on what we carry with us. This can be a difficult conversation because most of us have learned to believe that we do not have any cultural capital. Education and literacy are the gold standard of cultural capital. First-generation students come from the book-deprived homes that the newspapers lament about when they run yet another “Bobby can’t read and it is a literacy apocalypse” story. We are the families who did not read aloud or go to library story-time. We were lacking. What we needed to understand was that:

In the United States, we live the mythology of a classless society. We believe our society provides equal opportunity for all and promises success to those who work hard to achieve it. We believe the key to achievement is education, and we believe the heart of education is literacy. In a society bound by such mythology, our views about literacy *are* our views about political economy and social opportunity (Stuckey vii; *emphasis mine*).

By demystifying this worldview and suggesting that there are many types of cultural capital, which are just as valuable, the faculty created space for us to debate and decide for ourselves, what we would view as cultural capital, what we would value and privilege. It helped us to see that we had a choice. I wrote:

I think often of father’s cracked, scarred and disfigured hands. They are the image of manual labor, of years of backbreaking, unappreciated work. Those swollen, purple knuckles, the index finger twisted and disfigured by

a truck falling off a cheap jack, and the quarter-sized pockmark where an infection ate through the flesh until it needed to be cut away. These scars symbolize his struggle to keep his head above water with a sixth grade education and six children to feed. His Mexican brown skin and black Indian braids made it that much harder. It was more than fighting against the current; it was swimming into a waterfall. Yet he did all this with deep sense of pride, almost reverence for his place in the world as a worker, a builder, a man who shaped his world with the in skill in his hands, and the strength of his back. This is your tradition, manual labor, thick Spanish accents and the deep-seated conceptualization of yourself and your family as people who work with their hands.

The letter drew attention to the challenges we faced as students who were by definition Gloria Anzaldua's borderlanders. Where "To survive the Borderlands/ you must live, sin fronteras/ be a crossroads (216)." For many of us that meant juggling complicated home situations. The identity agent's role in this process is to help the student reframe their complicated lived experiences so the student can begin to re-see them as an asset.

This concept of cultural capital is strange, this idea that our experiences, our education, the understanding we bring to any given situation, and how those subtle nuances affect how people perceive you, what assumptions they make, what box they put you in. Your cultural capital is part peso, part food stamp and part sweaty stained, crumpled, dollar bill. It is not much, the sum of your experiences, your way of understanding the world.

You need to know and understand that in graduate school it won't be enough pay your way. Instead, you need bank on your ability to work hard, and your ability to adapt. The great thing about capital is if you invest wisely, it will grow.

The “Letter to Self” encourages students to think deeply about the challenges they face on campus and in the academic environment. This is particularly important because First-generation students need to find spaces in the academic community that they can call home. The need other students to interact with and to socialize with. At the college level, we do not expect to do too much social and emotional teaching so First-generation students must integrate, on their own, into a new environment. In addition, they struggle with finding a common ground with their peers. For me, the biggest hurdle was figuring out just how much of my story and truth I could tell in any given situation. My lived experience includes situations and realities that most people prefer not to talk about and I needed to learn how to navigate that reality. By opening up the an opportunity to reflect on my lived experiences and to think about why I was struggling to adjust to the environment I could begin to think and what it might mean to manage those aspects of my reality.

You reread the words you have written and wonder if they are too personal, too much, but the assignment asks you to reflect on the challenges, the barriers in your life. There is anger at these questions because you wonder if they know what they are asking you to reflect on. People on campus are always asking personal questions and then looking at you as if you have sprouted horns when you talk about a childhood

shaped by violence, racism, and abuse. And you know that most people only want to hear about the good things, things that are symmetrical, pretty, and clean but life, at least where you come from, is rarely clean.

Finally, the Letter to Self gives students the opportunity to say aloud, to write, to assert what they want from their education. This can be a challenge since many students either do not know or feel like they are getting above themselves to say the words aloud. First-generation students often come to campus feeling like guests, and guests do not ask for things, they do not demand, or have expectations. Guests are grateful for whatever gifts they are given. It is critical that First-generation students are encouraged to work through these feeling, given opportunities to ask questions and make requests. Writing the following list felt shameful to me when I wrote it, as if I was being rude, disrespectful, and worst of all greedy. Even now, all these years later, I feel a strange sense of shame looking at this list, at the bluntness of it, at the greediness of it. However now, I have the thinking moves and tools I need to think about what that feeling means and to resist it.

- 1. I want to graduate in 2010*
- 2. I want my MFA as a creative writer and my PhD in Rhetoric and Composition.*
- 3. I want to write, I need to write. I want to be recognized for my writing.*
- 4. I want to teach.*
- 5. I want to give my kids more than just a foundation; I want to give them everything.*

Finally the “Letter to Self” asks the student to begin thinking about the next step. It asks the student to start thinking about what they need to do to reach their goals.

In more practical terms you continue to prepare yourself as best as you can. You do the research into good programs, make the phone calls, and write the emails. You'll take advantage of every assignment, every bit of reading material, glean as much from it as possible. You'll force yourself away from your computer and out of the house to make the connections you'll need later. You'll learn as much as you can about grad school. You'll articulate your deepest fears so that you're prepared for them. Better to know what you're facing than to let it sneak up on you.

Ultimately, the Letter to Self is the foundation of the academic identity of a McNair Scholar. It is the entry point into the conversation about identity. Because it is the foundation, it needs to have solid groundwork. The reading and discussion for this assignment needs careful scaffolding. What is evident in this letter is that there is no way I could have articulated some of the most important ideas in it without an identity agent. I could not have articulated fears about losing myself, I could not have connected myself to writers like bell hooks, and I could not have so clearly defined what I wanted out of an education. I certainly could not have recontextualized my lived experience as poor, as Mexican, as working class, as an asset. This letter isn't perfect—I cringe a bit to share such messy, flabby writing—however, it does illuminate the thinking moves that the McNair curriculum was asking us to make and the conclusions I was drawing from those thinking moves.

REPRESENTATION: THE STUDENT TO SCHOLAR ESSAY

The Student to Scholar is the next writing assignment. This essay creates an opportunity for McNair scholars to locate positive representation of their communities in academia. It gives scholars a chance to see people who share their lived experiences in academia. It gives scholars a chance to talk to members of their field and finally it asks scholars to engage the thinking move of reflecting on the stories of scholars who share some of their experiences. This move gives scholars concrete examples of characteristics that the identity agent wants them to develop. It helps students identify their own experiences in a larger pattern of experiences. There is very little as empowering to a struggling student as knowing that they are not alone, that other people have experience the same challenges and succeeded.

First-generation students do not see their stories reflected back at them very often. This essay sent us out in search of people who shared our stories. It is at this stage that scholars begin to read a variety of writers from a variety of backgrounds. We read bell hooks, Lisa Delpit, and Richard Rodriguez. We discuss the challenges they face and the ways they met those challenges. Specifically, we talk about networking and building systems of support among like-minded people. On one hand, we recognize how difficult it may be to find people from our own communities in graduate school and on the other hand, we start thinking about how to build community wherever we are.

Finally, they assign the Student to Scholar essay. The essay asks us to look at the reading, to talk to professor and McNair alumni, to answer the following questions

1. What is a scholar?
2. What is the difference between as student and a scholar?

3. What specific skills, personality traits, and characteristics, can we develop in order to become scholars?
4. How can we develop them?

The essay works in two ways. First, it asks a McNair scholar to define the characteristics of a scholar. Next, it asks a McNair Scholar to locate and listen to people who have developed those characteristics. At the same time, the Student to Scholar paper also pushes the McNair Scholar to interact with role models and representations of scholars on campus. Finally, it asks the McNair Scholar to reflect on the real life steps they needs to take to develop the characteristics they have defined as the characteristics of a scholar.

It is typical for First-generation students to be one of a small group of people like themselves or even the only one. I have been the only Latina in any number of situations, which often made me doubt myself. For example in my second year, I took a graduate class with one of the faculty who mentored me. In the process of that class, I wrote an essay that won an award and I made great progress in my McNair project. It was a highlight of my college career. By any reasonable objective perspective, I succeeded in the goals of the class. However, when, a few months later my mentor invited graduates from that class to join a conference panel for the College Conference on Communication and Composition, I was not invited. This is not a reflection of any kind of institutional disregard or personal conflict with my mentor. It merely reflected the program's dedication to helping their graduate students present at conference. They privileged the needs of the graduate students in the class.

I admit that I was hurt and I really struggled to avoid viewing it as a reflection on my abilities. It hit me right in my insecurities and my imposter syndrome. I questioned

my performance in the class and wondered if what I read as a successful class and good grade where a “gift” from a professor who liked me and wanted to “help” the Mexican student in the classroom. This is running theme in my academic life. I struggle to trust my professor and other folks “in charge” to judge me fairly. On one hand, I worry that their buried biases may cause them to act as a gatekeeper and on the other hand, I fear that their desire to “diversify” the field will prompt them to let me slide. Eventually, I discussed my frustration with Helen. In that conversation, she suggested that I submit my work to the conference anyway. She gently suggested that my mentor would be very proud of me for taking initiative and that the experience would be good for me. I took her advice and was surprised to receive an acceptance letter. This was a big moment for me and this moment would not have been possible without networking and connecting to people in my field.

The Student to Scholar paper creates pressure for the scholar step out of their comfort zone and look for people with which they can connect. In the following section, I am writing about people who all made very deep impacts on my education and perspectives. Most of the people I interviewed were not Latino but each of them drew me to them because of their passion and commitment to their teaching. Dr. Woods is a Filipino who taught Eastern Civ. Alan Heathcock is a writer and was a fiction teacher and Dr. Gill is a historian. My connection to these scholars was story. They all taught through story:

Dr. Woods says that there are four words that are integral to the way humanity gives and takes knowledge. These words are: Tell me a story. People use story to share knowledge and wisdom. All academic knowledge

is a story told in a language that I will need to master if I want to succeed in graduate school. After that conversation, I begin to hear stories everywhere I go. When I talk to Professor Heathcock, he says that all writing is storytelling and Dr. Gill, a historian, talks about how the story of history can get lost in the esoteric of academia. They stress how important it is to be able to tell a story, to present information in way that is interesting, captivating, to be able to communicate effectively. I always knew that history, writing, literature, was about storytelling but I couldn't see or hear a story in math or biology until now. Math, physics, biology are just stories told in a language I am unfamiliar with. The pattern is the same.

The Student to Scholar essay builds off the Letter to Self. It asks the student to begin a transformation every graduate student is familiar with—the transformation from consumer of knowledge to producer of knowledge. This is a big step, it is difficult even for graduate who come from educated backgrounds.

As identity agents, the McNair faculty recognizes that scholars need as much agency in this process as possible. However, because many of us had only recently learned what it meant to be consumers of knowledge, many of us still struggle to feel as if we have a right to knowledge—the idea that we could produce was a big leap.

In the beginning of this project I was sure, I understood the difference between student and scholar. A scholar wants it more; a scholar works harder, a scholar is more dedicated. While there are many similarities between them, the two are fundamentally different and the

relationship between them intricate and complex. A scholar is the storyteller and a student is the listener. As a listener, the story exists to serve you, to enrich your life. The storyteller exists to serve the story. The community only thrives when there is a give and take between scholar and student.

Looking back, I would say that the biggest difference between a student and a scholar is that a scholar is a teacher and learner with a well-developed academic identity, a place in their academic community, and a well-developed sense of purpose and passion for their work. A scholar recognizes that in order to produce knowledge they need to exist in a constant state of inquiry. I guess the one solid answer I have learned about being a scholar is that there are no concrete answers. There is always more to learn and there will always be things we need to unlearn. Scholars need a certain generosity of spirit, a willingness to listen.

This essay put me in contact with Dr. Dora Ramirez-Dhoore. Although I knew she was part of our department and I had seen her on campus, we had never spoken. She was the first Latina professor I had ever met.

A scholar must be willing to begin, as Professor Dhoore said, with what is unknown and pursue truth regardless of where it might take them. The beginning is always a question, a desire to know more, to fill in the blanks but once the story has begun the scholar must follow where it leads without influencing it. Dr. Woods also talks about balancing humility and confidence as a scholar. This, I think, is one of the most important

qualities of scholarship, the ability to give and take, to accept failure, and success, to collaborate. It's about integrity. Carolina Valderrama talks about being willing to accept that sometimes being a good scholar means working with people outside of your field of interest, to compromise for the greater overall benefit. She argued that a scholar gives their best to all their work, even when it's not the dream job.

At the same time, the Student to Scholar essay exposed me to storytellers and narratives about graduate school, about getting into graduate school, and about surviving graduate school. This move allows identity agents to do two things. First, they are filling a gap for First-generation students. For those of us without any narrative of college, of education, or of graduate school, this essay put us in contact with a wide variety of people who have experienced the process. It opens the door for us to begin to imagine ourselves in graduate school, as working academics.

By helping us access representations of academics with which we can identify, the McNair faculty made it possible for us to claim intellectual space, to take agency, and to set goals with tangible success stories to draw on as we worked towards those goals. In addition to the Student to Scholar essay, we attend McNair Scholars conferences where we have an opportunity to meet and listen to other McNair scholars at every level of academia. We listen to panels made up of folks, like us, who finished graduate school. Through this process, we learn to be constantly aware of our academic community. We learn to make a habit of reflecting on what we can take and use from situations and stories.

This grad school application process is a direct challenge to a scholar's ability to engage in the story of knowledge, to bring new knowledge to the listener and make the story uniquely their own. Dr. Ballenger talks about approaching writing with authority and I believe this idea follows through with scholarship. Approach the field with authority, command respect by being as prepared as possible, by holding yourself to the highest possible standards. In practice, this means being on time, being where you say you'll be, getting the work done, staying organized. Like Martha Mendoza said it's all about staying balanced. This means understanding that an MFA or PhD is not something to be taken for granted, or taken lightly. If you want it, you have to fight for it, sacrifice for it.

REINVESTMENT: THE ACADEMIC STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The academic statement of purpose is biggest writing challenge McNair Scholars face. It is the moment we synthesize everything else we have learned in order to write about the academic identity we have developed. The statement of academic purpose asks the student to create concise a snap shot of the young academic, the applicant to the next level of academia. In the short space of two or three pages, students must show that they have mastered the standards of the American University while remaining a unique voice. They must demonstrate their knowledge of the field they want to enter and clearly state their research interests while showing the audience that they are open enough to explore the rich collection of knowledge they will find in graduate school. They need to demonstrate that they understand that their teaching, research, and service needed to be

defined in context to the communities they wanted to serve with their scholarship.

Finally, they needed to be utterly real and human while showing that their humanity through the lens of their academics.

To accomplish the writing task, scholars need to reimagine their education as cultural capital that they can reinvest. They need to see themselves as investors. This was important to me because, like many others, I juggle loyalty to my communities and a desire work in spaces that are outside of my community. The idea that I was building cultural capital that would serve my whole community made that balance easier to strike. However, it is a difficult shift to make because, typically, our experiences contextualize us as consumers of knowledge, as in need of cultural capital, not in the position of being able to invest cultural capital.

The McNair faculty model reinvestment. They built a certain amount of work into the program that asks us to give back to the program. They expect us to invest in each other's success, they expect us to mentor the incoming cohort, we take part in recruitment, and we talked constantly about service. That meant, that when we were the incoming cohort, we were welcomed, older scholars invested in our work, and they mentored us. Additionally, the faculty asked us to really consider what community we served in our current work, who we would serve as scholars, and why. They constantly threaded these hard questions into the conversation. They pushed us to think about articulating those answers into our statements of purpose because we needed to be applicants who could articulate how our research would affect others in order to stand out.

In order to write the statement of purpose we needed to reflect on reinvestment. Because writing the Statement of Purpose is so hard, we begin talking about it, free writing about it, and drafting it very early. We were encouraged to hold on to our letter self and our Student to Scholar essay. We were encouraged to discuss and share it with our mentors. We begin seriously drafting it in the second semester. In my year instruction included:

- Attending panels and discussions with faculty and listening to them describe what makes a good statement of academic purpose.
- Reading model texts written by our successful McNair predecessors.
- Peer mentoring sessions with members of the graduating cohort.
- Peer group workshops with folks in our cohort who shared, as closely as possible, writing conventions.
- Discussing the genre characteristics of the SAP.
- Faculty conferences and feedback.

Finally, we revise, revise, and revise. Even with this instruction, I struggled all semester to figure out how much of my truth is enough and how much is too much. I struggled against explicitly evoking my status of woman/Mexican/First-generation even though they explicitly tell me that it would give me an edge in my applications. I contradicted myself. I struggled with my anger at the system because it makes it so hard. I hated having to out myself as underrepresented even though I knew that programs asked me to name my underrepresented-ness because they want to make the process equitable. I

exhausted myself in my struggles and damn near drowned in my frustration. Finally, I came up with a paragraph that reflected none of that struggle.

In my junior year I was accepted into the McNair program—a program designed to help students from working class and minority backgrounds attain higher education—it was the McNair Program that funded my current research through a summer grant of \$2800. The program helped me envision myself as a scholar, and teacher. In turn, I want to be able give back, help other students see themselves as scholars, researchers, teachers, and professors. The program enriched my education not just through funding but by motivating me to invest myself in the pursuit of my PhD in composition and rhetoric. I’m a non-traditional student. I dropped out of high school at fourteen to join the workforce as in common in my culture. I returned to school older, married and a parent. It was a struggle to catch up but once I caught up I chose classes in my field that challenged me, for example in the spring of my junior year I took a graduate level course with Dr. Bruce Ballenger which enriched my writing and helped me find a unifying thread in my research. It was difficult but enlightening, and it remains one the highlights of my undergraduate career.

Eventually, I had to step back, reread my Letter to Self, my Statement of Purpose, and all my journal entries and reflections. Then I reread Dr. Villanueva’s “Memoria is a Friend of Ours: On a Discourse of Color.” Finally, I was able to write my “base” draft. This was the draft that I would refine and personalize over the following summer.

When I was born the doctor said, “Try not to get attached. She’ll die in the first month. She’ll just slip away. When I slept I inexplicably stopped breathing. “Some kids just aren’t cut out for this world.” My father couldn’t afford monitoring equipment, so he laid me on his chest and when I slipped away he pulled me back. This world is his gift to me and I want to explore it and recreate through words.

I plan to be a teacher of writing at the college level. I want to do research about writing. I am specifically interested in how culture, especially Latino, African American, and Native American culture affects the writing practices of first-year writers because I want to find a way to break a cycle I see on campus all the time. I see students from Latino, African American, and Native American backgrounds fight to get to college and then they drop out in the first year because they can’t pass their English requirement. I find this infuriating and I believe researching this problem is the only way to solve it.

At the same time, I am a writer and I plan to write across genres and across departments. I plan to write stories about the world and humanity as I see it...I see myself as a flexible and curious “writer/teacher, teacher/writer,” to borrow a phrase from Wendy Bishop... writing is a humbling and humanizing gift. Composition studies, the study of how we write, fascinates me. It is a study of process, of theory, of trial and error. Composition studies is where everything I love about academics—reading, writing, researching the way we write, deepening my

understanding of the way people interact with the written word—comes together. It is my goal to teach writing, not as an art or as a working skill, but as a way of communication, a way of speaking out, and affecting change in the world around me.

The focus on reinvestment was present in many ways in the McNair program. Our faculty focused on it, our peer mentors focused on it, and faculty mentors focused on it. The entire McNair community focused on it at the McNair Scholars conferences we attended. Speakers and panels celebrated the ways they were able to reinvest. They encouraged us to speak to our younger siblings and family members and to listen for changes in the ways they talked about education. They proudly talked about how being first in their family to graduate had a domino effect and pointed out the family members following their example. It was at one of these conferences that the abstract concept of my education as something that I could reinvest into the community became real.

We were in Seattle for the annual McNair conference at the University of Washington. There were so many scholars with backgrounds like mine. They surrounded me and it was an eye-opening experience. Later, as I struggled to write the Academic Statement of Purpose, I would lean on that experience. It gave me the strength to find the words I eventually sent out into the academic world.

In retrospect, it is evident that many of the programs were using similar approaches to scholarly development. The conference itself offered panels of professors who began as McNair scholar, workshops that focused on writing the academic statement, and opportunities to celebrate the ways McNair Scholars were reinvesting into

the McNair program. It was a wonderful and powerful experience but my moment did not happen at the conference. It happened after, at the hotel lobby at 2am.

I distinctly remember sitting in the lobby the first night because I was too tired to sleep, too stressed to study the night we arrived in Seattle. In the previous twenty-four hours I had left my home state without a family member by my side for the first time in my life, I left my kids overnight for the first time, and I had flown for the first time. I was getting ready to give my very first academic presentation. I was terrified. I felt out of place and lost and all I wanted was some place that felt like home. So, I sat and watched the staff clean and set up for the next morning. Eventually, I introduced myself, we chatted. I came again the next night. In fact, this would become a habit for me at conferences. I don't sleep much, I seek out hotel employees to chat with, and I do a lot of reflective writing.

On the last night in Seattle, I ended up downstairs at 2am listening to the Spanish chatter of Latina staff and the older Latino gentleman who was prepping for breakfast and doing janitorial work. His name was Alejandro. The women did not share their names. I was journaling about the conference. After a while, one of them approached me and we got to talking. They told me stories about coming to Seattle, their travels, their history. All three had left folks behind to be in America. I told them about how my own grandparents had left family behind to come to America, how my grandfather became a citizen as soon as he could and how my stubborn, stubborn grandmother never gave up her Mexican citizenship and was eventually buried in Mexico. It was unspoken but we all knew that all three were undocumented. Eventually someone asked what I was doing in Seattle. I told them.

They were so excited to hear that I had been to the university to present my own work. They asked me to read to them, to share my writing. I couldn't say no, even though I wanted to, because I was terrified that I would alienate them. I was afraid to lose the warm connection we had forged, that it would die in the face of my education. However, to refuse an elder like Alejandro was unthinkable. So I gave an impromptu reading a hotel lobby at 2am and my audience for two Dominican ladies and a gentleman from Guatemala. I didn't read from my research or my fiction or the bad poems I had in my notebook. I read from the reflections I had been writing over the weekend. I read about what it felt like to be in the presence of our keynote speaker.

“Pleasure,” she says. Her Puerto Rican tongue rolls the word until it takes on a life of its own. “Pleasure” Bomba’s around our tables, bringing us up and forward in our chairs. “If you’re going to make in graduate school you need to find two things in your work: pleasure and purpose.”

Ileana talks with her whole body. Even her hair bounces and shimmy’s to the rhythm of her story as she tells about leaving Puerto Rico in search of the man who inspired her to apply to graduate school. Her hands reach out, palms up, fingers spread wide, pulling us all closer as she tells us about crying in the library, about working nights shifts, about being too tired to sleep. We nod. I am torn between watching the beauty of her hands and listening to the beauty of her story. She is illuminated.

As she speaks a strange thing happens, we move closer together, two hundred bodies shift slightly until we are almost leaning into each

other, as if we all want to lean forward together, place our collective forehead in her open palms, and rest for just a moment. It is as if we know that her hands will protect us.

We bleed like unfastened dye into each other, our edges soft and hazy. We forget that we are tired, and fearful. Ileana drowns out the voices in our heads. We lean into her, a collective mass of children teetering between the world we know and the world we aspire to know. We lean forward and fall. We fall forward and she reaches out with those delicate, dancing hands and holds us all. Together we take pleasure in Ileana and in each other and in our purpose.

And as I read I stop being afraid of the journey because in that moment, in front of that audience, I know I succeeded. The next morning my late night audience is kind enough to open up breakfast early at my request so my cohort can eat before we leave at 5:30 am. As I am leaving, Alejandro hugs me and whispers, “I am proud of you, mija.

Recognition, Representation, Reinterpretation

The McNair Scholars program gave me a “family” in a way that simply being part of the incoming freshman at BSU never did. It gave me a set of older “siblings” I badly wanted to impress and would eventually give me a set of younger “siblings” to whom I am deeply committed. It gave me faculty, in the program and in my department, to look up to, and to frame as role models—people I both wanted to please, and who I wanted to respect me as a scholar. These desires balanced each other out in my favor; my desire for approval helped me develop thoughtful practices of listening and thinking through advice, instruction, and critique, before reacting. My desire for respect helped me develop

the confidence and backbone to defend my intellectual perspectives and projects when needed.

It was through McNair that I realized that being a mother didn't take away from my intellectual ability—it gave me endurance; growing up as working poor didn't make me inferior—it made me tenacious; being Mexican didn't mean I was doomed to trail behind—it made me a pathfinder for those who would come after me. It was in McNair that I started to realize that being different meant that I could see what was clouded by “normalcy” to others, that I could make connections between issues and ideology that others couldn't because they didn't see critical factors as ideology, they saw it as “natural.” It was in McNair that I realized that being different from the majority of scholars did not narrow scope of my scholarship—it expanded it.

I learned these things in McNair because the faculty focused on helping each of us grow and develop into scholars. This is a deceptively simple statement because what I mean is that they did not try to reinvent us, assimilate us, or teach us to adapt in different cultural spaces. They did not treat our home communities as spaces we would have to leave behind, or ask us to replace the values we carried with us. Instead they looked for ways to add scholar to the rich combinations of identity we already possessed—without valuing one over the other. They acknowledge that there were systems of privilege and marginalization in place that would trip us up, and they helped us develop ways of thinking about how to deal with those obstacles.

The McNair Program was the first academic space that acknowledged and validated me as a Mexican, nontraditional, female scholar. It was the first academic space that insisted that I see those distinctions as valuable lenses to explore the world around

me. The first academic space that asked me to examine how my identity shaped me into the thinker I was, and how I could use my messy, different, nontraditional identity to continue developing my strongest intellectual characteristics. When the McNair faculty recognized the skill I brought to academia as part of my heritage they presumed competence—they showed me that they acknowledged that my cultural ways of seeing, doing, and knowing were valid. When they helped me find representations of my community in academia they showed me the possible ways I could exist within academia. By modeling ways of reinvesting my scholarship back into my communities, they reinforced that I was still part of those communities—that I was part of an academic community that did not exist in isolation from my home community but instead, connected back to my home community.

CHAPTER IV: MCNAIR IDENTITY AGENT

In 2012, I returned to Boise to work with the incoming cohort as a writing teacher. Helen invited me to take a larger role as a writing teacher because she noted the number of schools that had begun to ask for a personal statement in addition to the academic statement. She had also noticed that some schools were asking for diversity statements. These statements often asked students to speak to diversity and inclusion. Helen was aware that I was studying reflective writing, identity, and personal writing, and since I was eager to work with the McNair program, she agreed to let me run a few workshops over the summer. Our goal was to build on the existing curriculum to help the scholars write these new statements while making their academic statements of purpose even stronger. I planned to blend in reading and strategies I was using in my composition classes. The summer workshops went well and Helen invited to work full time with the incoming cohort.

FIRST-GENERATION MCNAIR WRITING TEACHER

Walking back into the McNair Scholar Program as a writing teacher meant that I needed to begin thinking, planning, discussing, and researching my strategies for the cohort. My primary responsibilities would be to help them shape their statements of academic purpose, diversity statements, and personal statements. I would also help with would be to assist with research, journal articles, and conference proposals by offering then one to one peer review session. I began by thinking about the work I had done as scholar, thinking about the students I worked with over the summer and by discussing both with Helen. Through those discussion and planning session I decided that I could add more recent readings and discussions about identity, reading that tackled

intersectionality and issues of marginalization and privilege. Helen and I agreed the 2013 cohort represented a more complex mix of students than we had worked with in the past. Instead of social scientists and historians, we had a large cohort of STEM students who had emerged from the working class, scholars who were just as dedicated to their LGBTQ community as they were their home community, and older, returning students who had returned to school due to economic hardship. Due to these factors, we decided that my goals would be to add discussion and opportunities to write about the following ideas.

1. Privilege and Marginalization does not exist in a straight forward, up and down, hierarchical ladder. Instead, there is a wide spectrum of “normative” expectations applied to people. Whenever we fall outside of that spectrum, we risk marginalization. Whenever we exist comfortably, and tension free in those spaces we are privileged. A student brings diversity to a program when their identity is marginalized or underrepresented. This does not always mean race—however, that does not mean that marginalization as a white woman who is an older returning student hold the same oppressive weight as being a black student.
2. Privilege does not automatically equal villainy, apathy, or disconnect from the issues the world faces just as marginalization does not automatically afford a person a deeper social consciousness or a stronger grasp on the theoretical frameworks that applied to social justice.

3. It is possible to exist as both marginalized and privileged at the same time.

We felt that adding opportunities to read, write, reflect, and discuss these ideas would help the scholars to write their diversity statements and personal statements no matter where they existed in the social spectrum. We hoped that if each scholar committed to inquiry about their own identity, each of them would be able to answer how their backgrounds would add to a diverse scholar to any program.

At the same time, I knew it was critical to maintain underlying structures that was already in place. I needed to add these three concepts to the existing structure in order to help students form the base of the academic statement that statements would do the following:

1. Clearly define each scholar's unique strengths and clearly define what assets he or she brings to a graduate program in context to his or her unique identity—needed to include their racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, and even reginal identities.
2. Clearly connect each scholar to the theoretic frameworks in their areas of expertise. Each scholar needed to be able to point to a theory, theorist, or well-known public intellectual in order to define his or her research interest.
3. Clearly define a purpose for their research and scholarship beyond loving/enjoying the content subject. Scholars should to be able name a demographic or community he or she would serve with his or her education. Each scholar should be able to clearly define how each

program they were applying to would advance their specific goals to serve that demographic or community.

In order to do this I needed to think about all of the identities in the room and to locate writers and readings that were able to articulate these three points from a variety of perspectives. It would not be enough to offer women and people of color as the only voices of this conversation. I needed to include working class white men, LGBTQ folks from both white communities and from communities of color. I needed indigenous voices and voices from a variety of Latino and Black perspectives.

I wanted to create a low stakes space where they could read and write about their lives, write as often as possible, and discuss difficult issues. I decided to create an online space for this work during the first year. I wanted a space where folks were encouraged to speak freely, but where the medium of writing forced them to see their words in print before they offered them to their cohort. I wanted to give them a space to get to know each other through their writing and reflections. I decided to use Edmodo as an online classroom. The second decision I made was to use the term writing “journal” because the students were already keeping a research journal where they took notes, worked on ideas, and documented questions about their own research interests.

The journal would be used to respond to the readings about the graduate experience and to collect information about themselves to eventually sculpt into their statements. In it they would keep drafts of the Letter to Self essay and the Student to Scholar essay. Eventually they would bring their entries together in a portfolio and write a reflection on them. Then, they would use their reflection as the very first draft of their Statement of academic purpose. My hope was that by slowing the process down some

and giving them more opportunities to write about the readings they would build up a body of work that would reveal a variety of entry points into their statements. Most scholars, myself included, would agree that figuring out where to start is the hardest part of writing the statements.

For the summer semester, I designed a writer's workshop modeled on partly on the Nebraska Writing project small group model and partly on the Iowa's Writers' Workshop model from the University of Iowa's creative writing program. The Nebraska Writing project uses a student centered small groups and peer review model. The goal of the Nebraska Writing project workshop is to keep each writer motivated and working over the summer. The workshop is writer-centered. Groups of three or four students negotiate what kind of feedback they would give and receive, and they work together over the summer to make sure every writer gets what they needed to maintain the writing. My workshop would use the same principles, each writer would share their work, which would include a reflective author's note, and each writer would open the discussion by telling the class what they were struggling with and what kind of help they needed. Feedback would focus on what was working and ways to help the writer keep making progress. Writers would refrain from commenting on editing or grammar.

However, my workshop would also employ some of the strategies of the creative writing workshop developed and founded at the Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1963. In a traditional fiction workshop, the writer offers a story that is ready for submission to a literary journal. The readers review and comment on the story as if they had read it in literary journal. The writer does not speak. The published writer or teacher in the room leads the workshop and draws everyone's attention to craft, prose, dialogue, or plot done

exceptionally well. The goal of this workshop is for the writer to get a sense of how readers might experience the story and for the readers to see examples of fiction in a variety of stages.

My workshops were a hybrid. We met as a large group because there were fifteen of us. Each day they discussed three statements of purpose. The writer introduced their statement, told us which school it was for, talked a little bit about their frustrations and goals, and then asked for the type of feedback they wanted. I jokingly told them to think of feedback as “salsa”—they could ask for hot, medium, or mild. I would then take over, point out specific sections that they did well, and explicitly discuss how it they crafted it. For example, I might ask the class to focus on the way a writer used a short story about their childhood to make a point. I would point out that the story was in first person point of view, that it was less than a paragraph long, but that it created a driving reason for the writer to pursue a degree in biology. I might point out the short sentence structure or the descriptions or use of code meshing. This served two purposes, it gave me an opportunity to discuss crafting prose and it gave me an opportunity to praise each writer for something unique in their statement. Then we would briefly discuss why each move worked in a statement of academic purpose.

Finally, the rest of the class would take over and discuss the statement. At the end workshop, the writer asked questions, discussed ideas that emerged during the workshop, and then made a quick revision plan. Since summer classes were three hours, we were able to dedicate around 45 minutes per workshop. Because we would be working together for two years, working on multiple writing projects and engaging in intense writing sessions I opted to use the term community for our endeavors. In reality, the majority of

the work they would do in our community would not be graded or evaluated. Instead, it would eventually pay off in the application process. This is so different from the typical “classroom” experience that I wanted to focus on the long-term nature of our goals.

The Syllabus

The McNair Writing Community:

“A proper community, we should remember also, is a commonwealth: a place, a resource, an economy. It answers the needs, practical as well as social and spiritual, of its members - among them the need to need one another” (Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays*).

Community Description

The goal of this online writing community is to foster the eight “habits of the mind” that “The Council of Writing Program Administrators, The National Councils of Teachers of English, and The National Writing Project” consider essential for success in post-secondary education. To meet this goal you will be asked to read, write, and reflect on what it means to be a writer, a research writer, and more specifically, a McNair scholar with the express purpose of transitioning from undergraduate education to graduate education.

“Habits of mind” refers to ways of approaching learning that are both intellectual and practical and will support success in a variety of

fields and disciplines. The Framework identifies eight habits of mind essential for success in academic writing:

- Curiosity: The desire to know more about the world.
- Openness: The willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world.
- Engagement: A sense of investment and involvement in learning.
- Creativity: The ability to use novel approaches for generating, investigating and representing ideas.
- Persistence: The ability to sustain interest in and attention to short-term and long-term projects.
- Responsibility: The ability to take ownership of one's actions and understand the consequences of those actions for oneself and others.
- Flexibility: The ability to adapt to situations, expectations, or demands.
- Meta-cognition: The ability to reflect on one's own thinking as well as on the individual and cultural processes used to structure knowledge.

Expectations of this classroom:

This class must function as a community of writers. In order for any community to work effectively it must be understood that each member will always be treated with respect even when we disagree.

Writing is a complex and often bewildering process therefore, in order to be better writers, we must respect each piece of work as a work in progress. We must be open to the possibilities of what a piece of writing may be, while understanding that the heart of the writing process is the desire to makes our work better.

I will work hard to create a learning environment that supports our class as a writing community and each of you as individual writers. This means I will respect your voice as a writer, scholar, community member, and individual. I will promptly return responses to your work. You are also expected to support and facilitate your work as writers. Over the course of the semester we will use Edmodo to maintain an online reading/writing journal. Every other Wednesday I will give you a journal prompt that will include readings and writing prompt. You will read the article and respond to the prompt, then as a group we will discuss the implications of the reading.

RECOGNITION: THE LETTER TO SELF

Once I figured out a structure for the class that would support the reading, writing, reflection, and discussion model of the McNair seminar I then turned my attention to the texts (*indicates the texts I added to the curriculum). I started with “Claiming an Education” by Adriane Rich because it is a foundational text used in the McNair program. This text is used to introduce two concepts. First, the difference between “receiving” an education and “claiming” an education because it is critical that each

McNair scholar, regardless of their background, walk into their application process with the understanding that there are not in a position to simply receive an education. They must walk in the doors prepared to claim their education, prepared to advocate for their right to that education, and to negotiate terms for that education. This is a truth that carries over to First-generation students. Rich says,

...you cannot afford to think of being here to receive an education: you will do much better to think of being here to claim one. One of the dictionary definitions of the verb "to claim" is: to take as the rightful owner; to assert in the face of possible contradiction. "To receive" is to come into possession of: to act as receptacle or container for; to accept as authoritative or true. The difference is that between acting and being acted-upon... (113)

This remains relevant, particularly for McNair scholars. Next this reading asks students to reconsider the concept of "objective truth" in the university. Rich says,

But the most, significant fact for you is that what you learn here, the very texts you read, the lectures you hear, the way your studies are divided into categories and fragmented one from the other—all this reflects, to a very large degree, neither objective reality, nor an accurate picture of the past, nor a group of rigorously tested observations about human behavior. What you can learn here (and I mean not only at Douglass but any college in any university) is how men have perceived and organized their experience, their history, their ideas of social relationships, good and evil, sickness and health, etc. When you read or hear about "great issues," "major texts," "the

mainstream of Western thought," you are hearing about what men, above all white men, in their male subjectivity, have decided is important. (114)

This is a concept that we will work through constantly—in order to re-imagine their lived experiences as an asset they must be able to critique the idea that there is a single right way to do education or graduate school. Rich sets the stage for the conversations we will have through the program.

I then decided to pair Rich with the “Prologue” from “Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color” by Victor Villanueva*, “I Just Wanna be Average” by Mike Rose*, and “The Achievement of Desire” by Richard Rodriguez in order to give the students a spectrum of voices who were all negotiating what it means to claim an education. I added specifically added Rose because he voices issues facing working class students and Villanueva because he explicitly discusses the frustration of being a white Puerto Rican whose identity is read in a wide variety of ways.

Next, I paired “The Danger of a Single Story” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Video)*, and “Pedagogy of Privilege” by Justin Ford_(Video)*, with selections from bell hooks “Talking Back” and “Unpacking the Invisible Backpack” by Peggy McIntosh. Hooks and Macintosh are part of the McNair curriculum and work to introduce the concept of privilege and give a voice and examples of how it can function in the graduate classroom. I added Adichie and Ford in order to expand on the idea and to negotiate the face that many of my students were raised with color-blind ideology. Hooks, while a moving account of racism and white privilege, is harder for students who have not experience outright acts of othering to understand. Ford, offers insight into how privilege may work in a more coded society and Adichie gives them language to talk about

privilege and power. I was hoping that in class we could fall back on the question—is what we are seeing part of a single story? How do we counter or challenge single stories? What gets lost when your story is told through the lens of a single story? Having a shared language is a critical part of talking about these issues in the classroom.

Next we read “Memoria” Is a Friend of Ours: On the Discourse of Color” by Victor Villanueva*. I added this for two reasons. First, it offers a compelling argument for blending lived experience and memory with academic writing and second it acted as a model text for how to blend the two types of writing. Villanueva blends narrative and an informative essay into a compelling about his academic journey, which is what they are trying to accomplish. Later, it was clear that the scholars saw Villanueva as a model for both writing and behavior. Tyler writes in response to Villanueva:

I could be completely wrong but these are my thoughts so I’m going to do my best to try to understand what Villanueva is saying. To me this means people have a balance of where they’ve come from and where they are headed in academia. ...I’m aiming to reach a balance scholastically (time management, organization, preparation etc.) as well as in life (me time, work, taking a step back etc.) I think all of those complement each other and will help build an overall balance I need to achieve my goals. I was raised to go to school and get good grades and get a job that pays well. I always believed the only way I would get to college was to participate in athletics. My teachers told my mother I was a well-rounded person, and I truly loved art. Unfortunately, I put all of my eggs in one basket and focused mainly on sports, doing just enough to get by to be eligible. I lived

and believed my stereotype (African-Americans must play sports to be successful in life, hence my research) (Tyler Hawkins)

Finally, I paired “The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People’s Children” by Lisa Delpit and “Explaining White Privilege to a Broke White Person” by Gina Crosley-Crosley* as a way of looking more closely at the ways these issues affect us in school and everyday life.

Each selection of reading asked them to the students to write a journal Entry of 500 words they share with their peers. For each entry I also submitted a short entry that modeled the way I wanted them to approach the writing. For example, on the first week I posted:

This week’s journal includes two Tedtalks and two articles. Please watch both talks and read both articles. For this week I want you to think about the term “privilege.” I also want you to think of the term “power.” Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, both theorists and philosophers, make the argument that power does not simply move up and down, nor does it exist in a simple binary, instead it shifts and swirls around us at all times. So we can, and do, embody or live in many roles at once. Some of those roles come with unearned privilege and some are unfairly denied access. We can be both at once.

For example as an Indigenous Mexican-American woman I have been unfairly denied access to many places, to many opportunities, and my voice has been silenced by folks who feel that my Mexican-ness or my woman-ness somehow reflects negatively on my competency. At the same time I am a straight

cis-woman—for those of you who have never heard the term it means that I identify easily with my gender and the way society constructs my gender. It means that my female-ness is never questioned. However one of my dearest friends is a trans-woman. Her female-ness is always questioned, contested, and denied. I am privileged and she is denied access. She has an app on her phone that tells her what bathrooms in our town are safe for her to use because she has to think about those things. If she chooses the wrong bathroom she could be arrested, beaten, raped, or even murdered. As you can see, I exist in several roles all the time. So do you.

So this week please begin by thinking about the same questions I asked you last week. Also, consider the ways each of these pieces ask you to think about the terms “power” and “privilege” and speak to the ways these terms apply to you.

Where do they intersect?

Where are they different?

Which writer did you find most compelling? Why?

If you had questions for these writers, what are they?

I asked the McNair Scholars to respond to each other’s journal entries, not with critique but with questions, and I asked them to think about why we asked them to read these selections

Where I Am From Poem

Next, I added two short writing assignments that asked the scholars to write personal narrative. I added these because so many of the programs they were interested in

wanted personal statements or diversity statements, which depended heavily on personal narrative. The first was the “Where I am From Poem.” This is an assignment that is often used in compositions classroom and originated as a writing prompt by George Ella Lyons. This prompt can be found at www.georgeellalyon.com/where.html.

I asked the McNair Scholars to write this poem because I wanted them to evoke their own Memoria—memory that extends beyond their own lived experience. The Letter to Self asks student to take a snapshot of their identity, but the Where I am From Poem pushes them to look further back. It is just as important to know where we come from, as it is to know where we are going. For the First-generation student, the student of color, the kid from the farm, the LGBTQ, the single mom, it is critical for them to claim the places they came from as valuable to their journey. Our home communities are where we build foundations. They provide motivation, or teach us that which we do not want in life. All of these lessons are valuable. By claiming these lessons, McNair Scholars can use the power generated by them to continue forward. The following selections of opening lines by four different scholars are powerful declarations about their identity, their history, and their journeys.

I'm the result of assimilation, pressures to fit,
Distant origins of Michoacán and lost languages.

From the tractor my mother drove at six years of age,
The Bachelor's degree grandma earned at 66.

I am from 70's wood paneling, the Lego-littered carpet
upstairs, the lavender bathwater wafting from my son's
scalp at night.

I am from Girl Scout uniforms, potatoes, and mountains.
I am from a loving diverse home. I am from Mixing up
cultures and traditions and referring to it as normality.

These four students clearly connected their cultural histories to their identity.

Next, I asked them to complete a deep map that asked them to map, using symbols, text and images how they reached the McNair Program. "Deep mapping is a kinesthetic thinking strategy that helps students dig deeper into the many ways geographically, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually we are affected by a place" (Cathie English). I modified this composition assignment because I wanted the Scholars to begin to pinpoint the moments that led them to their subjects and areas of study. In their statements, they would need to be able to what they hoped to do in graduate school. In addition to the maps they needed to write a legend that helped me to "read" their map. Deep map Students created a wide variety of artifacts and dug deeper into their academic history. The original Deep Map assignment can be found at

http://www.drcathieenglish.com/uploads/1/8/9/0/18905781/deep_maps.pdf

Kristina Gray's legend includes the following:

Vallivue High School: I began my map at High School because that is
where I began to take my academics very seriously. Neither of my parents

were college graduates and they put a lot of pressure on my sister and I to get into college...

Spain: I really cannot stress how much studying abroad in Spain changed my life. I believe that the experiences that I had there literally altered the direction of my life...

Later Kristina would pinpoint a single incident that happened in Spain that led her to her interest in art history and the artist she hoped to research.

The Letter to Self:

Although I added some scaffolding to build up to the Letter to Self, the goal of the essay remained the same. We wanted the scholars to recognize their own cultural capital, begin to think about their own the complication of privileges and marginalization they would face in graduate school, and begin claiming their unique perspectives as contribution to the academy. Part of that process is writing about fears and about old frustrating memories. This part of the process was easier for some students than others. One student opens with her family history and an example of how that has worked against her in school.

Megyn

My parents are Latinos from Oakland...I'm between 3rd and 4th generation Latino. ...it is interesting how long it for someone immediate family set foot on a college campus...My abilities were called into as student... were called into question because of my ethnic origins. ...In my sophomore year of high school there was an assembly in which certain students were invited to... All the students were either African American

or Latino. The assembly was designed to encourage students to be excited about the upcoming standardized testing...I learned that African American and Latino students don't typically score as high as White students. So my high school decided to gather every student who was African American and Latino to encourage us to do better on the test.... I don't have a clue if my test scores were bad compared to other students or if I was just sent to this assembly because my last name happens to be Rodriguez.

Another starts talking with her fears and frustrations as a returning student.

Renaë

I struggle with my writing skills. The feedback I have received these past four years from other professors has been positive...This semester Dr. Woods has shredded my essays. Unfortunately I have had to write an essay every week. I understand why he does it but I am now skittish to write anything for fear it will be incorrect...I now spend extra time second guessing myself and avoiding writing. Since my emphasis is writing based, the implications of essay avoidance could definitely have negative consequences. The habit of avoiding work is reflective of my first two years in college when I was 19. During my two years at a business college, I often skipped class and turned in less-than-stellar work. I have certainly learned that showing-up only for the day of the test is not enough. Being the smartest is certainly not what is required. Consistent perseverance the entire semester goes a long way to creating good grades.

A key part of this assignment is for students to begin to identify the moments that define their scholarship and interests. Higher education is hard in many ways and having a strong sense of purpose helps every student when things get rough. McNair scholars need to start putting down stakes early, they need a purpose to hold onto when things get hard. Many of the scholars started used the Letter to Self Essay to begin to pinpoint the moments that shaped their goals.

Megyn writes:

As cheesy as it can be, I feel as though my progress today, has come from a single pivotal moment. The one club I did attend once or twice was BGLAD. Boise State's only LGBTQ student group on campus. ...I happened to go to one meeting in March of 2012 and at this one meeting there happened to be a spot for an officer. I reluctantly raised my hand and volunteered. I became a BGLAD officer through which I heard about the Power of One conference in Corvallis Oregon. Going to the conference I met the Women's Center staff and applied for a student position at the center.

Because of the Women's Center I was sent to attend LeaderShape to help me refine my vision I want for the world. My passion for working towards equity was ignited. After getting more involved at Boise State I was inspired to change my major from Health Science to Multi-Ethnic studies. By January of 2013, I officially became the president of BGLAD. Since then I have changed everything about the club, from the name, logo, organization, meetings, events and culture. I'm really passionate about

creating a strong and sustainable LGBT student group on the Boise State campus before I graduate.

The goal for the poem, the deep map and the Letter to Self Essay was threefold. First, to allow scholars to take stock of their cultural capital, second get them to articulate the steps they would need to take to succeed in their journey, and finally, to give them possible points of entry into the Statement of Purpose. Therefore, when it came time to write the Statements of Purpose many students looked back to these moments. Kristina Gray elaborated on her time in Spain and the way it affected her academic trajectory. She writes:

I was studying abroad in Spain for a semester but I possessed only a handful of memorized phrases and a pocket dictionary. I found myself unprepared to carry on the simplest of conversations and this made me question my decision to study in Spain. Then my group toured The Prado museum. Our tour guide spoke solely in Spanish and this was frustrating but I gave her my full attention. Eventually we encountered the famous painting, “Las Meninas.” When she began to speak about this painting language ceased to matter. Her enthusiasm resonated with mine and I knew why she loved this painting. Even though she showed this painting day after day it still mystified her.

It was in this exact moment that I caught the art history bug. I had so many questions. “What was this paintings history?” “Who painted it?” “Who were the people in it?” I needed to know more. For this reason, it is my goal to get into a postgraduate program for Art History. I want to help

people connect with art by conducting research that showcases it. I want to play a part in the experience that readers have when they learn about art. I want my work to leave people in such a state of wonder that it ignites, at the very least, an understanding of why art plays such an important role in our society. Art historical research seeks to educate, preserve and highlight culture, in order to preserve cultural heritage beyond a single life (Kristina Grey).

This opening emerged from the deep map and her poem. Like Megyn, Kristina is synthesizing her cultural capital—her trip to Spain—her interaction with a representative of her field—the Museum guide—and her to share her scholarship with others.

She is writer who is using Memoria and “Looking back, [to] look ahead, and giving [herself] to the looking back and the looking ahead, [to know] the self, and, critically, knowing the self in relation to others, maybe [she will] be an instrument whereby students can hear the call [of art] (Villanueva).”

REPRESENTATION: THE STUDENT TO SCHOLAR ESSAY

In the Student to Scholar Essay, we hope to see the students beginning to articulate who they are as academics and who they want to become as academics. Seeing themselves represented in the scholarship and in academia is critical at this stage. They need to begin to name the fields, topics, research, and demographics they want to work with and serve. They need to begin to think about what kind of faculty mentor they want to work with and they need to begin to articulate what kind of mentoring they need. This cohort, due to some changes in the programming, did not have time to conduct had time

to conduct on campus interviews. Instead, we asked them to reflect on their transition. We brought in panels of scholars and graduate students to talk about the Student to Scholar transition. In the writing, we could see the scholars thinking about their academic needs in a more defined way.

Renaë:

I needed someone who would have directed, guided, pushed, corrected, encouraged, motivated, suggested, and basically been involved in my developmental years. I didn't think I was smart enough. I definitely didn't have a wellspring of family wealth to provide me the assumption that college was a possibility; nor did I have a parent to provide me with an example of college attendance. Survival. Survival was the example my parents set for me. I'm sure they tried their best. As a parent myself, I realize parenting is difficult at best ...when alcoholic stepparents, low-wage employment, poor money management skills, divorce, teenage pregnancy and then marriage are added to parenting, the consequences double down on every family member. Sometimes that intensity makes diamonds out of the participants and sometimes it doesn't. I'm looking to become a diamond. I don't need to be the shiniest diamond or the biggest or the most desired. In the simplest of terms, I want to make something productive out of the hand that has been dealt to me. I've done okay so far but I know I can develop even further and thereby offer more to others around me.

There is a clear difference in how they think about their roles as scholars from the Letter to Self. At the same time, it became even clearer to me how important representation is to the developing scholar. It is clear to me that the interviews are a critical part of this essay and a critical part of helping students see themselves represented in their fields and in academia. Real, live interaction with people in their field, preferably people from their communities, has an impact that no reading or writing can replicate. Creating opportunities for that one to one interaction is a critical move that identity agents should make.

Nonetheless, these papers still make important thinking moves. Megyn, who is now a graduate scholar at University of Washington, and part of a program that lets her work directly with her community, can clearly envision herself as a public scholar and activist. She says:

I really want to pursue Sociology and emphasize in Social Movements in the United States. I find the process of social change very fascinating. I like looking at movements from the individual perspective, from the organizational perspective and at the community perspective.... I feel as though I could study this topic forever and that I could apply the knowledge I gain to a future career. I see myself working in government, non-profit, a university or a combination of the three. I would love to get some teaching experience, become an expert in my field of interest and travel to give keynote lectures. I could see myself using my expertise to help give advice for policy makers to come up with more inclusive policies in government. I would love to work for or develop my own non-

profit organization that is pursuing to create positive social change. I want to be able to travel to talk about the organization and expand it. I want to create scholarship foundations for future minority students one day to give back to future students who will come after me.

One of the most important things we begin to see at this stage is that scholars are blending and bringing together the idea of what they have to offer and what they hope to gain.

They are connecting those ideas to their communities. Megyn's devotion to the LGBTQ community is evident in everything she writes while Renae's desire to excel is the unifying thread in her work. However, both scholars are bringing these concepts together.

REINVESTMENT: THE STATEMENT OF ACADEMIC PURPOSE

The Academic Statement of Purpose is a critically important text with ridiculously high stakes. The scholars will draft these statements repeatedly. They will workshop and revise. They will refine each statement for each school. Every line they write brings them closer to their goals and they are deeply committed to producing the best statement they can. Finally, students need to be able to begin to articulate what they want in their future and how they plan to achieve it.

Megyn:

...I want create positive change in our society. I want to help make our community a more inclusive place in which all individuals are equal and can contribute...McNair understands the importance of diversity and so do I. I'm doing this because in order to make some of these visions come true, I need obtain some credentials first.

By this point, each scholar can name and define the ways they want to reinvest in their communities. They are mentoring the incoming cohort and participating in recruitment. One scholar, Allison, a composition scholar is acting as a writing consultant to her fellow scholars, another's tutor each other in math, science, and other classes in which they struggle.

Each scholar is an individual and responds to the curriculum in different ways. Some of them find the deepest meaning in recognizing their own cultural capital, like Renae who struggled with her decision to drop out during her first attempt at college. Others find the most meaning in finding representations of themselves in academia, and others will find the deepest meaning in the opportunities to reinvest in their communities. For example, Richard turns down several prestigious offers in order to serve for two years as a conservation-environmental educator in the Peace Corp. We begin to see glimmers of their commitment in their Statements of Academic Purpose.

Although these Statements of Academic purpose are early drafts we can see them clearly articulating how their pasts have influenced them as scholars, how their lived experiences benefit them as scholars, and the topics they will hope to research. We can see that they are devoted to serving their communities, their families, and their desire to learn. These statements are snapshots of young scholars who know where they belong in the academic community. These are thoughtful, reflective, and purposeful students. Megyn focuses on her research and the communities she hoped to work with. She clearly articulates a plan of action.

I focused on Idaho's LGBTQ community and the media that surrounds it. I used NVivo software to qualitatively assess fifteen years of articles to see if the local

news outlet was acting as a supportive third party stakeholder through media frames for local LGBTQ advocates pushing for policy change.... The larger implications of this research is that many factors can play into the success or failures of Idaho LGBTQ advocates as they push for policy change. The local media may be acting as another potential barrier to policy change... I want to research ways to help with policy formation by developing new strategies to deal with issues of public welfare for communities of color or the LGBTQ community.

Renaë's statement shows an incredible amount of growth as a scholar, writer, and academic. In her letter she openly addresses her past and builds a thoughtful argument for herself. She highlights her research and her own learning in the statement. Her letter is also a testament to the idea that practice makes perfect. Renaë struggled as a writer as a returning student. She faced harsh critique about her writing from her mentors in the beginning of her journey but used the feedback to build her writing skills. Like Megyn, we do not see the hours of work, the reading, or the difficult moments when people interrogated Renaë about her whiteness or questioned her dedication. We do not see that work but we do see the motivated, competent scholar who finds a way around the obstacles that get in her way.

I have acquired three semesters of Hindi, each term earning an "A". This language acquisition is above and beyond my curricular requirements; specifically, BSU does not offer Hindi. When my former advisor, Dr. Woods, told me I needed Hindi in order to be considered for a dynamic South Asian graduate school program, I immediately began calling universities around the country. Brigham Young University (BYU) in

Provo, Utah, was the only one willing to provide me with a distance learning opportunity. As a result, I Skype into Hindi class two nights a week. My drive to successfully obtain Hindi instruction outside of my current university curricular requirements speaks to my tenacity and resolve to achieve my goal of a Ph.D. in South Asian Studies. I look forward to the challenges and growth that await me in the near future as a graduate student. My commitment to excel, along with my abilities to persevere and embrace cultural significance are part of what make me a strong addition for your department.

Penrose tells us, “Writing teachers...need to continue to explore pedagogies that will concentrate their efforts...on helping students forge identities as members of [academic] communities” as a measure to stem the flow of First Generation Students who are dropping out and failing college (459). Which is why it is critical remember is that many McNair scholars belong to the same community—First-generation students—who, according to research, drop out of college because they perceive themselves as isolated, as less competent than their peers, and as being without community.

The difference between McNair scholars and other First-generation students is that McNair scholars work closely with identity agents. Their faculty use reading, writing, reflection, and discussion to help them recognize the cultural capital they already carry with them, to encourage them to locate members of the academic community who reflect their own stories back at them. Finally, identity agents encourage McNair scholars to see their education as cultural capital that they can reinvest into their communities. McNair scholars work through a series of carefully scaffolded reading and writing

assignment that work to help them to situate themselves in the academic community.

They learn to perceive weaknesses as learning opportunities, to seek out the support they need, and to advocate for themselves through advocating for the communities they love.

CHAPTER V: IDENTITY AGENTS IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

In 2002 Dr. Ann Penrose, a composition scholar at NC State University conducted a “quantitative descriptive study [that] examined First generation-students’ perceptions of their academic literacy skills and their performance and persistence in college (437).” Her research focused on the difference between first-generation students and continuing-generation students in the areas of preparedness, retention rates, and their own perceptions of their academic literacy skills. She found that “[First-generation students]... differ from their continuing generation peers in general academic preparedness, in retention rates, and in their perceptions of their academic literacy skills, but not in college performance” (437).

The study suggests that First-generation students struggle in many of the same ways as other underrepresents students. They lack money, they come from schools and histories that don’t prepare them as well as other students, their families are complex and create stress. They often have to work or care for family. However the study also show that these are not the core reason that students withdraw from the university. Instead Penrose found that the majority of First-Generation withdrew because they were unhappy or dissatisfied with campus life. In fact, the students who did withdraw for academic or financial reasons was near equal to their continuing-generation peers. So, although some FGS are leaving because of academics or financial, they are not doing so in disparate numbers compared to their peers. She says:

Research on attrition indicates that only 15-25% of students who leave college leave due to academic failure (Tinto, 1993). Tinto’s exhaustive review of this research also reveals that financial considerations are rarely the primary reason

for departure. The majority of students who leave do so voluntarily. Tinto's much-cited analysis argues that most voluntary departures reflect dissatisfaction with elements of the college experience such as a lack of fit between the student's goals and the institution's mission, difficulties adjusting to college life, and a lack of integration into the academic environment (445)

Penrose found that “despite their weaker preparation in high school, FG students at a range of institutions describe themselves as no less prepared or confident than other new freshmen” which “contrasts sharply, however, with case study tales of the self-doubt that grips some FG students soon after they arrive at the university, as well as with the tendency toward higher attrition among FG students” (446). What this tells us is that come to the university at least as confident as the peers but over time something changes—even though this study showed that FGS were performing at the same level as their peers. Penrose interprets the contrast thusly:

The contrast lends support to Tinto's (1993) claim that students' decisions to persist or to leave college are strongly influenced by the nature and extent of their integration into the academic and social life of the institution. FGS differ little from their CG peers in initial expectations for success or in performance in college. Where the two groups diverge is in the experiences they have as college students—their comfort level or quality of life, in this case intellectual and social life in the academic community. *In other words, what distinguishes FG students from CG students is not whether they can succeed but the cost of their success* (emphasis mine 446-7).

Penrose's case study and her exploration of the quantitative literatures tells us that first-generation:

...seem to pay higher costs than other students to succeed in college. They approach college with weaker academic preparation, have fewer academic and economic resources to draw upon, and must apportion their time and energy among multiple responsibilities off-campus.... they are likely to receive less understanding at home, despite familial support for their educational ambitions. In short, they must make themselves comfortable in an unfamiliar academic environment where they can spend little time; they must derive support, confidence, and inspiration for learning from a thin network of sometimes intermittent connections to the university community (455).

However the same data suggests that “that despite the challenges they face, FG students who persist in college do succeed—perhaps seven at higher rates than CG students, given the unexpectedly high proportion of FG students in the four-year graduation sample (455).

The problem that Penrose uncovers is that “that significantly fewer FG students persist”. This is important because, as Penrose puts it “the fact that fewer choose to stay in college indicates that factors other than academic potential are at work, a conclusion supported by the case study and quantitative literatures. The prior research demonstrates that what distinguishes FG students from others is not their level of achievement but their university experience. This pattern is consistent with Tinto's (1993) *finding that students are far more likely to leave the*

university because of dissatisfaction than because of academic failure
(emphasis mine 455-6).

So, according to Penrose, it may not be lack of preparation, lack of resources, or lack of support—at least not alone—that is driving that terrible statistic that tells us that FGS succeeding at half the rate of their peers. Instead what she found is that FGS who leave due to being unhappy or dissatisfied are doing so in much greater numbers than their continuing generation peers. She suggests that the combination of the challenges FGS face combined with the fact that they struggle to situate themselves into the academic community may be a more accurate reason that FGS are not succeeding (455-7).

Furthermore Penrose argues that this is an important factor for the university to consider, but more importantly she suggests that first-year writing programs should pay special attention because what many of these students *do* cite is a dissatisfaction with their community literacy in context to the academic community and their oral and writing ability in context to their peers. Her research implies that some of the major stumbling blocks for FGS encounter include integrating into academic discourse communities through verbal and writing skills. That's not to say that they lack those skills but to say that they don't trust their own skills, or literacies in an academic environment. While the statistics show that they perform at the same levels as their peers, they perceive their own literacy as lacking. Penrose suggest that although we already know that "by virtue of their decision to attend college, these students have not only entered alien territory but distanced themselves from the understanding of family and friends (439)" the next step is to figure out how to address making the shift from newcomer to member of the community. She writes:

The question for writing specialists is whether and how this general sense of dislocation influences students' acquisition of and anticipation in the literate practices of the academy... writing teachers in particular should take this challenge to heart—not just because we have access and opportunity by virtue of the near-universal freshman requirement and small class size, but because the source of FG students' insecurities may be situated very specifically in composition teachers' domain of academic concern. FG students' self-assessments indicate that, on average, they have less confidence in their verbal abilities than CG students, even though the performance data demonstrate that this concern is unwarranted (457).

Although this is just one study the implications are important because s Penrose points out that: *Helping students see themselves as members of the academic community* may be the most important challenge faced in the university at large and in writing classrooms in particular [emphasis mine] (458).

She tells us, “Writing teachers...need to continue to explore pedagogies that will concentrate their efforts...on helping students forge identities as members of [academic] communities” as a measure to stem the flow of First Generation Students who are dropping out and failing college (459). Penrose points out that many First-generation students must fulfill the First Year writing requirement and so most of them will spend time in a writing classroom. However, not every First-generation student will join a McNair Program, a TRIO program, or take a class that will put them in contact with identity agents. This is why it is important for writing instructors to consider how to be identity agents in the classroom. The writing produced in a class where the instructor is

an identity agent is, by necessity, deeply focused on the writer and the ways they interact with the world. Such a focus would not diminish the academic value of a first-year writing course. Nor would such a focus only benefit First-generation students.

Instead, it could transform the first-year writing course into a place where all students inquire into the nature of academic and begin to develop a better sense of what it means to be a college student. Additionally, the writing classroom is an ideal environment for the identity agent because inquiry, reading, writing, reflection and discussion are already common strategies in the writing classroom. The identity agent in the writing classroom can contextualize new role identities for students who have never considered themselves as writers, scholars, or citizens. Identity agents can further contextualize those roles for students who already see themselves in those roles.

RECOGNITION, REPRESENTATION, AND REINVESTMENT IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

In the writing classroom, the following three moves can be adapted to combat the challenges facing First-generation students while benefiting Continuing-generation students.

- Offer students the opportunity to take stock of who they are, what they are willing to give up, and what they are not willing to give up for an education, and locating the ways their lived experiences enhance their value to academia.
- Offer students the opportunity to have conversations with scholars like themselves who have succeed in order to help them document

the skills, characteristics, and habits of the mind they need to develop to succeed.

- Offer students the opportunity to see the ways their education can benefit their home communities.

For example, I routinely frame my writing and inquiry class around the question: what does it mean to be a writer in the world today? I begin by asking the students to think about the role of writer and the characteristics that one needs to be an academic writer. We focus on the notions that writers are critical thinkers, writers are audience aware, and writers are purposeful. Throughout the semester, I focus on pushing them to produce critical, aware, and purposeful writing. I refer to them as writers and insist that they do the same. We write a literacy narrative that explores how they developed their identity as a writer. We focus on interrogating how and why they understand themselves in certain ways as writers. We focus on looking at examples of critical writing from all areas of the academy, I ask prolific writers in the department to speak with them, I ask them to interview local writers, and eventually I ask them to compile a portfolio of their very best work.

For my writing argument class I tweak it a bit and focus on what it means to be a convincing writer in the university—convincing writers are honest, thoughtful, and passionate about the arguments they make. Honesty means that they do their research, thoughtful means they consider the all the sides of an argument, and passionate means that they care about the topics they are arguing about. In these classes, I act as an identity agent in a very small way—by asking the student to try on a new identity, one that is rooted in the role of writer, and then I work to develop that identity. Most of them take it

back off again at the end of the semester but in the meantime it often makes them more reflective, more willing to take risks, and more interested in their own writing—without limiting or distracting from the university objectives.

In addition, composition is a field rich with voices making arguments in favor of seeing difference. Young's *Code Meshing*, Rose's *Lives on the Boundaries* (1989), Villanueva's *Discourse of Color*, and Keith Gilyard's *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence* (1991) all offer model texts. Their writing uses the writer's unique voice and perspective to share research and knowledge with their reader. These texts can be used to help First-generation students recognize their own unique skills; see themselves represented in academia, and think about ways to reinvest their education to benefit their communities. These texts can also help continuing generation students grapple with the wide variety of "what does it mean questions" we are already posing in the composition classroom.

For example, the writer I lean on most heavily to help white male students who grew up subsistence farming poor or who are dealing with the culture shock of moving from super small homogeneous towns to bigger cities, is Mike Rose, a composition scholar. His exploration of working class rhetorics often speak to these students in a way Peggy McIntosh or bell Hooks does not. Typically, I pair Rose and hooks so that the students can see the similarities in their experiences and so we can interrogate why we are comfortable hearing hard truths from Rose but we resist them from hooks.

Rose and hooks are readings resonate with my First-generation students while offering my Continuing-generation students narratives from people of color. Effectively, I am teaching in two different ways with the same readings. I am teach so that one group

of my students can see themselves in the academic community and so that the other group of my students can recontextualize the scope of the academic community in a way that includes peoples they may not have previously considered as their community members.

Identity in the Composition Classroom

Identity agents do not have the luxury of thinking about identity as broad categories. They cannot think of their students as just white, or black, or middle class or disabled. They have to think of the nuances of identity, they have to be aware of the demographics they are working with; they have to be aware of all the places where identities intersect, tangle up, and get messy. They have to understand that their class may contain white subsistence farmers, African American middle class, folks who have lived in a variety of different “classes” due to financial loss and gain. Identity agents have to be hyper-aware that power does not move in simple up and down patterns, it just moves.

People can be both privileged and marginalized at the same time. This is not to say that an identity agent has to identify and understand each of her students’ complex identities. This is to say that the conversation should start with demystifying concept of power, privilege, and marginalization. Students explore all the many ways they exist in the power complex dynamics of the university, their communities, and in wider society. It is not enough to offer students Peggy McIntosh’s invisible backpack. If you tell a white student, who grew up in poverty, that being white makes it easier to rent a home he will laugh at you. If you tell a white student who was a homeless teen that her white skin

protected her from harassment in stores she will laugh at you. They laugh because nothing in their lived experience corroborates those assertions.

In their experience, renting a home was nearly impossible because there was no way to save first, last, and deposit, and no one ever got a deposit back because a landlord could read powerlessness written into their secondhand clothes and worn shoes. At the same time, if you tell a Mexican-American who has grown up in a middle class Mexican-American suburban enclave that she is underrepresented and people like her rarely make it to college she's going to scoff. Her parents did go to college, so did their friends, and she has been groomed to go to college since she was a small child.

The identity agent needs to design writing projects that encourage student to explore their unique academic identity. There are numerous approaches to this kind of project. For example, I might frame a writing class around the history of the higher education in the USA. I would begin by framing the class around exploring the development of American higher education from the colonial period to the present. That would include exploring the founders, the student body, and the legislations that have shaped higher education. This would offer multiple points of entry point into the academic community and encourage students to build their own community. It is critical to encourage students to exam their own relationships with the academic community and their institutions from multiple perspectives so that they have a real understanding of how their institutions succeed and fail to serve students like themselves. A realistic view of their institution's strengths and weakness prevents the student from internalizing lack of community as a reflection on their ability. It also encourages them to seek out the places where they can find community.

The objective would be to help students understand the origins of higher education so they can better understand the complex community to which they belong.

The class would explore four major topics:

- Changes in the purpose of higher education.
- The growth and limitation of access to higher education.
- The relation of higher education to the larger society.
- Student culture and experiences.

We would look examine how the university system emerged, we would research its changing goals, and how it met or failed those goals.

In the first writing project, the students would write a literacy narrative that focused on their family's traditions of higher education. The second might ask students to locate scholars on campus who share important identity markers as the student and to interview them about their experiences. This writing project would help students to develop their identity as members of academic community by asking them to look into their histories in order to begin to understand how they fit into the larger community in the present day. At UNL, that means some students are legacy students and some will have parents and grandparents with degrees, and other will be First-generation students. The final project might ask students to research an academic community on campus to which they belong. We would read a variety of texts both historical and contemporary about the academic community in order to define what we mean when we say "academic community."

Reading about the inception and development of universities in the colonial era and into early American history, discussing legacy students, continuing generation

students, and First-generation students, is one way to examine our position as community members in academia. From there we can actively examine the ways our current position in the university acts to privilege or marginalize us. Finally, we can discuss how that influences our perspectives.

RECOGNITION: LANGUAGE AND TRANSFORMATION

A wide variety of approaches developed in composition studies already encourage writing teachers to act as identity agents. Place-Conscious education, Transformative pedagogy, Queer Theory, and Community Literacy already have framework to position the writing teacher as an identity agent. For example, Place-Conscious Education focuses on developing the way the student understands of their role of citizen of a specific place, while queer theory looks closely at what it means if we refuse to accept heteronormativity as the default setting for readers and writers. Community literacy builds on the notion that reinvesting our education is part of what it means to be a citizen.

Language

Support for Identity agents in composition studies starts with The Conference on College Composition and Communication's resolution "Students' Right to Their Own Language" because the resolution clearly supports students need to recognize their how their home communities make them stronger students. This resolution states:

We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another.

Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and moral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language (NCTE).

First, this resolution positions identity as an important factor in student teacher relationships. It acknowledges that students come to the classroom with identity factors that deserve to be acknowledged and respected.” The resolution uses language that connects language to race, heritage, and ethnicity—to identity and then says, “Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. Second, it argues that there is no single “right” dialect or way of writing. Finally the resolution urges teachers to have the “experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity,”

The resolution makes the claim that claim that treating any one dialect as unacceptable “amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and moral advice for humans.” These lines have been used as framework to combat against English Only standards, the notion that there is only one way to write, or that there is only one right way to teach writing, and practices that discriminate against students of color. These lines also opened the door for writers/teachers of difference—writers of color, queer writers, working class writers, and disabled writers—to build teaching practices that focus on respecting and validating student identities. It has opened to do for composition scholars to ask questions like, “what are teaching practices support disabled students or what

teaching practices best serve queer writers, or what teaching practices empower women?” The questions support scholars who would be identity agents for women writers, disabled writers, queer writers, and many others.

The resolution also created pressure for scholars to reconsider how they think about and deal with student identity. For example, in 1999 Peter Elbow writes in “Inviting the Mother Tongue: Beyond ‘Mistakes,’ ‘Bad English,’ and ‘Wrong Language,’” that

This essay grows out of feeling torn between conflicting goals or obligations. I think most teachers of first-year college writing courses also feel this conflict, and I experience it acutely as director of a university writing program. On the one hand, I feel an obligation not to force all my students to conform to the language and culture of mainstream English. (See ‘The Students’ Right To Their Own Language’ [Committee].) On the other hand, I feel an obligation to give all my students access to the written language of power and prestige (359).

This is only one of the many articles, essays, and books that emerged as composition studies wrestled with the ramifications of the argument that “The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and moral advice for humans.” Finally, the resolution created space for composition scholars to challenge the idea that tolerance and respect for different ways of knowing, speaking, and writing is enough. These scholars call for inclusion, celebration, and validation of other

rheterics, ways of knowing, speaking, and writing. For example, in the 2010 article, “Should Writer’s Use They Own English?” Vershawn Young argues that

...we need a new term. I call it CODE MESHING!

Code meshing is the new code switching; it’s mulitdialectalism and pluralingualism in one speech act, in one paper. (115)

Young is doing more than accepting or respecting “dialect,” he is calling for space at the writing table for writers who intermingle languages. He is calling for rhetorical moves that marry Standard English practices with cultural rhetorical moves. He is calling for scholars to accept, validate, and even teach code meshing in the classroom. He says,

Let me drop some code meshing knowledge on y’all.

Code meshing what we all do whenever we communicate—writin, speakin, whateva. Code meshing blend dialects, international languages, local idioms, chat-room lingo, and the rhetorical styles of various ethnic and cultural groups in both formal and informal speech acts. This mode of communication be just as frequently used by politicians and professors as it be by journalists and advertisers. It be used by writers of color to compose full-length books; and it’s sometimes added intentionally to standard English to make the point that there aint no one way to communicate. (114)

In 2011, Young and Aja Martinez also published “Code-Meshing as World English: Pedagogy, Policy, and Performance.” Meanwhile scholars from Appalachian studies, working class studies, cultural rhetoric, disability studies and queer studies have written about dialects, sociolinguistics, and the rhetoric of bodies through the context of the right

of students to write in their own languages. Most of these scholars cite, reference, or use the resolution in framework of their argument because the resolutions clearly demonstrates that composition studies as a field is aware of the importance of identity for student writers. The resolution has helped to create a field rich with writers and scholars who are all writing and creating artifacts about what it means to be a writer, what it means to be a scholar, and what it means to be those things while coming from a variety of marginalized identities.

Transformation

Composition studies is also a rich site of transformative education. In the 2012 article “Identity Process and Transformative Pedagogy: Teachers as Agents of Identity Formation,” Harrell-Levy and Kerpelman specifically name transformative pedagogy a method used by identity agents:

When teachers use a transformative pedagogical approach in their classrooms, they increase their capacity to be effective identity agents through their motivation of students to take active roles in identity development. Transformative pedagogy refers to teaching that fosters collaborative learning and empowers students to think creatively and critically (Donnell, 2007). Teachers who choose to use transformative pedagogy are not simply using a technique for teaching; they are applying a philosophy in the classroom that includes a clear investment in their students’ developing identities (77) .

They go on to explain that

Feedback from teachers and classmates is important to identity construction.... When teachers are conscious of their roles as identity agents, they can effectively construct environments that are more likely to lead to positive identity outcomes for adolescents. In a transformative classroom, the opportunities for the teacher to be constructive and influential as an identity agent are maximized (79).

They define transformative pedagogy as teaching that is student-centered, that values the mutual learning of both teacher and student, and reinforces “the voice of the student body—a voice formed from the students’ critical analysis of the subject, given their unique individual experiences and their unique collective experiences as a class community”. Finally, they say, “The transformative process has roots in the work of Freire (1970). Freire advocated for individuals to liberate their minds, contending further that a great obstacle to this liberation is the reality that the individuals absorb” (78-79). For many First-generation students, those “realities” are the notions that their cultures are without capital.

The practices and the theoretical connections that Harrell-Levy and Kerpelman are making are reflected in composition classrooms. Writing teachers across composition studies agree that student centered classrooms that offer plenty of opportunities for feedback and discussion are the most effective environment and are already acting as identity agents. Freire and Macedo claim reading, writing, discussion and reflection as methods of attaining “a critical reading of reality” which empowers us to “name” our worlds (36). They argue that reading, writing, discussion, and reflection can serve as ways to ready students to challenge existing structures of inequality and oppression because reading, writing, discussion and reflection are ways of demystifying the power

dynamics that surround us. Freire explains that “to surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity” (47).

The McNair Program builds on transformative pedagogy by focusing the lens they use to demystify power systems on academia itself. The McNair Program doesn’t just focus on imbalance and injustice in the world, but in the environment that students will live and study in. They challenge “norms” in academia to show students that those “norms” are not written in stone. For example, one of the norms we challenge happens when we read Villanueva’s “Memoria is a Friend of Ours: On the Discourse of color.” Many students are hesitant to mix personal and academic, many believe they need to write in an academic style. This makes it harder to tell their own stories and to advocate for themselves in the Statement of Academic Purpose. Many also subscribe to the idea that they must remain “objective” in their research and that drives them to pick topics that are neutral to them. This makes it harder to stay invested and to finish the complicated long-term work they set out for themselves. We use Villanueva to encourage them to see the variety of ways academic writing can be presented and to encourage them to pick topics they are passionate about and that they can connect back to their own lives. One scholar writes:

...when one integrates their personal with the academic both the personal and academic portions of that one’s life flourish. Personal without academic would be a life with little understanding. Academic without personal would be uninspired and void of inspiration that each individual brings... as a McNair scholar it means

that I do not necessarily need to separate my personal thoughts, emotions, and growth from my academic trials and academic growth. I can integrate the two when appropriate for better results than I could accomplish with them segregated.

I feel that this is necessary especially as an aspiring scientist...

Freire and Macedo also tell us that students need ways to “recognize various tensions” in their lives that we need to offer them ways to “deal effectively with them” (49).

Many writing teachers already focus explicitly in helping students develop the rhetorical tools to speak back to tensions they will face as writers and citizens, the identity agent shows students how those same tools can be applied to their own lived experiences as a way of helping students develop their role identities as writers. For example, in composition studies most writing teachers teach a version of the rhetorical analysis because it gives students the tools to see and demystify the messages they receive from society. Ideally, the identity agent takes this move a step further and asks the student to apply that same analysis to their own lived experiences in hopes that the student will be more able to “recognize various tensions” that exist in their social positions. The same reasons we teach the rhetorical analysis holds true for asking students to do reading, writing, reflecting, and discussion about their own experiences in context to power, privilege, marginalization and social position. Rhetorical analysis is a method learning how to “see” differently. Once students begin to do the work they will discover ways to “deal effectively” with the tensions that arise in their inquiry (Freire and Macedo).

One particular tension in academia that McNair works to address is the low number of people of color, First Generation, and underrepresented scholars in tenure

track teaching positions. One way we do this is by showing our students how their own education has been affected by those numbers. After reading Rodriguez and Delpit one scholar writes:

...I never thought about how dominant this culture of power is in my everyday life. I've never noticed that my educators have always been predominately white males, additionally most of my textbooks were written by white males as well (I looked up all of my books up for the current semester). I am in fact receiving a "white education". However, I never realized how big of an impact this is on my schooling before entering McNair. Although I have found the education I have received thus far to be beneficial and a quite good one at that. I can't help but think if I am really getting to see the entire scope of things? In reality, I am not if only one side, the majority, is teaching me (Kristina Grey).

It is at this point, after these reading and discussions that we begin to discuss ways, like teaching, that McNair scholars can reinvest their educations back into their own communities. By the end of the program, many of our scholars are determined to become the professors they never had, and they hope to serve the students who follow in their footsteps.

However, transformative education is not just for Freire's "oppressed." If it is to be successful it must also work for students whose experiences with privilege and marginalization are more nuanced and less obvious. McNair serves First-generation students from middle class backgrounds, students of color who are coming from financially elite environments, and white students from middle class homes. Giving these students positive ways to deal with tensions that arise from their positions in society is, in

some ways, even more difficult because the demystification process is not one of reaffirming revelations—unlike the underrepresented female scientist who is empowered when her experiences are validated and named as sexism, the white male scientist is confronted with a hard truth for which he must account. However, to effectively encourage both students to become transformative scholars they must both be given steps they can take to deal with these tensions. In the introduction to Katy M Swalwell's *Educating Activist Allies: Social Justice Pedagogy with the Suburban and Urban Elite*,² Michael W. Apple argues:

Much of the emphasis in critical education has been on poor and oppressed populations... However, because so much attention is rightly given to the poor and disenfranchised and to those whom this society has marginalized as the “Other,” less attention has been paid to critical education for those who benefit the most from this society's dominant institutions and power relations, what Katy Swalwell calls the “suburban and urban elite.” This is a distinct problem. All sets of social relations are just that—relations. For there to be the “poor” there is a corresponding category of the “affluent.” For there to be “people of color” there is a corresponding category of people who see themselves as the “human ordinary.” (Apple xiii)

This simple point has considerable bite. There is not a poor problem unless there is a rich problem. There is less of a Black problem than there is a White problem. We constantly negotiate these problems in the McNair classroom. For example, one McNair scholar took great issue with Rich's article because “she attacked science for being sexist” because he ... “believe[s] science cannot be sexist in its correct form or usage.” He

perceived her as aggressive, angry, and Black, perhaps because I did not disclose her racial identity until after they read the selection. In his frustration, he totally lost her conversation on “claiming” his education. In time and by bringing in voices that acknowledged his concerns and spoke from different perspectives he eventually began to expand his way of thinking about privilege in the sciences. Another scholar was being asked to think about privilege for the very first time. She wrote:

...Peggy McIntosh illuminated the ways I contribute to the discrimination of others or at least in the unacknowledged ways I am privileged. I never thought of myself as privileged. For the most part I have been socialized to accept the positions I inhabit. The positions of youngest child in the family, female, non-wealthy, non-traditional family, undereducated, etc. McIntosh’s bulleted list was extensive enough to show me the extent to which I unknowingly possess privilege. If I “inherited” that privilege simply by being born white, why do I feel guilty? I never knowingly perceived that I was elevated above others because I have always viewed myself as looking from the bottom up, not from the top down (Renaë).

This scholar was most interested in research in India and research about feminist organizations in India. In order to do her academic work well, and to learn to communicate and interact with her Indian faculty mentors, she had to think about privilege. Not doing so could have quite easily have created tensions in graduate school that she would not be able to name and therefore would not be able to navigate.

It is particularly important for First-generation students coming from the “suburban and urban elite” to be given positive ways to handle the stress that is placed on

their identities because these students have lived experiences that are mostly marked by privilege outside of academia. Within academia their lived experience can make them outsiders. And due to their First-generation status they still lack institutional knowledge, can still be viewed as outsiders by others, and are still part of a marginalized community. However, they will struggle to contextualize themselves in the community in very different ways. It is harder for them to understand how they are connected to the systems that create inequity and it is harder for them to see themselves in the material they are given to read. With these students “fragility” often interacts with marginalization in ways that make it very difficult for a student to find community or to feel comfortable in a classroom environment.

For example, the student who struggled with Rich focused on how her “attack” on science made him feel as a scientist. He writes:

...even though Rich claims that Darwin's "Descent of Man" ignores half of humanity, the entire text revolves around the power wielded most often by female organisms regarding sexual choice and the course of evolution (which she would have understood had she read a page instead of merely attacking it due to the title). While Darwin was a product of his time, as was Lincoln (who also said things modern cultures would rightly consider sexist and racist, regardless of the monumental force he wielded in shaping equal rights), he showed ethics that were light years ahead of his contemporaries (see link below). Overall, that article left a very sour taste in my mouth, and because of that, she sabotaged any chance of me being moved by her speech (Adam Keener).

His response focuses almost entirely on how her words make him feel and how she is responsible for “sabotaging” his ability to connect to her speech. This kind of reaction is what Robin DiAngelo, a Whiteness studies scholar refers to as “fragility.” She says:

White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. Racial stress results from an interruption to what is racially familiar (54).

Rich places a minimal amount of stress on white male scientists for perpetuating a male centric view of the world and it became a sticking point for the scholar. This is fragility and it is often present in the classroom, and not just in context to race. Discussions of class, gender, and ability, can spark fragility. The problem is that fragility makes it particularly difficult to engage in the critical thinking First-generation need to succeed in college. The only way to move past fragility is to continue discussing privilege, marginalization, and power and to investigate the reasons for fragility. Transformative pedagogy offers a strong beginning point, a rich selection of writers, and supports writing teachers as identity agents.

Critical pedagogy argues that that when we give students the tools to see the constructions of injustice, they use those tools to resist pressure to maintain injustice. Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo claim reading, writing, discussion, and reflection as a methods of attaining “a critical reading of reality” which is empowers us to “name” our

worlds (36). They argue that can serve as ways to ready students to challenge existing structures of inequality and oppression. Freire explains that “to surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity” (47). Freire and Macedo tell us that students need ways to “recognize various tensions and enable them to deal effectively with them” (49) and it has always been the work of the writing teacher to help students develop literacies that help them deal effectively with the tension they will face as writers and citizens.

REPRESENTATION: PLACE AND PERFORMANCE

Place-conscious pedagogy offer a particularly good model of pedagogy that encourages wiring instructors to be identity agents. Robert Brooke’s *Rural Voices* gives us students engaged with the practical working and political workings of their home communities. These are writers who are learning, writing, and interacting with their places and their communities. The crucial component is that much place-conscious pedagogy asks students to think about how they benefit from their rhetorical work as members of the communities they are working in. Place conscious education focuses on developing a student’s role identity as inhabitant of a specific place. By centering learning about places as part of the writer’s identity, the teacher invites the writer to reflect on the ways the places they love have influenced their identity. Furthermore it also focuses representation, recognition, and reinvestment. Place Conscious pedagogy asks the student to read, write and discuss people who have emerged from their local spaces. It asks students to think about how being local makes them experts on the needs of their community and then it encourages them to use their writing to benefit their local places.

Place-conscious teaching asks the question: what does it mean to live in this place, and then it answers that question by offering the writer ways to celebrate, critique, sustain and build up the places they love.

Place Conscious teaching locates students in a physical space, usually their own place of origin, and asks them to re-see that space as a citizen by shifting their view to the microcosms of society that small towns and neighborhoods often represent. Students are asked to critically consider the public work of being a responsible and contributing member of that microcosm and by extension, larger society. Identity agents ask students to critically consider the relationship between their identities and the community, institutions, and governing bodies that they interact with. Both Place Conscious teaching and teaching as an identity agent relies of sequencing writing that creates opportunities for students to recognize their unique perspectives, see themselves represented, and to reflect on the value of reinvesting their education into their own communities. Both Place conscious educators and identity agents model such thinking moves for their students and reflect with their students on the value of these thinking moves. Both Place conscious educators and identity agents are “needed so that the education of citizens might have some direct bearing on the wellbeing of the social, [political], and ecological places people actually inhabit” (Gruenewald 2003).

Representation and Performance

Queer theory tells us that identity is a performance, a routine that we establish through a thousand little actions we simply perform as we see others like us perform. For folks who are queer or gender fluid this performance requires reflection and critical thought (Butler). Building an academic identity also requires reflection and critical

thought into how to one performs as “student,” or “scholar” along with a negotiation of how to perform cultural capital. Queer theories, feminist theories, argue that, we construct gender identity over time through a series of small choices made repeatedly.

In the same way, becoming a scholar happens through a series of small choices made repeatedly in certain situation. Because gender identity, like an academic identity, is a construct, queer theorists, writers, and teachers have explored the ways we construct identity and the effects of those performances. Many of these compositionists bring these concepts, ideas, and questions to the classroom and use them in the same ways the McNair faculty use transformative pedagogy—to ask students to develop their understanding of how their social position interacts with the world around them.

For example, Zan Meyer Gonçalves argues in *Sexuality and the Politics of Ethos in the Writing* that identity performance, as conceptualized in queer theory, can support a pedagogical practice of building ethos in the composition classroom by empowering composition students to think through meticulously crafting rhetorical performances—in the manner queer youth employ as survival strategies in a heteronormative world. In her work with queer youth, Gonçalves witnesses writers and speakers performing identity in a way that was carefully crafted to elicit certain responses from very specific audiences. She realized the value in teaching and learning rhetorical strategies that help students become aware of the ways various discourses frame identity performances. Then she crafted a pedagogical praxis that provides students with the tools needed to gain rhetorical agency within those discourses. She suggest that “invit[ing] students to see themselves as agents in and subjects of multiple and competing discourses and to identify the ‘truths’ those discourses support” and “guid[ing] students to address the important

and enduring differences in identity-based values between themselves and their audiences” (91) can empower them to build ethos as social justice writers and activists.

Her careful examination of the relationship between self-awareness and performances of identity as is the foundation of her pedagogy. She writes “If we are able to recognize, through self-reflection, how our differing identities are shaping the way we see others and perform our ‘selves,’ we are more likely to make conscious choices about how and for whom and for what purpose we are performing our ethos” (14).

In the final chapter, she gives a very specific list of how she models the writing and thinking moves that she wants her students to adopt. Modeling—a common practice in the composition classroom—is a typical strategy of identity agents. Parents model behavior to children, clergy model faith and worldviews to their congregations. Modeling and mimicking are foundational parts of developing identity. As students begin to understand and accept that “what it means” to be a conscientious writer is to be socially aware and “what it means to be socially aware” includes doing certain things like examining our own social standing, actively engaging in rhetorical action that promotes social justice, and maintaining relationships with people different from themselves they will begin mimicking these actions in order to reconcile their behaviors with their understanding of a good writer. Gonçalves says that she has developed an ethic that underlies her pedagogy. This includes:

- Self-reflection
- Separation of judgments from observations
- Use of dialogue
- A focus on making allies and common ground (132)

Gonçalves' methods, particularly her focus on reflection and modeling, echo the McNair program's emphasis on self-reflection through writing and giving scholar's access to mentors so who model what it means to be professional in their field.

Just as importantly, Gonçalves's observations and the methods she developed from them validate the benefits of offering First-generation Students opportunities to recognize their own unique ways of contributing to the discourse of their field, opportunities to see themselves represented in academia, and opportunities to reinvest their education into their own communities.

REINVESTMENT: COMMUNITY LITERACY AND SERVICE LEARNING

Community literacy is another area of study in composition where identity agents organically emerge. This is particularly true of service learning because the inherent complexities of service learning pushes writing teachers to think about all the implications of identity in service learning. "Tactics of Hope," Paula Mathieu says that composition studies has taken a "public turn" because writing should not just exist within the classroom, instead we should take it "out there." Service learning is one example of community literacy at work. Fayetteville State University describes service learning as:

Service learning is a process of involving students in community service activities combined with facilitated means for applying the experience to their academic and personal development ...Students work on real problems that make academic learning relevant while simultaneously enhancing their social skills, analytical ability, civic and ethical responsibility, self-efficacy, and career development. The most meaningful service learning activities are developed through partnership and

dialogue between the University and the community organizations with whom our students serve. (Definition of Service Learning: Fayetteville State University)

Ideally, in service learning students are engaged on a local level. This work benefits them, adds to their lives, and helps them develop personally and academically. Service learning and public rhetoric initiatives are, at their best, undergirded by the notion that our communities are ecologies where we are all important and connected.

These ideals connect directly to the notion of offering students the opportunity to reinvest their education into their own communities. McNair scholars are often asked to “pay forward” by participating in mentoring incoming cohorts, helping with recruitment, and returning to serve in the program. This kind of service to their community helps understand that being a scholar means using their education to give back and make change. Service learning in composition studies seeks to show students that being a writer, a college student, and a citizen means using their education to give back and make change. Due to the similar goals at hand, many compositionists who engage their students in service learning are acting as identity agents.

Identity agents emerge in community literacy because, as many scholars suggest, community literacy is a way of giving our students a voice in public discourse... They suggest that frank, critical, and inquiry-based discussions about identity in context to community, institutions, and governing bodies, combined with the opportunity to write about those discussions, have the power to shift students from apathetic bystander to active community members who use writing as a means to create some kind of change in the world outside of the classroom.

Service learning and other community literacy programs are designed to develop a student's role identity as a community member. In McNair, the goal is to develop the student's identity as a scholar. The two intersect because one of the overall goals of the McNair programs is to prepare scholars who will go on to serve both their own community and the academic community. To do that both service learning and McNair must prepare the student to enter new, complex, communities thoughtfully and respectfully, to nurture relationships, and to be open to critique, learning moments, and oftentimes to listen rather than speak.

These are not skills that are often taught in the college classroom. Linda Flower notes in her book *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement* that

The dominant discourses of engagement in composition have indeed taught our students and us how to speak up as an expressive practice and how to speak against something with the techniques of discourse analysis and critique. But this is not enough, for they do not teach us how to speak with others or to speak for our commitments in a nonfoundational way. It is here in exploring such a discourse with others and for a revisable image of transformation that community literacy tries to make its contribution to a new rhetoric of public engagement (2).

Flower asks us to rethink the rhetoric of community literacy and offers the rhetorical moves; speaking up, speaking against, speaking with others, and speaking for. However these moves are only useful if writers understand their own positional relationship to the social issues at hand. Ideally, their teachers use reading, writing, reflection, discussion and modeling to show their students how to deal with fragility and how to work with community members. In community literacy work students need to do the readying work

of exploring their identity as a community member before they can work effectively in a community literacy project.

Flower argues that readying students to do community literacy work pushes us to explore unfamiliar rhetorics and discourses. This is because once we are outside of academia, we often discover that the modes of analysis and critique taught inside academia fail to prepare students to relate to folks who are community organizers, community members, advocates, and activists. This is particularly true when crossing cultural divides of any kind. Flower points out that “working with diverse others is not theoretical situation. It’s a real world challenge. It requires that we “construct a rhetorical space that can support transformative relationships” (2). Students must first understand from where they speak, before they can speak. What they need, before going “to the street” are rhetorical strategies that help them to distance their social identity from their personhood or personal identity. They need permission to say, “I accept that I am accountable for this injustice but I am not responsible for it – rather it was done in my name, given to me by my history, and thrust upon me by circumstances of my birth that I could not control. What can we do now that I understand so that I do not continue to perpetuate the injustice?” They need reading, writing, and discussion strategies that help them to understand the difference between accountable and responsible. They need to be taught to understand that systems are designed to function with or without our personal participation but they are dependent on our complicity.

In McNair much of this work is done in the Letter to Self and in the writing journal. They are constantly being asked to think about what they can be responsible for and what they need to accept as out of their control. McNair works to encourage the

scholars to take control of everything they can and to let go of what they can't and McNair encourages them to give themselves permission to refuse to bear responsibility for things they cannot change.

Students working in the community benefit from those same discussion as they enter the communities they are working within. Ideally writing teacher who engage in community literacy projects ready students to work in the community by asking them to write about their own connections—personal, familial, historical, or otherwise, to the places where they will be working. Ready students by helping them understand their own connections to the people and places they are serving also helps them to voice and explore their notions about “out there” before they are actually on-site. Ideally the writing teacher takes into account that a community literacy project will ask a student to examine their own identity in a number of ways. For example, like McNair scholars, it is important for students to *recognize* what skills and expertise their lived experience affords them and what skills and expertise it does not afford them. Understanding their connections to, limitations, and biases about the “street” helps students to work effectively in the community.

Writing teachers who take up the challenge of community literacy also take up the challenge of readying students to step into the public realm. They encourage their students to become aware of all the complicated ways identity can influence our behavior and the behavior of others so that they are better prepared to interact effectively with people from a wide and varied spectrum of identities. They encourage students to explore their own positions as a way of figuring out if they should speak up, speak against, speak with, or speak for something. They take student identity seriously. They encourage

privileged students to think about why their lived experience indicates that their role in the community is a support role and not a leadership role. At the same time they encourage students who are members of the communities that they are working in, to claim their own expertise about that community and to take on leadership roles. Community literacy, is simultaneously, extremely valuable and extremely messy, complicated, and problematic. Writing teachers who take on these projects often become identity agents to help their students develop their identity as community members and as activists before they go out into the “street.”

In both service learning and in the McNair program, training students to work and serve in a new community begins by readying students to connect with and work with people at every level of the community. In service learning this is where “frank, critical, and inquiry-based discussions about identity in context to community, institutions, and governing bodies” are used to help students see how inequities develop in tier communities, why they develop, and help the student to understand what their own stakes are in the community. In McNair we call it networking. We encourage scholars to build networks of people who can lean on each other and people they can turn to for support. For example, we encourage McNair scholars to think about the kind of work office staff might do, the kinds of frustrations they may have, and to treat them respectfully and empathically because building connecting with the staff, understanding the work they do, and treating them respectfully can have a real effect on a graduate student. We remind them to be aware of how each person’s position in the community interacts with their own.

In service learning, writing teachers encourage students to reflect on the work that community organization is doing, the frustration the organizers may experience, and to treat those community organizers respectfully and empathetically in order to help prepare students for the difficult nature of community literacy. In both cases self-reflection is the beginning point. Given how important it is to prepare both McNair scholars and service learning students to enter a new community it is critical that faculty model that behavior and press scholars to think about the ways privilege, marginalization, and power function in a community. In service learning failing to ready students to work in the community adds to the risk that students and scholars will not learn to work with or “speak with” a community, and instead will speak over a community, or fail to connect to a community. In service learning failing to ready a student results in a failed grade or project for the student and it adds to the social burdens of the community. In graduate school failing to connect with the community can have much more serious consequences for the scholars. First-generation students are also entering a new community and they need help becoming ready to make those connections. For First-generation students the stakes are higher and the risks are greater.

CONCLUSION IDENTITY AGENT IN MY CLASSROOM

As writing teacher I claim the position of identity agent. In my rhetoric and inquiry class I shape the class work around the overarching question “What does it mean to be a writer?” In my Rhetoric and Argument class I shape the class around the question “what does it mean to argue as an academic?” In my literature class I frame the class around the question “what does it mean to be a reader?” In all of these classes I have

conversation about privilege and marginalization by focusing on a process of demystification.

In my inquiry and writing class I begin working to demystify the variety of power dynamics and policies that may have shaped them as writers. I tell them that the strongest writers are the ones that are willing to question not just what they know, but how they came to know it. Then we focus on inquiring into what they know about writing, how they came to know it, and how that might affect them. In our first unit I ask students to identify a misconception about writing that has influenced their process and to investigate it. We look closely at things like the idea of creating a perfect first draft, or solitary writing. They write a literacy narrative about one or two misconceptions that they have struggled with.

In the next unit I ask them to explore the notion that words are concrete or that they have singular “true” meanings. I ask them write an extended definition of a complex term like family. I push them to really investigate the connotation and denotations of the term. I push them to think about why their definition is important. Then, finally, after they’ve learned to trust the process of inquiry, I shift focus and ask students to inquire into the dynamic of the English Only Policies in writing classrooms.

We begin with the NTCE’s 1974 “Resolution on the Students' Right to Their Own Language.” That way I can establish that the NTCE recognizes other Englishes as legitimate as a starting premise. We are not investigating the legitimacy of other people’s Englishes, we are investigating the legitimacy of English Only policies. We begin by looking at history of African American English Vernacular (AAVE) in the classroom; including Geoffrey K. Pullman’s *African American Vernacular English is not Standard*

English with Mistakes, which breaks down the reasons linguists have categorized AVVE as a language.

Next, we read a wide variety of perspectives on the subject, including Stanley Fish and Vershawn Ashanti Young's response to Fish about teaching writing.

I ask my students to produce three short pieces of writing during this unit. The first is a rhetorical analysis of Fish and Young and to decide which is the better article. I ask them to begin by respecting the NTCE resolution. They are not allowed to discuss if AVVE is valid because, using the scientific method and the tools we have, the majority of linguists agree that AVVE is a valid language. Instead they are asked to mark and discuss the academic rhetorical moves the writers make. I ask them to consider how research is used, how evidence and support is used, and to pay close attention for logical fallacies such as faulty generalizations. By pulling language out of the equation, and by operating under the premise that Young has a right to write in his own language a part of the intellectual exercise, my students are more likely to see that his article is logically and persuasively reasoned. After the rhetorical analysis, we can begin to discuss why folks might have assumed that Fish's article could not be the better article.

Next, I shift and ask them to read some critique of English only practices in the Appalachians and then I can discuss the ways language bigotry impacts not just people of color but also how it affects white folks who are often working poor. Next, they write a literacy narrative about their interaction with other languages and other Englishes. This assignment opens up discussion of how privilege and marginalization often rely on the foundational belief that there is a Standard English and a valid reason for everyone to learn to speak and write it. Finally, I ask them write a researched essay on a topic that is

informed or affected by the issue of language in the U.S. This work forces students to dig deeper into the conversation, but also allows them to decide on the topic of their essay. By combining teaching practices common in the writing classroom, the rhetorical analysis and literacy narrative, with narratives, model texts, and theorists focusing on issues of privilege and marginalization this unit prepares them to research a current issue that is affected by privilege and marginalization and gives them time to analyze their own hidden biases and the ways they came to develop those biases before delving into the data and research. As an identity agent my goal is to impress upon them that writers are people who ask hard questions of themselves and their topics.

This combination is important because it works to help ready students to deal with difficult and often fraught topics. I focus on language—the right to our own ways of reading, writing, speaking and knowing—because language connects identity and writing in very explicit and clear ways that students can identify with. They understand that as writers we choose topics and audiences that are connected to how we perceive our identity. From their own experience they also understand that how teachers’ value student writing is connected their students’ use of language. The progression from valuing the complex identities in the classroom to using them as a site of inquiry, and then, in turn, using that inquiry to encourage our students is a powerful process. It also offers plenty of opportunities to discuss privilege, marginalization, and power and opportunities to push students to be critical thinkers about the social issues confronting them.

By asking the students to locate a personal connection to the topic before I allow them to research, I reinforce the idea that writers can and should research into the ways they formed their beliefs. I also reinforce the idea that writers see their lived experiences

as valid and important because they have shaped us in ways that give us a unique voice. It allows me to reinforce their unique voice as valuable to the community of readers and writers. More importantly, as an identity agent I am creating access for marginalized writers to claim the identity of writer—in their own voice. Over and over again students from marginalized communities have commented or shared that my class helped them see themselves as writers.

Bruce Ballenger suggests that inquiry begins with a question—and the questions that I firmly believe every writer must ask are—how do I understand the construction of the positions I hold in society and how do I understand the ways that construction affects others? How does it affect my treatment of my topics? My goal as an identity agent is to offer my students the question—what does it mean to be a writer? Once I ask the question, I must help my students understand that the answers are not about not good grammar or accolades. The answer is that being a writer means being a critically important member of the academic community and society because writers are people who are willing to ask hard questions of themselves, they are willing explore those questions in writing, and they are willing to share that writing for the rest of us to consider. A writer is a maker of knowledge.

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