WORKING TO BUILD A BETTER CLASS-ROOM:
INVESTIGATING THE BENEFITS OF SERVICE-LEARNING IN COMPOSITION COURSES FOR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS FROM WORKING-CLASS BACKGROUNDS

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ABSTRACT

By examining the challenges that working-class college students face, this study posits service-learning as an effective tool for addressing issues of class in higher education, particularly when utilized in composition courses. To elucidate specific issues that are either unique to working-class students or more prevalent among them, and to illustrate how service-learning helps to alleviate these issues, I draw upon works from, though not limited to service-learning studies, working-class scholars, composition theorists, cognitive scientists, and statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Center for Educational Statistics. Ultimately, I conclude that service-learning can improve intercultural understanding between working-class students and their more privileged peers, can increase their retention rates and can inspire greater numbers of them to pursue graduate degrees.
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Chapter 1: Class Matters in Service-Learning

*Issues of Underrepresentation*

Considering that numerous advocates and practitioners of service-learning have already addressed issues concerning its academic rigor as well as proven its institutional viability, perhaps the greatest remaining obstacle for the pedagogy is the limited perspective of its supporters. Many of the same works that explain the benefits of service-learning also represent students as a homogenous group, which limits the scope of research on the subject and subsequently undervalues its impact. To wit, in the essay “I Can Never Turn My Back On That: Liminality and the Impact of Class on Service-Learning Experience,” Sue Ellen Henry criticizes how “service-learning is often framed as a pedagogical perspective and instructional tool that can help “privileged” students gain greater insight into the life experience and perspectives of “others,” namely those “served” in the service-learning arrangement” (45). She determines that the consistent appearance and acceptance of the term ‘privileged’ in service-learning literature implies that all college students are financially secure and white. Also, this distinction not only reintroduces the boundaries between classroom setting and society that service-learning is supposed to collapse, but risks reinforcing oppressive cultural hierarchies. Above all else, Henry worries that this rather simplistic portrayal of service-learning and the one-course-fits-all attitude it perpetuates harms those it ignores, namely working-class students (60).

Working-class college students complicate/contradict the trite service-learning model of privileged student helping underprivileged individual(s) because in many cases they are volunteering with communities that resemble their own. Yet service-learning practitioners in higher education seldom consider who their students already are when they enter the classroom,
disregarding the fact that different student backgrounds produce different results. For example, in “Beyond a World of Binaries: My Views on Service-Learning,” Tiffany Dacheux, a self-identified working-class student explains:

When a student enters in a service-learning situation, the first thing she often learns is of the “plight” of those she will help: their poorness, darkness, or less than satisfactory academic achievements. Difference is emphasized, for the intended purpose of “preparing” the serving students for what they might encounter. What this really does is set them up to “judge” those they might help and place them in the same binary that I did. For students like myself this holds true as well…. But I think for people like myself the main benefit is something that was not intended: the realization of our peculiar situations as first generation working-class college students and the binaries that may exist in our identities … only by acknowledging the parallelism in our lives, can we begin to attempt to synthesize it and develop more of a dialectical relationship between our working-class backgrounds and educated aspirations. (70)

Once again, the notion of privilege in service-learning emerges, but for the working-class Dacheux it does not constitute difference. Despite the boundaries her professor establishes, Dacheux eventually learns how to empathize rather than judge, which produces a different, though equally rewarding service experience. Indeed, her liminal classroom identity not only exposes the inherent discrimination of the server/served binary, but also enables Dacheux to re-evaluate her place in academia. Moreover, the deeply personal ‘parallelism’ she encounters is firmly rooted in her working-class background, a ‘peculiar situation’ that is consistent with
testimonies from other working-class students as well as critical works on education like *Lives on the Boundary* by Mike Rose.

Based upon his own dual perspective as a former working-class student and now a university professor, Rose reveals that it is “not only the economic and political barriers they [working-class students] face, but the fact, too, that judgments, accurate or not, affect the curriculum they receive, their place in the school, the way they’re defined institutionally” (128). Moreover, he believes that the single greatest determining factor for this treatment is class. In many of the examples Rose provides, class not only decides the quality of education that working-class students receive growing up, but also influences how they respond to college. If true, then service-learning practitioners who agree with or actively promote (as in Dacheux’s case) the server/served binary are missing a great opportunity to learn how to better serve working-class students. Likewise, ignoring issues of class that service-learning courses inevitably raise, or treating them in a perfunctory manner, may unwittingly promote discrimination against students from working-class backgrounds.

As stated earlier, when working-class students participate in service-learning programs where they serve communities that resemble their own background, the potential for a rewarding experience emerges. However, when an instructor portrays these familiar cultural/physical environments as “other,” if not less than, working-class students can feel marginalized, alienated and even targeted. Yet at the same time, this server/served binary may harm working-class students in an indirect manner.
In her article “Integrating Service Learning and Multicultural Education: An Overview,” multicultural education scholar Carolyn R. O’Grady draws attention to the danger of framing service-learning in terms of us and them. She warns:

Without the theoretical underpinnings provided by multicultural education, service-learning can too easily reinforce oppressive outcomes. It can perpetuate racist, sexist, or classist assumptions about others and reinforce a colonialist mentality of superiority. This is a special danger for predominantly White students engaging in service experiences in communities of color. (12)

Although O’Grady ends by focusing on White student reactions, her main concern is how service-learning courses address issues of privilege and power which, based upon the cautionary tone and content of this example, indicates she would agree with Henry that sensitive issues like class should not be reduced to easy binaries. Otherwise, unfair and unjustified assumptions that might ordinarily be scrutinized would be allowed to masquerade as meritocracy, itself a parody of equality. For this reason, service-learning advocates usually promote responsible, focused critical reflection in service-learning courses that challenges such views, but quotations like O’Grady’s that are used to support this balanced approach inadvertently complicate it.

When O’Grady makes the same connection as Henry between privilege and race, noting that “predominantly White students” are prone to judge non-white communities, she too engages in stereotyping. By singling out white students, O’Grady conflates race and class in a way that

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1 Critical reflection (see Deans; Jones; Eyler and Giles) is any exercise where the student (re)evaluates their service experience. Ideally, these exercises are performed throughout the term/semester, are varied (group discussions, writing journals, etc.) and involve instructor feedback.
generates a division based upon preconceived/misperceived differences she claims do not exist. Henry at least acknowledges this slippage when she states, “One problem with the current literature, however, is that “servers” and the “served” most often differ on both racial and class characteristics … and tend to collapse race and class together, making it difficult to determine the influence on class awareness, specifically” (46). Also, Henry shares testimony from several of her working-class white students about non-racial, class-based discrimination they confronted during their own service experiences. As such, she is right to mark the boundary between race and class in a service-learning context. Her critiques of service-learning literature, as well as the personal testimony, confirm that each category generates polemical issues irrespective of their related ones and subsequently matters of class and race deserve to be treated as separate entities. Yet this does not mean that comments like O’Grady’s or any/all conclusions drawn from them are illegitimate. Rather, they should be viewed as points of departure for further investigation into the importance of class as well as race in service-learning courses.

Furthermore, the visibility and exploration of class in service-learning courses is a matter of pedagogical identity. According to Susan Stroud, the former director of Campus Compact, deconstructing complicated issues like class is not just responsible for generating higher levels of cognition and/or consciousness, but this process is what defines service as service. She affirms, “If our community service efforts are not structured to raise the questions that result in critical analysis of the issues, then we are not involved in education and social change—we are involved in charity” (3). Similar to Henry and O’Grady, Stroud advocates a comprehensive approach to service-learning that involves critical awareness of relevant issues before the project(s) in addition to analysis of the service experience after. To ignore class, or worse, approach it as a binary, undermines the effectiveness of service-learning. However, whereas Henry and O’Grady
present their ideas as ways to improve the pedagogy, Stroud claims that awareness and analysis are the very foundations of service itself; anything less is charity and can lead to harmful outcomes like those mentioned by Henry, Dacheux and O’Grady. Thus, it appears there can be no proper service-learning without complete service and, based upon observations and insights from both scholars and students, there can be no complete service without critical reflection.

I do not mean to insinuate that service without the benefit of an experienced instructor leading critical reflection is somehow less valuable or worthwhile, nor do I wish to seemingly frame these views on service and service-learning as absolute. Nonetheless, these combined writers encapsulate the problem of underrepresentation in service-learning courses and its literature; failing to closely examine and complicate factors that create the need for service, as well as the reactions of both service provider and recipient, can lead to permutations and even perversions of service, where students engage in negative behavior(s) like self-aggrandizing, othering and judging. Of course, the persistent avoidance and/or mistreatment of class issues are not the only forms of underrepresentation, but they do seem to be under-acknowledged by service-learning theorists. More importantly, many of the benefits of service-learning that educators tout as justification to incorporate the pedagogy take on added meaning when applied to working-class students but, due to the tangential nature of this discussion in higher education, what these benefits are remains vague. For these reasons, I begin my exploration of service-learning at the inchoate intersection of service and class, to elucidate how the pedagogy assists working-class college students excel in higher education.
Defining Working-Class College Students

One of the most revealing indicators that working-class students are not a priority in service-learning research, or American society for that matter, is the lack of clarity for the term working-class. While some social scientists focus strictly on empirical figures like income and education level to define this nebulous group, others rely upon more controversial factors like ethnicity and culture. So with no straightforward definition I developed my own criteria for working-class students based upon the examples I found scattered throughout my research.

Working-class students are often first-generation college students. Not only was this trend consistent with many of the working-class student testimonials I read, but a study\(^2\) about first-generation college students by Chen (2005) from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that in 1991 an alarming 50 percent of first-generation college students came from families that earned less than $25,000. Also, roughly 85 percent came from families that earned less than $50,000. Meanwhile, another NCES study\(^3\) by Choy (2001) that also focuses on first-generation college students reports, "If they [first-generation students] were younger than 24 and financially dependent on their parents (as most students that age are), they were more likely than others to be in the lowest family income quartile" (21). These are telling figures that reveal a clear relationship between first-generation college students and working-

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\(^2\) According to the study by Chen, “These selections resulted in a final analysis sample of about 7,400 students, accounting for about 87 percent (weighted) of all NELS [The National Education Longitudinal Study] 1992 12th-graders who entered postsecondary education between 1992 and 2000” (3).

\(^3\) In the study by Choy, “The data presented here come from three nationally representative longitudinal studies conducted by NCES; The National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS), which studied a cohort of 1988 8th-graders every 2 years until 1994, 2 years after most of them finished high school, and then again in 2000;” “The Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS), which included students (of all ages) who enrolled in postsecondary education for the first time in either 1989–90 or 1995–96. The first group was surveyed again in 1992 and 1994, and the second group in 1998;” and “The Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B), which conducted follow-ups on 1992–93 bachelor’s degree recipients in 1994 and 1997” (5).
class status. More importantly, when paired with statistics on grades and retention rates, as I do in later chapters, these figures reinforce the need to help working-class college students excel in higher education.

In addition, what constitutes the working in working-class students is not necessarily the labor these students perform (though many do work in college to support themselves⁴), but it refers to the occupations of their parents. These often involve some form of physical labor and are always low-income positions, yet I do not offer specific job categories or an income cut-off since the impact of both fluctuate according to factors like family size, location, etc. However, in order to provide some perspective, the 2009 federal poverty guidelines designate the cutoff for a family of two (whether two adults or one adult with child) as $14,570, and this level rises nearly $3,800 for each additional member. Matching these figures with earlier findings from the NCES studies about first-generation students reveals that a significant portion of them come from families that flirt with the current federal poverty line, which not only restates the dire situations some working-class students emerge from to attend college but reiterates the fact that students are not a homogenous group. Additionally, regardless what kind of financial aid packages working-class students receive, they are still likely to encounter multiple challenges due in part to their working-class backgrounds, a consequence that I examine in later chapters as well.

⁴ According to the NCES study by Choy (2001), “first-generation college students who worked while enrolled (as 70 percent did) were more likely than others [who were non-first-generation students] to consider themselves to be primarily employees enrolled in school” (21).
As for the final marker, the vast majority of working-class college students at four-year institutions experience a lack of power. In *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret*, Michael Zweig explains:

Working class people share a common place in production, where they have relatively little control over the pace or content of their work, and aren’t anybody’s boss … the recent increase in inequality is not just a case of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, as the media often portray it. Our society’s growing inequality of income and wealth is a reflection of the increased power of capitalists and the reduced power of workers…. Class has its foundation in power relations at work, but it is more than that. Class also operates in the larger society: relative power on the economic side of things translates, not perfectly but to a considerable extent, into cultural and political power. (3-4)

Based on Zweig’s definition of working-class, it appears that my previous criteria for working-class students, a lack of education and income, contribute to produce the last one, an overall lack of power. But, the veracity of his statement is less important than acknowledging how a perceived lack of power can be just as debilitating as a real one. Many working-class freshmen report arriving at school already believing they lack agency in the classroom and acceptance in social settings, a notion that is only reaffirmed by their college experience. For example, in a special issue on diversity by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Bobby Allyn shares his own difficulties as a working-class student trying to reconcile his modest upbringing with those of his affluent peers. He admits, “I don’t want to alienate myself by letting my college friends know
that I’m not well traveled and don’t understand their references, so I act as if I were in the know, hoping they won’t suspect that I’m from a different class. This “cultural passing” gives me a feeling of accomplishment but also leaves me dejected, knowing that I am still an outsider” (B32). Whether Allyn’s friends would accept him if he ever revealed his true past is uncertain. What matters though is he believes they will not, so he continues his “cultural passing,” which is really a form of cultural denying. Allyn, like many other working-class students, sees what his parent’s lack of education and income have (unintentionally) denied him, and he would prefer it not affect his power to make meaningful connections though, in his mind, it clearly does. The same can be said for the impact of Allyn’s working-class background on his academic life, but I will examine specifics later. I only include this brief example here to show how a sensed lack of power can negatively shape experience and, due to its pervasiveness amongst working-class students, why it deserves to be included as part of my criteria.

Therefore, whenever I refer to working-class students I imagine individuals like Bobby Allyn, whose backgrounds and/or current situations fulfill these three criteria: a lack of education; a lack of income; and a lack of power. It is a working definition that I hope limits the scope of this study yet remains fluid enough to accommodate a variety of working-class experiences. Also noteworthy is that the majority of my examples involve young adults, but this is more coincidence than conscious decision. There are many interesting and compelling ways that older working-class women and men complicate the effects of service-learning, but unfortunately most pedagogical literature I found dealt with younger working-class students.  

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5 This may be due in part to working-class adults being overburdened with full-time jobs and/or family obligations, which deny them the extra time needed to participate in a service-learning course.
Consequently, I too will be focusing on younger working-class students. It only seems fitting considering my own students were the inspiration for this thesis.

**Motivation, Structure and Methodology**

As a teacher assistant in the Community Scholars Program at Georgetown University, I consistently tutored working-class students and occasionally taught them. Despite the fact that many of them were good writers and had received high marks in high school, few were familiar with the demands/expectations of college level academic discourse and I began to understand the need for freshman composition courses. More importantly, I noticed that some of the issues my students faced concerned their working-class backgrounds and not the coursework. Yet when the readings reflected their own lived experiences, most chose to share these parallels during my office hours instead of with the class. It was then that I resolved to improve college level English curriculum by creating a more comfortable classroom environment. Soon after, I learned about service-learning and was excited to find so much helpful information about its benefits, the risks involved and what steps to take when creating a service-learning course. Several books also linked service-learning with composition (see Deans; Adler-Kassner et al.; Hurlbert and Blitz), which was both helpful and promising. However, I encountered the same problem that Sue Ellen Henry astutely points out, where college students are assumed to at least be middle-class, if not white. I had trouble finding literature that demonstrated service-learning could help my students, the underprivileged and typically underrepresented ones: aka, the working-class. I needed to be

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6 According to the program website, “The Community Scholars Program provides Georgetown students with the unique opportunity to thrive. Each year, sixty Scholars are selected during the admissions process based on their academic achievement, impressive co-curricular accomplishments, and commitment to service. They typically represent diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, and are often first generation college students.” (“Community Scholars, emphasis mine)
sure that service-learning helped them too and, in many ways, this thesis is the culmination of that search.

Over the next five chapters I address and interweave several key claims about service-learning in four-year institutions: that it augments the curriculum of any discipline; that the pedagogy works particularly well with composition courses; and that it benefits all students. At the same time, I demonstrate how each of these claims applies to working-class students in order to support my own conclusion that service-learning helps working-class college students excel in higher education. I begin in Chapter 2 by articulating problems that are either specific to working-class students or more common amongst them. I also examine the consequences of these problems and reiterate the need for service-learning. Next, in Chapter 3 I address some of the more pressing issues that composition instructors and/or theorists have with the current pedagogy. I share some of their own suggestions/solutions before explaining how service-learning contributes to these efforts. Then, in Chapter 4 I explore the myriad benefits of service-learning for working-class students. Some of them relate to composition courses while others are more general, but each one proves that the pedagogy assists working-class students. Finally, in Chapter 5 I investigate my most speculative findings: service-learning promotes understanding of diversity; it leads to higher retention rates for working-class students; and the pedagogy increases the likelihood they will pursue post-graduate degrees. I label this group as speculative because there are currently few studies focused on these particular subjects, which required me to connect the dots between service-learning and class. Indeed, it is a challenge I encountered throughout my thesis.
Despite reports from Campus Compact that the number of service-learning courses has risen steadily over the past ten years, there remains a dearth of research on the relationship between service-learning and class. For this reason I draw upon a wide range of materials to support my interlinking claims. These sources include, but are not limited to, articles about composition pedagogy, studies concerned with the effects of service-learning on college students, critical essays about service-learning, statistics on post-graduate degrees and family income levels, and even an instructional book about increasing faculty diversity intended for university administrations. Ultimately, I create a comprehensive approach to service-learning, class and composition in four-year institutions that touches upon the finer points of each subject to better articulate where they intersect, and I do so hoping that by the end their many connections will be apparent enough to merit further investigation and, more importantly, changes to college composition curriculum.

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7 Campus Compact, a national coalition of college and university presidents whose schools participate in service-learning, reports that its total number of active members grew from 689 in 2000 to 975 by 2005. It continues to grow by an average of 70 campuses every year.
Chapter 2: Working-Class Woes

The Challenges: Academic Under-preparedness

Although cases and causes of academic under-preparedness for college students from working-class backgrounds are already well documented in multiple critical works, the issue is worth revisiting as the best known challenge for working-class students. As the earlier quotation from Rose indicates, working-class students are likely to receive primary and secondary educations that are inferior to their more affluent peers, so when students from neglected schools do make it to college they sometimes arrive at a disadvantage. However, he observes that the under-preparedness working-class students face is two-fold, where quality of education not only means achieving a specific degree of expertise in multiple subjects but fluency with academic discourse as well. Rose explains:

… those coming to the university with less-than privileged educations, especially those from the lower class, are particularly in need. They are less likely to have participated, in any extended way, in such discussions in the past. They won’t have the confidence or the moves to enter it, and can begin to feel excluded, out of place, put off by a language they can’t command. Their social marginality, then, is reinforced by discourse and, as happened to me during my first year at Loyola, they might well withdraw, retreat to silence. (193)

Based on his experiences as both a working-class student and a tutor to them, Rose believes that even working-class students who are fortunate enough to attend schools that prepare them for
college-level work are still at a marked disadvantage; when exposed to unfamiliar academic
discussions they are often unwilling or unable to participate in them. Instead, he consistently sees
working-class students resort to routines they developed in high school to succeed academically
and sadly, like him, they too are confused when these strategies no longer work in a college
setting. Also, Rose humbly admits that only with the help of mentors did he manage to survive
his freshman year while making sure to emphasize that not all working-class students are so
fortunate (55). Yet most working-class students, despite having more resources than Rose did
thirty years ago, continue to underperform their more privileged peers. Worse still, the pressure
that some working-class students place on themselves to succeed can be equally harmful.

The Pressure to Succeed

Attempting to link SAT scores with success in college is nothing new, but the connection
Stephen Cole and Elinor Barber make in Increasing Faculty Diversity\(^8\) manages to complicate
the notion of academic under-preparedness. Results from their study\(^9\) demonstrate that “African
Americans at predominantly white schools, Latinos, and Asians (to a much lesser extent)
underperform white students with the same SAT scores” (125). Whereas Rose might attribute
\(^8\) To avoid the same conflation of race and class I discuss earlier, it is necessary to state that whenever I cite Cole
and Barber I do so knowing the impetus for their study was to improve minority representation in higher education.
Also, they divide these findings according to race, not class, and they make no explicit reference to service-learning.
However, figures from the U.S. Census Bureau study “Income in the United States: 2002” (DeNavus-Walt et al.
2002) state that the median gross income for self-identified “White alone or in combination” households was
$44,964; “Black alone or in combination” was $29,177; “Asian alone or in combination” was $52,285; and
“Hispanic origin of any race” was $33,103 (9). Despite Asians being the highest earners, “U.S.A Quick Facts” from
the U.S. Census Bureau estimates for 2008 show that Blacks and Hispanics represent a much larger percentage
of the population. Whereas Asians were projected to account for only 4.5 percent of the total population, Blacks and
Hispanics were projected to represent a combined 28.2 percent. Based on these figures I extrapolate that a higher
percentage of minority students are working-class than their white peers.

\(^9\) Cole and Barber “obtained data from 7,612 graduating seniors at 34 colleges and universities. The data included
information on input variables, occupational choice, school characteristics, and school experience” (39).
this trend to under-preparedness, Cole and Barber believe the evidence supports Claude Steele’s (1997) theory of “underperformance.” As a social psychologist at Stanford University and an author of multiple works on race and academic performance, Steele believes that the “fear of invoking negative racial stereotyping increases test anxiety and thus [negatively impacts] performance for those minority students who care most about school” (qtd. in Cole and Barber 138). Therefore, poor academic performances by working-class college students may have less to do with preparation and more to do with excessive pressure. Cole and Barber acknowledge this pattern requires further analysis, but if proven true then it should follow that any practice that fosters a more comfortable classroom setting without sacrificing academic standards deserves to be considered.

Furthermore, the pervasive fear of being stereotyped is due in part to another challenge that working-class students face, this being the assumption of academic under-preparedness. Despite earning the approval of an admissions board, working-class students repeatedly find themselves in situations where they must prove their intelligence. For instance, in Teaching Community, bell hooks recalls how she “began college fully believing in my professors’ belief in my capacity to learn,” and subsequently was “shocked when I [hooks] was forced to confront the way in which white-supremacist thinking about the nature of race and intelligence surfaced between professors and myself” (97). Some professors even questioned whether she was receiving outside help to write her papers.
Obviously, hooks believes her race triggered the negative attention, but she also recognizes the connection between this form of discrimination and (mis)perceptions about working-class students. Her essay “Keeping Close to Home” captures this very point:

To be materially underprivileged at a university where most folks (with the exception of workers) are materially privileged provokes such thought. Class differences were boundaries no one wanted to face or talk about. It was easier to downplay them, to act as though we were all from privileged backgrounds, to work around them, to confront them privately in the solitude of one’s room, or to pretend that just being chosen to study at such an institution meant that those of us who did not come from privilege were already in transition towards privilege. To not long for such transition marked one as rebellious, as unlikely to succeed. (101)

For hooks, class differences underlie many of the problems that working-class students have in college, regardless if class itself is ever acknowledged. Actually, avoiding the topic seems to cause more tension because it allows more privileged individuals to project whatever expectations they may already have, and in hooks’ case this meant desiring to no longer identify oneself as working-class. Moreover, she used these demeaning experiences to motivate herself but other working-class students may not be so resilient. Putting pressure on oneself to succeed and then failing is discouraging, but succeeding and then having that success questioned is debilitating. It is a discrete form of discrimination that Sharon Crowley, professor emeritus at Arizona State University and outspoken critic of mandatory composition courses, seizes upon when she criticizes first-year composition courses.
Marginalization through Remedial Education

In her article “Composition’s Ethic of Service, the Universal Requirement and the Discourse of Student Need,” Crowley argues that colleges mark themselves and academic discourse as exclusive when they require composition courses for incoming freshmen. It is the “marginalization of the entire freshman class (except, of course, for those few elect—usually English majors—who are exempted),” which only “serves to underscore and reinforce the exclusivity of academic discourse, both with regard to the academy’s newest members (students and teachers alike) and with regard to culture at large” (229). Having seen the benefits of well-structured composition courses, I do not agree with everything Crowley says, but her words resonate when applied to remedial composition courses. Unlike the solidarity that required courses can generate amongst freshman, remedial courses promote inferiority and otherness. They sever this most basic bond by marking/making one group of students different, and the group is often predominantly working-class. Rose conveys how harmful this ignoble distinction can be:

The curriculum in Developmental English breeds deep social and intellectual isolation from print; it fosters attitudes and beliefs about written language that, more than anything, keep students from becoming fully, richly literate. The curriculum teaches students that when it comes to written language use, they are children: they can only perform the most constrained and ordered of tasks, and they must do so under the regimented guidance of a teacher.... It’s a curriculum that rarely raises students’ heads from the workbook page to consider the many uses of written language that surround them in their schools, jobs, and neighborhood.... These students traverse course after
remedial course, becoming increasingly turned off to writing, increasingly convinced that they are hopelessly inadequate. (211)

Evidently, Rose believes that remedial courses are the ones that marginalize and reinforce exclusivity, especially since first-generation working-class students are true neophytes to higher education. They do not realize that in addition to being separated from peers they are receiving a highly limited version of writing, which Rose believes negatively impacts their attitude toward composition and all forms of writing. Moreover, the NCES study about first-generation college students (Chen 2005) indicates that a higher percentage of working-class students take remedial classes than their privileged peers. It reports, “55 percent [of first-generation students] took remedial courses during their college years, compared with 27 percent of their counterparts whose parents held bachelor’s or advanced degrees” (12). By combining this figure with earlier findings from the same study that demonstrate the majority of first-generation college students are also working-class, we can infer that close to half of all working-class students took at least one remedial course. At the same time, if we agree with Steele’s theory on test anxiety then the expectation that talented working-class students are being (mis)placed in remedial English courses is not farfetched because placement is usually based on test scores (including writing

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10 At this point I must distinguish between The Community Scholars Program I mention earlier and remedial courses. Unlike many remedial composition courses that begin during the fall semester and offer no outside support, Community Scholars starts in the summer as a one-month introduction to academic discourse and college life in general. Then, in the fall semester, students are required to take a beginner writing course that is listed as 009, not the standard 011 beginner course. It is also not open to students who did not participate in the summer program. Yet this difference does not mean the course is remedial. Instead, community scholars are grouped with the same professor and teacher’s assistant from the summer session as well as the same classmates. This level of familiarity and support is designed to foster a more relaxed learning atmosphere, where students feel more comfortable to share. In addition, community scholars have the added benefit of meeting with the teacher’s assistant for writing help in the spring semester even after the beginner writing course ends.
samples) of one sort or another. Unfortunately, those who do manage to avoid the academic trap that is remedial track education still face other obstacles when dealing with students who are not working-class or familiar with working-class issues.

_Alienation from Peers_

As the earlier example from Bobby Allyn shows, working-class students sometimes have problems forming relationships with affluent peers due to their disparate backgrounds. His desire to be accepted trumped the need to be acknowledged as working-class, an identity he both values and wants to escape. For Allyn, “Having to confront uncomfortable realities, like not being able to pay for dinner and having parents who don’t know what the LSAT’s or MCAT’s are, let alone give advice about them, contributed to the divide I felt between myself and my friends” (B33). In fact, many working-class students encounter similar situations both inside and outside the classroom, where the realities of belonging to a different socio-economic status interfere with the “average” college experience. Also, these kinds of negative experiences are not limited to freshman working-class students and/or lower level courses. In the article “Service with a Smile: Class and Community in Advanced Composition,” writing instructors Gary Eddy and Jane Carducci report that “the only unmanageable problem we seem to have with the projects is intimately related to our students’ working-class state…. The culture circles, facing the social situation of the working class, paradoxically, are too often bound by the conditions of the working class to unite in collaborative analysis and effort” (79). In other words, the work that generates labels like working-class, which in turn defines one’s “culture circles,” often prevents working-class students from effectively partnering with more privileged ones. Many either have jobs that occupy their free time, which the NCES study by Choy highlights, or as a minority they
feel singled out, reflecting Allen’s experience. However, what makes Eddy and Carducci’s findings unique is that they transpire in an advanced composition course, thus proving that issues related to class can follow working-class students throughout their college careers, even the ones who were never mired by remedial education. In many ways, the “class circles” they mention are really cultural shackles that restrict the freedom of working-class students to develop relationships with affluent peers. Worse still, feelings of isolation and/or discrimination are likely to be exacerbated when working-class students turn to their families for support if finding friends among peers proves too difficult.

_Alienation from Family_

When working-class students leave for college they are more likely to experience a sense of alienation from family because many do so against the will of their parents. Difficult as this may be to understand, some parents do not see the point of more education or disapprove of the distance. One of my own students is the daughter of migrant farmers who still harvest crops in rural south Texas. Because she already had a “good” job in a local factory, her parents did not understand her decision to attend college. Instead, they accused her of breaking up the family and refused to provide both financial and moral support. Only with the assistance of her teachers did she manage to send off applications, secure financial aid and eventually attend Georgetown. Yet extreme as her case seems such resistance to college is not uncommon among working-class families. In “Keeping Close to Home,” bell hooks recalls: “Like many working-class folks, they [hooks’ parents] feared what college education might do to their children’s minds even as they unenthusiastically acknowledged its importance” (100-01). Despite their recognition that college matters, hooks’ parents still tried to persuade her to stay close to home, which is quite common
among working-class families. According to a study\textsuperscript{11} on freshman trends (Pryor et al. 2005) by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA, “almost half (49.9 percent) of first-generation students chose to attend an institution within 50 miles of their permanent home, compared to only 35.5 percent of their peers” (3). While fiscal issues such as in-state tuition likely factor into these percentages, the difference also indicates that the parents of working-class students are having reactions that are similar to hooks’ parents and subsequently influence their children to stay closer to home. Sadly, this kind of pressure is also likely to create a sense of loss, guilt and sometimes abandonment that many working-class students carry with them when they arrive at college.

\textit{Alienation from the Community}

Attending college can be a double loss because, in addition to feeling alienated from family, working-class students might have trouble identifying with their new communities, or even feel discriminated against by them. I base this on earlier examples of challenges that working-class students encounter when dealing with peers, but there are others. Rosemary L. Arca, an instructor of developmental reading and writing classes at Foothill College in Los Altos Hills, California, begins her service-learning courses “by talking about our ‘villages,’ those communities to which we belong by choice and whose rituals and experiences we share. These discussions are especially illuminating because basic writers often feel marginalized from many of the communities that society values” (136). Arca’s students clearly reflect the second part of the double loss; they feel discriminated against because their new collegiate society often only

\textsuperscript{11} “The data in this report come from weighted responses 263,710 students at 385 of the nation’s baccalaureate colleges and universities” (3).
values middle to upper-class communities and discourses. Meanwhile, their more familiar
druidical rituals are either absent because it is difficult to find other working-class students
to share them with or they are hidden out of embarrassment. In many ways these students are
being forced to choose villages; between friends and family, future and past, middle class
identity and working class home. Except to choose is to be made complicit in the double loss.
Pam Annas, a professor at the University Massachusetts, Boston and self-proclaimed working-
class scholar, has a slightly different take though. As she sees it, “Class, like sexual preference
and some forms of disability, is less immediately visible than race or gender. One can choose not
to pass, to claim one’s identity and heritage and the recognition of complexity that goes along
with that or one can choose to deny all this” (170). So when Arca guides her students back to
their complete selves via service-learning there is still the risk that other professors will reinforce
the all or nothing scenario that Annas mentions.

At the same time, the challenge of marginalization for working-class students is related to
their narratives missing from the literary canon and most curricula. Rose reflects that “one of the
tasks facing all freshman is to figure out ways to counter this loneliness…. But a much deeper
sense of isolation comes if the loneliness you feel is rooted in the books and lectures that
surround you, in the very language of the place” (174). This response is especially true for
working-class students because their experience is rarely discussed in non-specialized courses.
According to Vivyan Adair in “Class Absences: Cutting Class in Feminist Studies,” there are
few places for working-class voices to be heard in higher education. Her analysis “of more than
100-introductory-level syllabi from a range of public and private colleges and universities”
shows that “identity at the intersection of gender and class (and with other variables) was
considered only 7 percent of the time” (577). In addition, she finds that this neglect extends to
upper-level course syllabi as well as the anthologies and textbooks they use, all of which reveals a form of institutionalized ignorance. Moreover, the continued absence of working-class narratives from reading lists implies they are not worth discussing and intimates neither are the communities that produce them. Of course not every professor has the freedom to select their course materials, particularly composition instructors, but this does not explain the extent to which working-class narratives are ignored. It may even be a sign that college administrations are purposely avoiding such texts, this despite the fact their omission contradicts the mission statements for most liberal arts programs, which claim to expand student imagination through exposure to new ideas. Rose echoes these sentiments when he states, “the canonical orientation encourages a narrowing of focus from learning to that which must be learned: It simplifies the dynamic tension between student and text and reduces the psychological and social dimensions of instruction. The student’s personal history recedes as the what of the classroom is valorized over the how” (235). Although all students are susceptible to this “narrowing of focus” the experience is likely to be pernicious only for working-class students since theirs are the personal histories commonly excluded. Meanwhile, if the text does not portray the experience of privileged students either, rarely will it also challenge them to (re)evaluate their privileged positions.

_Alienation from Faculty_

Equally disconcerting is that when discussions about class do take place they sometimes deteriorate into scholarly slam sessions. Adair recalls: “My own profound sense of dislocation as a poor white student was exacerbated in classes in which I became both the subject and the object of investigation. I recall one particularly painful experience of liminality: in my graduate
feminist studies class focused on women’s activism, students and teacher alike lamented and laughed at the inability of the poor to ever come to political consciousness” (595). Whereas Adair’s study reveals how professors can reinscribe marginalization at the macro level (the canon) her testimony highlights how they sometimes promote it at the micro level (the classroom). Obviously, making jokes at the expense of a person and/or community being studied is not sound pedagogical practice, yet this kind of reckless behavior persists because working-class students are afraid to challenge their professors (and rightfully so) while faculty are too willing to give the benefit of the doubt to their colleagues. However, bell hooks condemns this response (or lack thereof), declaring, “Until the power of shaming is taken seriously as a threat to the well-being of all students, particularly individuals from marginalized and/or subordinated groups, no amount of support staff, positive programming, or material resources will lead to academic excellence” (101). Not only is hooks right on solid moral ground, she is supported by multiple studies that verify the profound impact professors can have on their students. According to research from Pascarella and Terenzini in How College Affects Students: Findings and Insights from Twenty Years of Research, interactions between faculty and students positively influence sociopolitical attitudes and values, academic and social self-concept, intellectual orientation, and general maturity. However, imperative to these positive results are equally positive stimuli, which means that negative interactions are just as likely to produce the kind of negative results Adair and hooks mention and ultimately lead to a diminished sense of academic self-confidence.
Lack of Academic Self-Confidence

All of the aforementioned challenges combine to wound the academic self-confidence of working-class students. Beginning with the connection that Cole and Barber make between minority test anxiety and the fear of reinforcing negative stereotypes, we learn that academic self-confidence is an issue for even the most promising of students. Their study finds that “[u]nderperformance is greatest for African Americans and Latinos who have the highest SAT scores,” and though a strong performance on one test is not a reliable measure for future success in college, it is nonetheless telling that working-class students who are assumed to be the most qualified cannot keep pace with their more privileged peers (138). This indicates that the problem is not a lack of intellectual aptitude but academic self-confidence. Similarly, Crowley claims that required composition courses aggrandize academic discourse at the expense of marginalizing incoming freshman (229). It is a cogent argument that turns compelling when applied to remedial courses because, as the NCES study (Chen 2005) on first-generation college students indicates, a higher percentage of working-class students participate in remedial courses than more privileged ones. In both situations working-class students are placed in discriminatory classroom environments, but while the former may be unfamiliar the latter is likely to cripple their academic self-confidence and/or confirm the stereotypes that many working-class students already fear. As the earlier example from Eyler and Giles verifies, when working-class students receive little support, or worse, the remedial classes are their support, they begin to perform at the level expected of them.

Likewise, Rose carefully notes, “We set out to determine what a child knows in order to tailor instruction, but we frequently slot rather than shape, categorize rather foster. And the poorer the kids are—the less power their parents have—the more likely are their chances of
being … hurt about their intelligence” (128). This observation ties together Cole and Barber’s interpretation of underperformance with Crowley’s ideas on compositional marginalization because the process of slotting increases the potential for failure. For working-class students, remedialization is marginalization by other means, but still has the same effect of lowering academic self-confidence. For example, when bell hooks juxtaposes her teaching experiences at Yale with those from City College of New York, she “found that my [her] students at this public institution were just as brilliant and open to learning as my beloved Yalies, but that the difference was often in levels of self-esteem. Low self-esteem led many a brilliant student in Harlem to self-sabotage” (18). Self-esteem is not exactly the same as academic self-confidence though the two are closely related, but more significant is the detail that its absence caused hooks’ less privileged students to ‘self-sabotage,’ which reiterates that intelligence without confidence yields underperformance. Also, since working-class students are more likely to face challenges to their academic self-confidence, any practice that facilitates a more respectful classroom environment deserves to be considered. However, lurking behind this issue is the final challenge, a lack of academic authority.

_Lack of Academic Authority_

Unlike academic self-confidence which focuses on intellect, academic authority concerns the real and/or perceived ability of students to affect change through their writing and classroom participation. It is not an issue of whether they are smart enough to engage their peers and professors but rather if their participation actually makes a difference. If working-class students believe that their thoughts/opinions matter then they will be more apt to share them. However, as the examples of Adair’s study and Arca’s classroom discussions demonstrate, working-class
narratives are rarely studied in college which sends a clear message to students they and their predecessors are neither valued by academia nor have the potential to shape it. Consequently, working-class students tend to resist sharing their thoughts during classroom discussions, a pattern confirmed by Arca’s own experience as a composition instructor. She says, “When basic writers enter our classrooms, they arrive with a diminished view of themselves and of the power they have to effect change. They often come with no sense of authority—the power to influence or persuade—in their lives, in their expressions in written text, or their participation in class discussion” (133). Her insight that working-class students consider themselves powerless even before they attend college reiterates the lack of power I use to define them. At the same time Arca echoes Rose’s earlier point that working-class students may lack the confidence to enter into academic discourse, whether it be speaking in class or writing an essay. Academy authority takes time to develop, so the longer it takes working-class students to assert themselves the less likely they are to begin the process. Finally, she reveals the strong connection between academic authority and composition courses because, unlike the sciences, standards and expectations are not concrete. Grades are assigned based on the effectiveness of the argument, but since working-class students already question their power they are less willing to assert themselves in papers and subsequently less likely to earn high marks for writing. Instead, poor performance repeats their inability to effect positive change and, depending upon the response of the professor, transforms writing into a dreaded task. For this reason and many others, I explore the current state of composition courses and proposed changes in Chapter 3, but first I discuss the consequences of these challenges.
The Consequences: Lower Grades

Perhaps the most obvious and immediate consequence for working-class students is lower grades. The NCES study by Chen (2005) confirms that first-generation college students do not perform as well as their peers during the first year of college and throughout their enrollment. For example, first-generation students had an average GPA of 2.6 versus an average GPA of 2.9 for students whose parents had a bachelor’s degree or higher (37). Also worth noting is that “first-generation students were more likely than other students to withdraw from or repeat courses they attempted to study,” which makes sense considering the previous finding of lower grades (38). At the same time, these findings indicate why working-class students are more likely to leave college altogether.

Lower Retention Rates

Even as the number of working-class students attending college rises they continue to have lower retention rates than their more privileged peers. According to the NCES study by Choy (2001), “First-generation students were about twice as likely [to drop out their first year] as those whose parents had bachelor’s degrees to do so (23 versus 10 percent)” (22). Also, the study finds that “first-generation students were less likely than others to return to a 4-year institution once they left” (23). In fact, after 5 years “[f]irst-generation students were less likely than other

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12 While this outcome resembles the trend of underperformance that Cole and Barber discuss, it is not the same thing. Underperformance refers to Claude Steele’s theory that minority students earn lower grades than white peers because of test anxiety provoked by the fear that poor scores will reiterate negative stereotypes. It is one of many challenges working-class students face and it is the combination of any/all of these factors that contributes to the consequence of lower grades.

13 According to a another study by HERI about freshman trends (Pryor 2008), “White students represented 90.9 percent of the first-time, full-time freshmen in 1971 and their proportion declined to 76.5 percent in 2006, indicating proportional increases in the representation of other racial/ethnic groups and demographic shifts in the U.S. population” (1). Considering that many first-generation minority students are also working-class then an overall increase of minority students indicates an increase in working-class students as well.
students to have earned a bachelor’s degree (13 versus 33 percent)” (26). All of these figures illustrate that working-class students are less likely to graduate from four-year institutions than their more privileged peers. At the same time Clifford Adelman, a former U.S. Department of Education research analyst, adds to this discussion with his article “Diversity: Walk the Walk and Drop the Talk.” He finds “that two-thirds of the students in remedial reading in college are also in at least two other remedial courses, and that their chances of completing a bachelor’s degree by age 30 are about one in eight” (40). As I point to earlier, the challenge of remedial education is not the difficulty of coursework but the negative perception of self that these courses generate. Based on Adelman’s findings, it appears that students who feel marginalized are prone to dropping out, while the fact that most students in remedial reading courses are also in other remedial courses likely compounds this problem. Moreover, because these courses are occupied by a higher percentage of working-class students we can infer that remedial education is one reason for their low retention rates. But Adelman also presents data revealing that while minority access to college has increased, there has not been a corresponding increase in completion rates, which means remedial education is not the sole challenge. Just because many of the students in remedial courses are working-class does not mean the majority of working-class students are in remedial classes. All of the challenges I mention earlier contribute to low retention rates and I focus on remedial classes only because they are (supposedly) designed to increase success, not stifle it. Meanwhile, working-class students who do manage to graduate from four-year institutions are unlikely to pursue post-graduate degrees.
Lower Percentages Attending Graduate School

Table 1: Percentage of Doctorates Earned in English Language/Literature, American Literature and All Doctorates, By Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>English Lang/Lit</th>
<th>American Lit</th>
<th>All Doctorates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>92.9%</td>
<td>80.7%</td>
<td>82.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


According to Table 1, which shows results from the “Survey of Earned Doctorates” (SED), American Indians, Asians, Blacks and Hispanics made up 17.8 percent of total doctorates earned in 2006, a fact that should indicate not enough is being done to encourage and/or recruit working-class students into doctoral programs. Instead, The Chronicle of Education reports “the number of … minority doctorate recipients has ballooned.” In fact, “The number of black and Hispanic U.S. citizens receiving doctorates more than doubled in the past 20 years, and the number of Asian recipients almost tripled” (B40). Yet encouraging as these statistics appear, the numbers inevitably expose how far academia still has to go in addressing the needs of students from multiple demographics. To learn that minorities receive less than one-

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14 This is an annual study performed by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago for U.S. government agencies.

15 The ethnic categories “Native American, Asian, Black” and “Hispanic” are provided by the study, as is the field name “English language and literature.”
fifth of all doctorates is disconcerting, while the numbers for doctorates earned in subjects like English (7.3 percent) and American literature (19.3 percent) are no less deplorable. Still, there remains hope that more minority students will pursue post-graduate degrees; Cole and Barber report that based on their data “if African Americans and Latinos had the same grade distribution of white students, there would be a meaningful increase in the proportion selecting academia as a first-choice career” (137). The only problem is that the aforementioned challenges which result in lower grades for working-class students also dissuade them from pursuing academia. And this trend is unlikely to end soon because working-class students who do pursue graduate degrees are less likely to become professors.

By choosing professions other than teaching, working-class students guarantee their underrepresentation in academia will continue. However, reasons for this decision are neither straightforward nor wholly expected. According to Cole and Barber, one of the greatest detractors of becoming a professor is the (mis)perception that helping others is not possible in academia. They report:

In the focus groups some members of minority groups, particularly African Americans and Latinos, indicated that one reason why they wouldn’t be interested in an academic career is that they were interested in doing work that would help their people or improve social conditions for their people. Some thought that they could accomplish this with an academic career, but others saw the world of academia as too remote—the proverbial ivory tower. (160)
The belief that as professors working-class students cannot help “their people” may be caused by the double loss I discussed earlier. If these students feel isolated from both their families and fellow students in a university setting then naturally they do not expect any of this to change once they become a part of that discriminatory system. Additionally, if working-class students never form relationships with professors and/or the experiences they do have are consistently negative then they are unlikely to consider becoming one. However, the most influential factor for whether working-class students will choose academia remains their level of academic self-confidence.

Based upon results from their study, Cole and Barber conclude: “It is very clear that among students with low levels of academic self-confidence virtually no one wants to become a college professor…. For all four ethnic groups, when self-confidence was low, college professor was the least popular of the five leading occupations; when it was high, college professor was the most popular of the leading occupations, except for Asians” (120). This result validates the earlier prediction by Cole and Barber that higher grades for minority students will lead to a “considerable rise” in the overall number pursuing graduate degrees since grades are instrumental to academic self-confidence. More importantly, it shows that improving the academic performance of working-class students could lead to a corresponding rise in those that choose to stay in academia. But this link also reintroduces the dilemma of prioritizing that emerged when discussing the original consequence of lower grades. To properly address one consequence, or even one cause of a consequence, requires addressing all of them. Therefore it makes sense to confront these issues in the subject that affects the most students: composition.
Chapter 3: Composition at the Crossroads

The Current Pedagogy: The Gate-Keeper Role

For years now composition has been in a state of crisis. Despite repeated calls by experts in the field to reform curriculum, canon and ultimately pedagogy, university English departments have been slow to act. As a result, arguments concerning the identity as well as the relevancy of composition courses persist with little consensus besides the trite determination that something must be done. And nowhere is this struggle more apparent (or more important) than introductory composition courses for first year students where first impressions of academic writing and learning bear upon future performance and success, especially for working-class students.

Presently, the most notorious issue with composition courses is the gate-keeper role they perform. Numerous academics have denounced the way freshman writing seminars in particular marginalize and gradually homogenize student voices, which they achieve through the legitimized process of grading. David Bartholomae even begins his essay “What is Composition and (if you know what that is) Why Do We Teach It?” by noting that the problem is now endemic to the pedagogy. He explains, “When I refer to composition, I mean the institutionally supported desire to organize and evaluate the writing of unauthorized writers, to control writing in practice, and to define it as an object of professional scrutiny” (11). Bartholomae provides this incisive definition in order to criticize the current state of Composition, namely its proclivity towards criticism and ultimately control. He also laments how this practice leads to a generic academic voice that sacrifices creativity in the name of convenience. Similarly, Sharon Crowley views freshman Composition as a form of institutional indoctrination. She contends “This is the instrumental service ethic of the required composition course: to make student writing available
for surveillance until it can be certified to conform to whatever standards are deemed to mark it, and its authors, as suitable for admission to the discourses of the academy” (228). Crowley not only recognizes that the requirement of certification is used to silence nonconformist student voices but, like Bartholomae, she sees the practice as prevalent enough to label “instrumental.” Yet all the while these unauthorized writers are typically working-class students since they are less likely to have mastered, let alone be exposed to college-level academic discourse.

The price of college should no longer deter and/or discriminate against working-class students. In fact, many four-year institutions now actively court them by offering generous need-based, financial-aid packages while community colleges act as a conduit for students who might not be accepted due to lower grades and/or want to stay close to home. However, even when working-class students do enter academia, composition courses can still keep their literary voices out, and this process involves both reading and writing. Rose observes, “There is much talk these days about the value of a classical humanistic education, a call for an immersion in the humanities, a return to the great books. These appeals raise lots of suspicions, for such curricula have traditionally served to exclude working-class people from the classroom” (48). Based upon earlier examples of working-class narratives being left off reading lists and the negative consequences that their absence produces, Rose is right to worry; a lack of working-class voices in the reading all but ensures their lack in academic writing. Unless students are encouraged to find their voice, they resort to assigned readings as models for what their professors expect, which has negative consequences for both their learning capacity and retention ability.
Between universities and even within English departments there is no consensus on what freshman writing seminars should achieve, so with little guidance instructors inevitably promote good writing as some version of their own writing. I know this firsthand because in my own writing courses the first question I ask is what makes good writing, to which I am always amazed by the breadth of responses as well as the degree of assuredness from my students. However, a lot of what I hear is arbitrary grammar rules rather than sound writing practices, which bolsters Stephen North’s claim that students do not really learn to write in composition courses but to copy. In the article “Composition Now, Standing On One’s Head,” North explains that “[f]or the average or better student—and these are the ones who traditionally have gone to college—education has always meant conforming to the teacher’s standards” (178). This is both the purpose and problem of composition made explicit. Due to the subjective nature of grading papers students often write for the teacher and not for themselves, which research shows makes the process less fulfilling and more formulaic. For example, the study16 “Motivation in the Composition Class” by Williams and Alden reveals that “[p]art of the difficulty lies in the very structure of the classroom: its artificiality and the imposed nature of assignment debilitate intrinsic motivation and bring extrinsic factors to the fore. But an even larger part lies in the pervasive failure of composition, as a discipline, to recognize the significance of these extrinsic factors” (102). Specifically, only 20 percent of their extrinsically motivated subjects “place a high value on being able to write well” while an impressive 68 percent of their intrinsically motivated subjects responded that they do value writing well (107). In addition, Williams and

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16 “Over a two-week period at the end of the fall semester, 1980, the investigators [Williams and Alden] administered a questionnaire to 300 freshmen at USC who were finishing their first semester of college composition” (103).
Alden “note without surprise that the extrinsically motivated subjects, unlike their counterparts, are uninterested in teacher comments on papers. The grade is their most important concern, even though 72.1% believe that grades on writing assignments are based totally on subjective evaluation” (109). These findings indicate that students do in fact write for the teacher instead of for themselves. Equally disconcerting is that they find the grading process arbitrary and are subsequently less likely to value feedback. Yet this failure to promote the intrinsic value of writing well is unlikely to change until composition instructors learn to value writing that is personal.

Because instructors are already conditioned to reading highly formalized versions of academic writing that value professional discourse over personal, they in turn expect the same from their students. Richard E. Miller, like Bartholomae, criticizes this default teaching position in his article “The Nervous System” and how difficult it is to motivate and/or inspire students without soliciting personal experiences. He shares:

… by virtue of my own position as a writing instructor I know that “love and care” do not naturally or automatically translate into a pedagogical practice that meaningfully alters the students’ experience of reading and writing in the academy … these goals become imaginable when I conceive of the work of the classroom as an ongoing project where I learn how to hear what my students are saying…. This is the only approach I know of for making the classroom a possible resource for hope and it is the only mechanism I’ve found for transforming recitations and revelations of personal experience into moments for reflection and revision about the complex, conflicted, and contradictory ways that culture makes its presence known in the day-to-day working of one’s life. (283)
Miller recognizes how difficult it is for students to find meaning in writing when assignments not only prevent what they can say but also how they can say it, and he demonstrates this awareness by referring to the exchange between academic personal experience and academic discourse as an “ongoing project.” However, many expository writing courses consider personal writing incompatible with academic discourse and most discourage its use. Obviously, this adversely affects modes of expression for all students, but the impact is more severe on working-class writers.

When working-class students are required to perform academic writing they react in one of several ways. The first is that underprepared students find the task of adjusting their literary voices too difficult while the ones already feeling isolated from home consider this requirement a form of betrayal. Either way, the result is lower grades, if not failure, which figures from the previous chapter indicate. The next likely response is that working-class students manage to adjust and may even excel but, as North predicts, they do so by conforming. However, for them this process is closer to assimilation, because with enough time and repetition, whatever was unique (aka unauthorized) about their voices disappears. In “The Still-Unbuilt Hacienda,” Geoffrey Sirc observes that instead of classrooms “what we build are Museums, peculiar sorts of cultural temples in which students are “invited” in to sample the best that has been thought and expressed in our language and maybe even, like the art students we see poised in galleries with their sketchbooks and charcoals, to learn to reproduce the master’s craft” (2). More importantly, based upon the observations of Bartholomae, Crowley, and North, Sirc’s analogy for the university classroom seems to have found its culmination in composition courses. Also, his comparison reaffirms composition’s gate-keeper role where students are allowed to enter academia but their narratives and/or forms of discourse are not. This is why the last response is
also the least likely; working-class students fight to maintain their voice and manage to carve out a niche in the academy. For example, Masani Alexis De Veaux shares how difficult it was to receive permission to write her Master’s thesis for the State University of New York at Buffalo in African-American Vernacular English:

Harlem shaped me for the stance I took while earning my master’s degree; and when researching and writing my dissertation. For I wanted it written in my own voice. Not in the “scholar-ese” of a White, male-dominated, academic, abstract language. Devoid of my class, racial, sexual realities. I wanted it written in the multiple languages I have learned to speak. Reflective of, and incorporating, my mother’s tongue. Wanted it written within the frames of my own intelligence, creativity, and aesthetic. My own history. Wanted to celebrate and validate language spoken by women in my family—in an arena where the existence of our language has been systematically denigrated and denied. (81)

De Veaux reiterates the emphasis of “scholar-ese” in academic discourse and how it discriminates against the personal. The decision to write in her “mother’s tongue” is more about respecting background and less about disrespecting academia, though as she points out, it generally disrespects both De Veaux and her people. It is this kind of (mis)treatment that pressures most successful working-class students into abandoning their voice.

Learning as Memorization

When composition instructors present learning as conforming the likelihood that their students will retain something of value is predictably low. In fact, empirical studies by economist
Howard Bowen (1977) reveal that “50 to 80 percent of what is learned [in college and university] courses is lost within one year” (88). One likely reason for this loss is presentation. For example, in “What Students Think About and Do in College Lecture Classes,” H. R. Pollio finds that while teachers are lecturing, students do not pay attention to what is being said 40 percent of the time. Similarly, Wilbert J. McKeachie reports in *Teaching Tips* that in the first ten minutes of lecture, students retain 70 percent of the information, but only 20 percent in the last ten minutes. Therefore, lessons where instructors mostly lecture appear not to transfer knowledge but merely challenge students to memorize details. This trend appears to occur among writing students as well, who are less likely to apply writing skills that they learn in composition courses when they encounter writing assignments in later courses. Earlier findings from Williams and Alden point to this trend, but other research indicates that prosaic approaches to teaching writing can produce unmotivated and/or uninspired writers.

Poor presentation leads to a lack of application, which is the other reason students fail to retain what they learn in class. Eyler and Giles report that “students rarely transferred knowledge and principles learned in classroom instruction to new problems…. Only repeated attempts to solve similar problems and support and encouragement to apply what was learned seemed to lead to application” (8). Just as professors who dominate conversation leave their students little time to discuss their own ideas, composition instructors that teach writing as conforming do not give students the chance to find their own literary voices. While this approach may create a more efficient writer, earlier studies show that it does not generate student interest and subsequently fails to produce long-term learning. At the same time this apathy engendered by poor presentation and/or a lack of application might further explain why working-class students avoid English undergraduate and post-graduate degrees more than other humanities options.
Based upon results from the “Survey of Earned Doctorates,” which finds that only 7.3 percent of English studies doctorates are earned by minorities versus 19.3 percent for American literature, there seems to be a strong correlation between a student’s ability to connect with course material and their eagerness to study the subject. It is likely that early negative experiences with writing seminars not only reinforce the ivory tower image for college that Cole and Barber discuss, but also make composition its official gate-keeper. These include the aforementioned emphasis on academic writing style over personal substance and the distance it creates between students and subject matter. Even when beginner expository writing courses start with an assignment involving/inviting autobiographical details, the working-class students that arrive sensing they lack power and/or are already suspicious of academia might be apprehensive to share anything meaningful in their work. Equally plausible is that this first assignment is the only one that allows such sharing, as was the case in the Community Scholars Program. Conversely, the nature of American literature necessitates that it welcomes more unauthorized voices in both number and force, which makes the subject more compelling and ultimately more popular amongst working-class students as the numbers indicate. Thus, based upon statistics, studies and observations from multiple sources, if English departments want to attract as well as retain working-class students they need to make their material easier to connect with, and the best place to start remains freshman writing courses.17

17 Before I move on to proposed curriculum changes it is worth acknowledging that I chose not to address the issue of staffing freshman writing seminars with novice instructors. To me this is more a professional matter than a pedagogical one and involves multiple topics that are not germane to an examination of composition and service-learning. I also recognize that if English departments are serious about augmenting their curriculum they will eventually have to tackle this problem. Still, I believe it makes more sense to establish what are the best practices before asking who is the most qualified considering the former is typically what is used to determine the latter.
Brave New Composition: Exposing Students to Different Discourses

Many of the proposals for improving composition courses either complement or build upon one another. Each of them recognizes the significance of reintroducing the world to the classroom and, not surprisingly, this process begins by valuing discourses other than academic writing.

As the previous section demonstrates, composition often represents academic writing as the most important form of communication, which Peter Elbow contends is neither practical nor productive. In his article “Reflections on Academic Discourse, he makes several key points about academic discourse and composition courses, the first being that “The writing that most students will need to do for most of their lives will be for their jobs—and that writing is very different from academic discourse” (136). Naturally, there are numerous communication skills students learn from writing essays that can and should be applied elsewhere, but the essay is not a common form of expression outside of academia and therefore does not deserve special attention. Instead, to truly prepare students for the future Elbow argues “for one kind of non-academic discourse … that tries to render experience rather than explain it” (136, his emphasis). Specifically, he wants to involve autobiographical material in academic discourse more often in order to “take a larger view of human discourse” (137). This approach would account for findings that true learning requires application because by exposing students to multiple rhetorical writing situations they learn to discern the effective responses to future real world scenarios. Also, to maximize effectiveness, Elbow encourages the students to communicate with constituencies outside their insular disciplines, which allows them to observe different discourses

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18 It is important to note that Elbow is not arguing against academic discourse. He is merely trying to make it more effective for writing students. Elbow explains that “These are not arguments against academic discourse; only for teaching something else in addition” (136).
in action and learn by example. Ultimately, professors and students alike have more to gain if they move beyond their equally insular university setting.

Shirley Brice Heath, a distinguished linguistic anthropologist, agrees with Elbow’s plan, except she believes writing courses benefit students more when they engage with non-academic communities. Particularly, in “Work, Class, and Categories: Dilemmas of Identity,” she lauds how:

A variety of institutions [other than colleges and their composition courses] are responding to personal, spiritual, and civic needs, as well as business changes, to develop opportunities and add courses or build programs to meet these needs…. In the new settings, these groups enable writers to merge formal and informal writing across genres, audiences, and institutional and personal contexts…. Just as we have seen ourselves cross disciplines, we will watch more and more of us move across institutions. (231)

Whereas Elbow wants to bring the outside world into the classroom Heath supports pushing the classroom into the outside world. Writing is still an integral component, but instead of rhetorical situations she wants assignments with consequences, work that responds to community needs. Heath further diverges from Elbow when she recognizes that her objective(s) might require the creation of entirely new institutions rather than simply adding to preexisting structures, which is a far greater commitment for professors than altering writing assignments. Even so, both strategies share the same goal: to invest writing with meaning and practicality beyond the classroom setting. And it is this very desire that has led other writing instructors to
transform composition courses in ways that shift focus away from what they know to what their students might, thereby making once objective material personal, or at least engaging.

Making the Coursework Personal

By actively relating course materials to real life and vice versa writing instructors begin to challenge the gate-keeper model of composition that exists/persists. For instance, Elbow echoes Miller when he suggests that “Reading and listening might go better if we sometimes said, “Let’s start with what you have to say. Then we’ll see if the reading can respond to it and serve it” (14). For many professors this teaching model is dangerous because it requires ceding some of their power to students as well as admitting that they, and by association universities, are not the only authority on all things academic. However, English departments that hope to remain relevant and/or retain students cannot afford to continue devaluing personal experience. In fact, involving students in the learning process is not only useful but some scholars would argue natural. Throughout Teaching Community bell hooks expresses this idea when she argues on behalf of a similar student-centered teaching model. She explains:

Teachers who have a vision of democratic education assume that learning is never confined solely to an institutionalized classroom … the democratic educator … seeks to re-envision schooling as always a part of our real world experience, and our real life…. When teachers support democratic education we automatically support widespread literacy. Ensuring literacy is the vital link between the public school system and university settings. (41)
By using the term “democratic education” hooks argues that learning should function as a democracy where anyone can participate, which for her includes allowing experiences that are atypical of the “institutionalized classroom.” Similarly, when she substitutes the label of teacher with “democratic educator” hooks reminds educators of all levels that they are not authority figures but civil servants, which contradicts the top-down model that most composition courses uphold. In both cases, hooks chooses her words carefully to emphasize the unalienable right of students to actively participate in class and even relate their experiences to course materials.

Meanwhile, the point that hooks makes about widespread literacy being the “vital link” between public schools and universities is not simply a matter of proficiency in both reading and writing. Rather, she is referring to their shared mission of openness in education. This applies to the earlier observation that universities may no longer refuse admission along class lines but continue to deny working-class voices by promoting writing that is objective and impersonal, which obfuscates class itself. If openness is the purpose of the university but academic discourse remains its primary point of entry, then composition must function in a more democratic fashion to ensure that all students benefit from such courses. To wit, writing instructors should allow students to link personal experiences with course materials because it makes academic discourse more familiar. Also, based upon her purposeful use of the term “democratic,” hooks would support this more fluid style of teaching writing, which starts with what students want/have to say instead of telling them how to say it.

Providing Proper Support

All of these recommendations are only the first pedagogical steps in addressing the diverse needs of working-class students. Mike Rose testifies “to journey up through the top
levels of the American educational system will call for support and guidance at many, many points along the way. You’ll need people to guide you into conversations … models, lots of them to show you how to get to what you don’t know … people to help you center yourself in your own developing ideas” (47-48). In many ways this quotation represents what composition should be and what it is fast becoming. Being guided into conversations resembles Elbow’s unequivocal focus on writing as application; providing models is similar to Heath leaving the limited classroom setting in favor of inter-linking with other institutions; and having people to help center ideas reflects hooks’ conception of democratic education. But at the same time Rose’s words reiterate the need for a pedagogy that is versatile enough to address multiple issues simultaneously, which is where we begin find the link between service-learning and composition.

Why Service-Learning in Composition: Reaching Those in Need

Service-learning transforms subject matter into human subjects, creating student agency as it makes learning more tangible. Specifically, the National Service-Learning Clearing House (NSLC) explains, “Service-learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.” If composition experts/educators are serious about reforming the pedagogy, which also means addressing the needs of working-class students, then they should be investigating these and the many other benefits of service-learning if not already using it in writing courses.

In spite of its many issues freshman composition remains the most ubiquitous college course, making it the best place to incorporate service-learning for several reasons. Time is of the
essence for working-class students so the sooner they are exposed to service-learning the better. Many of the issues they face like marginalization begin the moment they start class, while other problems like a sense of powerlessness and/or isolation appear even before they arrive on campus. Also, service-learning supports many of the changes that composition scholars suggest, which I revisit and thoroughly examine in Chapter 4. For now it should suffice to say that making course materials and academic discourse more accessible is particularly important to working-class students who, as Rose points out, are likely to be unfamiliar with both. Likewise, adding service-learning to freshman writing courses matters because, according to Eyler et al., “Providing purely voluntary opportunities through co-curricular options or curricular options through a handful of professional or specialized service-learning courses will not reach the students who have the most to gain” (11). However, by increasing the number of writing courses that incorporate service-learning, the rate of vulnerable freshmen slipping through the cracks of academia should decline, particularly working-class students.

Further investigation demonstrates that working-class students have the most to gain from service-learning being introduced to composition courses. One study from James Davis (1965) finds that roughly half of college graduates end up in the same career they favored as freshman, but this pattern fails when applied to working-class students interested in academia today. According to Cole and Barber, the percentage of freshman that want to become professors is 34 percent for Whites, 22 percent for African Americans, 32 percent for Asians and 30 percent for Latinos, respectively (67). Yet if only half of each minority that wanted to become professors did so per Davis’ study, the rate of minority students earning doctorates would be considerably higher than current percentages. Even having 11 percent of African American seniors (the group least interested in becoming professors) is more impressive than the 2 percent of doctorates they
earned in English and still greater than the 9.5 percent they earned in American Literature. The disparity is still more drastic when the same formula is applied to Latino and Asian students. Granted, this mixing of figures and studies is not an exact science and I realize that minorities may be pursuing other doctorates in higher numbers. Nonetheless, the fact remains that two disciplines commonly associated with academic writing have extremely low minority representation, which indicates once again not enough is being done to appeal to multiple demographics, especially those that include a high proportion of working-class students.

_Curing the “Empty Assignment Syndrome”_

Another reason to start early with service-learning includes what Gay W. Brack and Leanna R. Hall refer to as “Empty Assignment Syndrome,” which is when students do not see a purpose to coursework and subsequently put little or no effort into their assignments. As the gate-keeper function and other aforementioned issues evince, the condition is endemic to freshman writing courses due to the proclivity of instructors to value literary imitation above intellectual stimulation, and this despite studies like the one from Williams and Alden that vindicate the latter. Brack and Hall reiterate that isolating academic discourse from personal experience risks alienating large portions of students as well as reaffirm the need for students to be engaged with their learning. Thus, a more personal approach not only echoes earlier suggestions by Elbow and Heath but appears to be an effective treatment for “Empty Assignment Syndrome.” This line of thinking may seem obvious enough until we consider the current state of composition, which scholars like Bartholomae, Crowley, North, and Miller all criticize for continuing to elevate objective and impersonal academic discourse. If writing instructors want to get the most not just from working-class students but from their entire class, then they must
motivate by connecting course material with personal interests, and it appears that one of these includes participation in service.

According to the HERI study on college freshman (Pryor 2006), “Students are not only interested in helping others through service; they believe it is important to personally take action at different levels” (1). Specifically, one in four students agrees that it is essential or very important for them to personally participate in a community action program, which is the highest level since 1996. Also, an even larger number of students consider becoming a community leader essential or very important, and still more believe that it is essential or very important for them to influence social values (1). Together these statements indicate that it is not just interest in service that is on the rise, but that more students are internalizing these experiences and now consider service a part of themselves. In addition, service-learning is an important component for writing courses that deal with polemical issues, as they sometimes do. By only providing reading and/or writing assignments that confront sensitive topics, instructors fail to capitalize on the growing desire of students to respond to these problems in constructive ways. For example, based on research as well as personal teaching experiences Adler-Kassner et al. state:

In fact, uncovering negative statistics on social problems such as AIDS, teen pregnancy, child abuse, and homelessness was making the students despondent. Literacy scholars had thought that information would be empowering, but they quickly learned that from the young students that analysis without action was inadequate. In many ways, this is the fundamental lesson that our colleges and universities can learn from service-learning projects. Analysis combined with action is the cornerstone of this new movement. (27)
Thus, to make coursework not just personal but also productive writing instructors should supplement reading and writing assignments with service-learning. Doing so counteracts negative responses that Adler-Kassner et al. mention because the pedagogy enables students to sublimate their learning experience. However, the practice does not serve as emotional sedative nor should it; service-learning neutralizes negative reactions by generating higher levels of cognition and consciousness, which is the underlying objective and, when done properly, the benefits far outnumber the risks, especially for working-class students.
Chapter 4: How Service-Learning Serves Working-Class Students

Primary Benefits: Respecting Working-Class Voices

Although working-class students have the most to gain from service-learning they are not the only ones who benefit from the experience. Studies demonstrate that the service-learning pedagogy enhances learning regardless of background and that its other advantages are equally unbiased. However, their respective levels of importance do vary according to student backgrounds and subsequently student needs. To wit, while one of the more explicit purposes of service-learning is to enhance the learning process, and higher levels of cognition and consciousness are the most obvious manifestations of this, they are not the most important results for working-class students. Instead, other outcomes take on added significance because they establish the framework that makes learning possible, a process that begins by valuing working-class voices.

In many ways partnering with working-class communities shows students from similar backgrounds that their voices matter. For example, Thomas Deans studies Bruce Herzberg’s approach to teaching introductory expository courses and finds that he frames service experiences as texts to be read and studied. According to Deans, Herzberg “recognizes that students need to process personal experience through narrative; but more important to him is that they use the service experience as a text (alongside other texts like those by Kozol and Rose) to be reflected upon with critical rigor. He is wary of reflection limited to the personal and

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19 Eyler and Giles report “There were few effects of minority status, family income, or age on the outcomes measured” concerning the results from their study (180). Similarly, Cole and Barber explain that socio-economic background had little to no impact on most of the results from their own study.
affective” (Deans 104). By presenting service experiences as text Herzberg can then emphasize analysis, which simultaneously fulfills the critical reflection component of service that Susan Stroud endorses and confirms the practice as worthy of academic discourse. It is a pragmatic approach he developed after conceding that learning academic discourse is inevitable, but at the same time realized this does not necessitate that narratives from working-class community partners or about student experiences be excluded. Herzberg believes they too merit investigation because studying informal, experiential kinds of knowledge can be just as enlightening as more formalized and structured versions. This lesson is even more valuable for working-class students because having alternative forms of knowledge finally recognized in an academic setting sends a clear message that their backgrounds are welcome and/or respected. For example, the critical essay “Stupidity Deconstructed” by working-class scholar Joanna Kadi restates how such recognition is vital to reversing the marginalization of working-class students:

Universities need to replicate and reinforce central ideologies. Such as poor people stupid, rich people smart…. These categorizations feed into an either/or mentality and ignore complications and complexities…. Many different kinds of intelligence exist, and these cross class lines. Universities revere the type of intelligence that can synthesize information rapidly and understand abstract concepts. Equally valid types … require creativity, humor, ability to ask questions, care, a good memory, compassion, belief in solidarity, ability to project an image of something that doesn’t physically exist. (50-51)

Similar to De Veaux, Kadi highlights how universities favor a homogenous academic discourse that precludes other representations/demonstrations of intelligence, which leads to
problems for working-class students and leaves oppressive academic structures in place. Yet her demand for a complete overhaul of classroom teaching later in the essay seems excessive when consider how Herzberg’s writing course demonstrates that service-learning is capable of welcoming and respecting working-class narratives without major upheaval. More importantly, the practice benefits working-class students in a more tangible and direct way when projects actively seek out such stories.

According to Eyler and Giles the most rewarding service experiences are those where students first listen to community partners and then work together to address a significant issue. Results from their study confirm that “[w]hen students have the opportunity to work with community members in planning service, they can move beyond the rather patronizing role of charity giver,” which Stroud warns against, and enter in “to the role of partner. And working together in planning increases respect for community partners” (47). This transformation holds true for working-class students as well, but for different reasons. Specifically, when community partners share personal experiences they do so to help students better understand the dimensions of the project, but if this is the students’ first direct experience with working-class narratives then it also becomes a compelling moment. However, because working-class students are likely to be more familiar with such narratives they are affected less by what is shared and more by the very act of sharing itself. The example of their community partners revealing personal details can inspire them to reflect upon and/or reciprocate the telling of their own stories with either the community partners or perhaps their own classmates. At the same time the degree of trust this sharing builds between students and community members, the willingness of students to learn from these narratives and ultimately the mutual respect this experience generates that Eyler and Giles cite lays the foundation for a classroom environment that is just as secure, motivated and
considerate. In other words, service-learning teaches students unfamiliar with working-class narratives how to listen and learn from them while working-class students discover that they can and should speak up in class because their stories are nothing to be ashamed of and neither are their voices.

Exposure to working-class narratives in academic settings positively influences the self-perception of working-class students and subsequently enables them to (re)claim their literary voices, particularly if they are supplemented with well-structured opportunities to reflect upon their service experience. Private writing exercises like journaling create safe spaces for working-class students to experiment with language and confront difficult issues that the service experience(s) might generate. In fact, Eyler and Giles report, “The self-exploration that often occurs in journals and in dialogue with faculty through journals is particularly useful for helping students to understand themselves and others better” (174). Meanwhile, a variety of discussion formats encourages working-class students to share their unique perspectives. Eyler and Giles find that “[d]iscussion was a popular choice for “most useful” form of reflection because it was so flexible; it can occur formally in class or informally with friends, colleagues, or community partners, and it is easy to do compared to the discipline of taking up pen and paper” (176). Thus, reflection exercises enhance the service experience for working-class students by providing a space for unauthorized literary voices to create rather than conform, which generates a greater sense of writing agency and authority.
And this newfound power in turn improves the already expanding self-perception of working-class students. Bobby Allen anticipates a similar positive outcome when he declares:

If students’ biographies become part of the classroom experience, students can gain insight into the unique and diverse backgrounds of their peers. That exposure could be the first step towards wider acceptance and greater understanding. Students of all backgrounds should be able to celebrate their class, and not feel forced to “pass,” under social pressure, as members of haute privilege. (B35)

Granted, Allen does not speak for all working-class students, but his testimony nevertheless reiterates the need to incorporate personal narratives from multiple backgrounds in order to foster a more welcoming and intellectually stimulating classroom environment for all students. Of course, making class more meaningful also means making coursework more relevant.

Reconnecting with Coursework

Earlier examples from Rose and Adair demonstrate that one of the greatest challenges for working-class students is connecting with their coursework, but Eyler and Giles offer compelling evidence that service-learning effectively addresses this issue as well. When students from their study were asked to compare service-learning experiences with other classes, an impressive 58 percent reported they had learned more, 24 percent responded they had learned the same amount and just 20 percent said they had learned less. These percentages, though promising, are uncertain as to which response working-class students identified with the most because they are not broken down by class or race. However, Eyler and Giles do report that 62 percent of the
students who had a positive experience also agreed “understanding how complex the problems faced by the people I work with” was most important, while a remarkable 77 percent cited it as most or very important (70). Based upon these combined results it becomes evident that service-learning successfully merges real world issues with classroom curriculum in a way that causes students to value working-class narratives and/or issues. After all, when a majority of students who believe they learned more through service-learning also consider understanding the problems of their community partner(s) to be a significant feature of that experience if not the most important, then clearly attitudes towards working-class communities have changed for the better. As for the link to working-class students, if they agree with the previous points then it should follow that the relationships they formed helped make course materials more accessible. However, when the opposite is true and privileged students agree with this outcome, their deeper understanding of assignments still benefits working-class students because it heightens awareness of class related issues, which is one more step towards understanding each other. Regardless, if results from the former scenario are more direct, both outcomes manage to help working-class students.

Furthermore, the combined 78 percent of students who felt they worked more or the same amount reiterates that service-learning courses do not diminish the level of academic complexity as many skeptics worry. Indeed, courses that used the pedagogy proved to be more rigorous while results on motivation show that students were up to the challenge; 55 percent felt motivated to work harder in service-learning classes, 34 percent reported they were motivated to the same degree of effort and only 14 percent believed they worked less. Naturally, when the coursework engages students they are the more likely to work harder and subsequently learn more, both of which earlier results confirm service-learning accomplishes. So the fact most
students felt more motivated in courses that utilized service-learning further vindicates the pedagogy as an effective tool for dealing with Brack and Hall’s “Empty Assignment Syndrome.” Also, the nearly 90 percent who felt more or as motivated reveals that incorporating service-learning helps students far more than it hurts them. At the same time, these results are highly relevant to working-class students because, as Chapter 2 explains, they are susceptible to apathy due to low levels of academic self-confidence and authority. Therefore, a didactic strategy like service-learning that motivates working-class students to (re)connect with coursework as it allows them to (re)claim their literary voices deserves serious consideration from any “democratic educator” that not only hopes to improve college curriculum but wants to develop meaningful relationships with students as well.

*Bonding with Professors*

Service-learning not only motivates working-class students to engage with coursework but also helps them bond with professors. Astin and Sax (1998) report promising results on the subject in their study20 “How Undergraduates are Affected by Service Participation.” They suggest that “the strongest effect [of performing service] occurred in the case of interaction with faculty” because service participants were nearly 50 percent more likely to spend at least an hour per week interacting with faculty members than nonparticipants (260). Astin and Sax also find that “despite the additional time required for service participation, students who engaged in volunteer service actually spent more time with studies and homework than did nonparticipants” (260). Additionally, the Eyler and Giles study report a similar correlation between service and

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20 Results are based “on entering freshman and follow-up data collected from 3,450 students (2,287 women and 1,163 men) attending 42 institutions with federally funded community service programs” (251).
professor-student relationships, where “30 percent more of the service-learning students reported a close personal relationship with a faculty member” than did non-service-learning students (52). Thus, by pairing findings from both studies we establish that service-learning courses lead students to spend more time with professors, and this result predictably increases the chance of forming a meaningful professor-student relationship. Moreover, considering results from Cole and Barber that show minority students are more likely to perceive academia as the perpetual “ivory tower,” as well as discouraging figures from the “Survey of Earned Doctorates,” working-class students have more to gain by bonding with faculty members. In fact, nearly every text I read from working-class scholars made reference to the intervention of a professor at some point in their academic careers that inspired them to stay in college and/or pursue a graduate degree, which confirms such relationships can counteract both perceptions of elitism and feelings of marginalization. And because of these positive experiences, each of these mentees turned mentor supports more interaction between students and faculty. Perhaps the most incisive of these arguments belongs to bell hooks:

More often than not these students, especially gifted students of color from diverse class backgrounds, give up hope....They take on the mantle of victimhood. They fail. They drop out. Most of them have had no guides to teach them how to find their way in educational systems that, though structured to maintain domination, are not closed systems and therefore have within them subcultures of resistance where education as the practice of freedom still happens. (48)
By depicting both causes and consequences of discriminatory practices inherent to the educational system hooks reaffirms the need for reform, and she rightfully focuses on the plight of working-class students. In particular, she emphasizes the need to eliminate any structure that maintains domination, including teaching practices that isolate students from their instructors and dissuade them from seeking extra help. And though hooks never refers to service-learning, its proven ability to facilitate professor-student relationships would certainly earn her approval because, while such bonds benefit all students, they are especially valuable for working-class students; just as learning from community members reaffirms working-class narratives belong in academia, bonding with faculty members reassures working-class students that they deserve to be there as well. At the same time, service-learning may lead to a corresponding rise in grades that further validates their sense of belonging.

The study by Astin and Sax indicates that students who participate in service are likely to improve their grades. They find that “participation in education-related service enhances the student’s college grade point average (GPA), general knowledge, knowledge of a field or discipline, and aspirations for advanced degrees and is also associated with increased time devoted to homework and studying” (257). Similarly, results from the Cole and Barber study indicate that faculty-student relationships may address the issue of underperformance. Not only do they find that “faculty contact is one of the key variables influencing the decision to become a college professors,” but “students who are influenced by graduate students in their career choice are more likely to be interested in academia” (186). If higher grades match higher levels of academic self-confidence and increased contact with faculty leads to higher grades, then the discovery by Cole and Barber that students who form relationships with faculty are more likely to become professors suggests that they earn higher grades. Also, the finding that graduate
students make more of an impact on undergraduates means service-learning programs should develop creative ways to involve them more often. Yet even without the involvement of graduate students, service-learning courses still do more than regular ones to make these kinds of positive connections (and their many advantages) possible.

*Reestablishing Connections to the Community*

The last of these direct connections that service-learning generates for working-class students involves the same group that inspires them to (re)claim their voices: the community. Specifically, the pedagogy addresses part of the double-loss that working-class students often encounter by providing them with opportunities to feel comfortable in a college environment via familiar/familial experiences. Eyler and Giles make a similar claim when they declare: “results of our survey supported this view that service-learning could help students become more involved in their communities.... Students who come to see the community members who need these services as partners feel a stronger sense that they are connected to the community” (47-48). Recalling how working-class students like Arca’s sometimes feel marginalized for not belonging to communities that society values while others like Rose’s experience a sense of isolation from their home and/or family, their need to connect is profound and immediate. In fact, different studies that Eyler and Giles cite reach the same conclusion that “One of the more powerful predictors that students will complete and benefit from the college experience is the degree to which they are engaged or involved in social and academic life on their campuses.

21 For example, Gay W. Brack and Leanna R. Hall report the service-learning program at Arizona State University structures projects in such a way that “All undergraduate student intern activities are supervised, monitored, and assessed by graduate student interns. This aspect of the program is critical; without such supervision, the program could not function effectively” (146). Yet this aspect is also critical because it promotes faculty contact with the group most likely to encourage undergraduate students to enter academia.
(45). But if working-class students believe they do not have the ability or even the right to engage in these new arenas then having the chance to bond with local community members and/or organizations becomes a vital first step towards acceptance, academic self-confidence and authority.

In addition to benefits like (re)discovering their literary voices and finally being exposed to working-class narratives, working-class students can also find new purpose in serving their surrounding communities. Based on figures from Table 2, Cole and Barber determine that “the most important point about the findings related to the appealing characteristics of academia, from a policy point of view, at least, is that every ethnic group is substantially more likely to see the opportunity to teach undergraduates as an appealing aspect of the career than the chance to do research” (141).

Table 2: Percentage of Students Indicating Aspects that Would Make the Career of University Professor More Appealing, by Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Latino</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Would Get a Lot of Satisfaction from Doing Research</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would Value the Opportunity to Mentor Minority Students</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In addition, they find that “minority students were significantly more likely than whites to see the opportunity to mentor minority students as a positive aspect of being a university professor” (143). Underlying both sets of figures is the desire of working-class students to assist persons
and/or communities that resemble their own. Although the findings from Cole and Barber show that Latinos favor research more than whites, which academic discourse heavily favors, these percentages also indicate that teaching is a far more effective way for working-class students to connect with higher education. Fortunately, many service-learning courses already involve some form of teaching like tutoring, peer mentoring or creating pamphlets for various community centers and organizations, if not the practice of teaching itself. This means not only are working-class students being encouraged to become professors but the bonds they form with communities enable them to connect with class in ways that research only curricula (as is often the case) precludes.

As for the second finding, it reiterates the first one, revealing that working-class students are moved by the opportunity to help communities that reflect their own personal experience and/or background. The disparity between White and minority students interested in tutoring minorities is a substantial twenty percentage points from the ethnic group “least” motivated by this possibility (Asians) and an astonishing 60 percentage points from the ethnic group most motivated (African-Americans). These results suggest how influential service-learning can be for working-class students, particularly when it involves teaching in some capacity; reuniting working-class students with communities they are familiar with and already want to help may assuage negative feelings caused by leaving home, arriving in a seemingly hostile educational environment or both. At the same time, results from the Cole and Barber study confirm the assessment from Eyler and Giles that “Students sometimes find themselves at loose ends in large, impersonal institutions, and service-learning provides the context for reducing this sense of isolation in a way that gives meaning to the student’s life. (49) Moreover, service-learning accomplishes this deeper meaning without sacrificing high academic standards.
Secondary Benefits: Higher Levels of Cognition

Although service-learning has primary and secondary benefits for working-class students, these labels are meant to distinguish between positive effects that lay the foundation for later ones rather than create a value hierarchy. Indeed, the following benefits are actually the ones commonly advertised because they explain the learning in service-learning. Yet just like the other outcomes, when working-class students are involved results are slightly altered, and this is no different for higher levels of cognition.

Earlier results that show service leads to improved grades and increased faculty contact only allude to higher levels of cognition, but the study from Batchelder and Root (1994) actually shows enhanced learning in action. They asked students\(^{22}\) in social science classes to write two essays analyzing social issues, one at the beginning of the semester and one at the end. However, one group participated in service-learning while the other did not, and though there was no discernable difference between the groups’ first essays, the difference between their second essays was significant. Batchelder and Root report:

\[...\, \text{some of the complex cognitive variables described in the theoretical and anecdotal literature are affected in measurable ways by service-learning. Service-learning students demonstrated greater resolve to act in the face of acknowledged uncertainty and greater awareness of the multiple dimensions and variability involved in dealing with social problems.} \, (352)\]

\(^{22}\) For the study, Batchelder and Root “recruited 226 students from undergraduate classes at a small, mid-western, liberal arts college” (345).
This dual rise in ‘resolve’ and ‘awareness’ that Batchelder and Root credit to service-learning confirms the pedagogy improves thinking skills. Whereas the former indicates a propensity for imagination, the latter demonstrates a proclivity towards open-mindedness, and both are traits of higher cognition. Regardless if this is just one study with a rather small sampling of students, its structure and (more importantly) its results reiterate earlier claims that providing opportunities for application increases the likelihood of positive outcomes. Similarly, according to research from Astin and Sax (1998) students who participate in service are more likely to experience “awareness and understanding of the world around them. Service participants showed greater positive change than did nonparticipants … with the largest differences occurring in understanding community problems, knowledge of different races and cultures, acceptance of different races/ cultures, and interpersonal skills” (259). Here too students that participated in service likewise improved their ability to understand complex community issues (which may have to do with their increased knowledge about community members), but what makes this outcome special is that the finding itself is self-reported. Students, not professors, recognized their own growth, signifying that in addition to awareness of others service increases self-awareness, which cognitive scientists have found is critical to advanced levels of learning.

Considering that many of the challenges working-class students consistently face are not just intellectual but emotional, they need to be equally mindful of both parts because studies show that being deficient in either one adversely affects the other. To wit, findings from Fischer and Biddell (1997) illustrate how “[e]xplanation starts with people in medias res, and the structures of action, thought, and feeling are analyzed in the activities themselves, not in static logic, innate ideas, or internalized experiences” (389). Moreover, they observe, “Emotions act dynamically to shape or bias activity and development, and persistent, strong emotional
experiences create distinctive developmental pathways” (390). Once again, the conception of learning through experience and/or application appears, but now scientists in addition to theorists are acknowledging the relationship between thought and feeling. In fact, Fischer and Biddell clearly state that “strong emotional experiences” facilitate mental development, which verifies that issues working-class students have with academic self-confidence and academic authority are also issues of cognition. For example, to generate higher levels of cognition students must be willing to assert themselves, but because working-class students are more likely to lack academic self-confidence and authority they are predictably less willing to create, submit and/or defend their own ideas. Instead, as is the case with writing as conforming, when confronted by an unfamiliar problem they are likely defer to other more self-assured voices and unwittingly impair their own potential intellectual growth, which restates the need for service-learning.

By confirming that confrontation stimulates cognition, Fischer and Biddell indicate that intelligence blossoms in classroom environments that encourage student agency while the opposite causes its atrophy. Not only does their finding endorse the need for working-class students to actively engage their learning but it reiterates why service-learning is so valuable to them as well; service experiences inject the classroom with ill-structured problems that provide conditions known to generate both intellectual and emotional friction and subsequently promote higher levels of cognition.

Furthermore, results from the Eyler and Giles study that show service-learning courses and the advanced levels of thinking they produce have a considerable impact on the processing of old ideas in addition to new ones. Approximately 30 percent of the eleven hundred students from their study reported “a deeper understanding of things I have already learned about in my classes” was among the most important outcomes of service-learning, while 62 percent said it
was either most or very important (70). These figures simultaneously demonstrate the degree to which service-learning augments coursework and confirm that enhanced cognition is vital for early acquisition as well as mastery. Meanwhile, these outcomes influence other familiar results like literary voice and new (though not unexpected) ones like increased social and political consciousness, which are just as important for working-class students.  

_Raising Social and Political Consciousness_

Although increased social and political consciousness was once the impetus for experiential education, modern service-learning advocates generally avoid advertising it as a benefit. But to understand its more/most controversial status and why it nonetheless deserves to be mentioned as a benefit (albeit a secondary one) for working-class students requires discussing John Dewey and Paulo Freire, the experiential education movement’s most influential figures. Both men agreed that school should be more than static knowledge in the form of facts and figures and proposed that their respective educational systems also teach students how to take a more active role in building a better society. More importantly, despite their considerable differences on how this new pedagogy should be framed and executed, ideas from both Dewey and Freire serve as the foundation for service-learning, ensuring that the pedagogy continues to raise social and political consciousness.

Dewey considered the American public school system at the turn of the 19th Century too compartmentalized, criticizing its strict adherence to academic disciplines at the expense of self-development. He explains, “The much and commonly lamented separation in the schools

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23 I do not mean to imply that students who do not participate in service-learning cannot achieve equal or greater levels of cognition, but each of these studies indicates that those who do engage in service improve their chances of achieving advanced levels of thinking.
between intellectual and moral training, between acquiring information and growth of character, is simply an expression of the failure to conceive and construct the school as a social institution” (116). Dewey’s message of eliminating the imagined division between school and society should be familiar considering it permeates so many other texts about education reform, including Rose’s *Lives on the Boundary* and hooks’ *Teaching Community*. Likewise, his response prefigures theirs and countless other pedagogical strategies that value both intellectual and emotional stimulation equally, though his is the first and perhaps most explicit endorsement of developing social consciousness in education. For Dewey, “Interest in the community welfare, an interest which is intellectual and practical, as well as emotional—an interest, that is to say, in perceiving whatever makes for social order and progress, and for carrying these principles into execution—is the ultimate ethical habit to which all the special school habits must be related if they are to be animated by the breath of moral life” (118). Similar to the work of Fischer and Biddell, Dewey pairs self-development, or “moral training,” with cognition. But unlike his successors who present the two benefits in service of each other, Dewey clearly places importance upon the former when he designates community welfare as the *raison d’être* of his pedagogy. Yet at the same time he makes suggestions that are beneficial for students regardless of motive, adding that “the extent and way in which a teacher brings the pupil to consciousness of his social environment, and confers upon him the ability to interpret his own powers from the standpoint of their possibilities in social use, is this ultimate and unified standard” (121). Here too Dewey’s focus on community welfare echoes, but his message reverberates with ideas that cater to the needs of working-class students as well because the process of raising social consciousness resembles current service-learning practices. For instance, the service experience fulfills bringing “the pupil to consciousness of his social environment” by reconnecting working-
class students with communities that resemble their own and/or working-class narratives that are often neglected by academia. Also, reflection exercises succeed in conferring working-class students “the ability to interpret his own powers from the standpoint of their possibilities” by providing them with better, more frequent opportunities to explore their own nascent literary voices and/or to mold a self-identity. Nonetheless, the extent to which Dewey focused on community welfare blinded him to otherwise glaring social realities. In his own comparison of Dewey and Freire, Thomas Deans points out that “among the most significant [differences] is Freire’s emphasis on accounting for the particular culture, class, and race of each learner, anthropological factors which Dewey largely sidesteps when speaking of students” (40). Thus, Dewey has the ignoble distinction of being the original purveyor of the specious idea that students are a homogenous group. Conversely, Freire considers the impact of personal backgrounds on learning in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and forces supporters of service-learning to examine the implications/motivations of the movement.

For Freire, the social was political due to an oppressive regime in his native Brazil, which inspired him to develop a pedagogy that focused on the political implications of teaching and its potential for shaping a future political climate that promotes social justice. This is another oft repeated argument for service-learning today, but his rhetoric is significantly more controversial than Dewey’s because Freire frequently mixes ideas on educational reform with commentary calling for social revolution. For example, Freire declares:

> The struggle begins with men’s recognition that they have been destroyed. Propaganda, management, manipulation—all arms of domination—cannot be the instruments of their rehumanization. The only effective instrument is a humanizing pedagogy in which the
revolutionary leadership establishes a permanent relationship of dialogue with the oppressed. In a humanizing pedagogy the method ceases to be an instrument by which the teachers (in this instance, the revolutionary leadership) can manipulate the students (in this instance, the oppressed), because it expresses the consciousness of the students themselves…. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators. (68-69)

Although Freire intends his language to be confrontational and even calls for revolution at times, the actual process of raising political consciousness he describes is not. Freire merely advocates a direct approach to teaching, where instructors and students collaborate to generate knowledge instead of the more familiar top-down model, which is how many modern service-learning practitioners teach. Likewise, the conscientização (consciousness) he hopes his pedagogy will generate “refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (35). This is no different than the justifications that modern service-learning practitioners offer in defense of their pedagogy (see Deans; Butin; Jones et al.). Actually, Freire’s conception of consciousness resembles comments made by education reformers Rose and hooks as well as composition critics like Bartholomae and Elbow. Also, since Pedagogy of the Oppressed was first published, socio-political conditions have improved across Brazil, but rather than change his message Freire has simply refined it. Specifically, the doctrine of action/reflection he mentions in the above passage has since become action/reflection/action. The difference is whereas the former method assumed the knowledge that action and reflection generates would inspire further involvement with whatever project the original action/reflection involved, the latter recognizes that ill-structured
problems often lead to ill-structured discoveries, which necessitates follow-up. But instead of a self-contained learning experience, which Adler-Kassner et al. demonstrate is not empowering, students and teachers alike are taught to enter a perpetual cycle of questioning, learning and acting that they can apply to other courses and even incorporate into their lives. It is an inspired idea that makes sense for service-learning and ultimately working-class students, and it is not Freire’s alone.

Service-learning now raises social and/or political consciousness without moral training or talk of revolution. Instead, service-learning practitioners like Linda Flower rely upon students to challenge each other to grow. In “Partners in Inquiry: A Logic for Community Outreach,” she explains how purposefully juxtaposing seemingly contradictory ideas and reactions from students can help them to learn:

Dewey describes knowledge as a situated, revisable understanding of the connections between things, people, and ideas. I have tried to argue elsewhere that Dewey’s insistence on knowledge as this network of observations calls for a strong rival hypothesis stance to issues, especially to issues of intercultural understanding. By a rival hypothesis stance, I simply mean a stance that starts by posing problems as open questions—too complex for single, or conclusive, answers. As a result this stance doesn’t just tolerate competing hypotheses; it actively seeks alternative interpretations, diverse readings, and multiple perspectives. (106)

Just as ill-structured problems create cognitive dissonance, by posing ‘open questions’ that do not allow simple, straightforward answers, Flower creates the same kind of intellectual
tension. In addition, the ‘alternative interpretations, diverse readings, and multiple perspectives,’ she desires not only to enhance discussion but to develop self-identity, while her notion of rivaling hypotheses resembles earlier recommendations from composition scholars like Elbow and Heath to expose students to dialogues outside of regular academic discourse. Altogether, these didactic moves shape Flowers’ service-learning strategy in a way that she believes will enable her students to address the issue of ‘intercultural learning.’ More importantly, this objective and its respective parts appear to fulfill Bobby Allen’s working-class wish that “students’ biographies become part of the classroom experience,” thereby allowing everyone to “gain insight into the unique and diverse backgrounds of their peers” (B33). The way that Flower conducts her service-learning courses has particular benefits for working-class students; developing self-identity, promoting literary voice and validating working-class narratives are all byproducts of her approach. Of course, she thanks Dewey for serving as her inspiration but doing so affirms the similarities that his work shares with Freire. Many of their best and frequently cited ideas complement each other and some, as is the case with ‘revisable understanding’ and action/reflection/action, are indistinguishable. Therefore, regardless who Flower credits for her approach, it will nevertheless reflect the work of both men and produce the same positive results for working-class students, a list that I propose include improved relations between racially and/or culturally diverse communities, higher retention rates and increased entry into academia.
Chapter 5: The Secret Lives of Service-Learning

Promoting Diversity

Due to a significant increase in the number of working-class students attending college, as studies from the Higher Education Research Institute and the “Survey of Earned Doctorates” indicate, there is a (mis)perception that diversity automatically produces greater levels of understanding. Faculty and administrators are less likely to think of students as a homogenous group, but many remain unaware of the unique challenges that being from a working-class background still poses. Even students in my own writing courses deny that issues of class exist in education until we discuss the quality of secondary schools they attended or how many of their friends and family graduated from four-year postsecondary institutions. Yet as this study shows, class does matter and educators must remain vigilant in addressing the many issues surrounding it. As such, I have argued that service-learning is an effective approach to helping working-class students excel in higher education and is ideally situated for composition courses, but what makes the pedagogy truly special is that its many benefits are not time sensitive. Service-learning contributes to broader, long-term positive outcomes for working-class students, and this starts with the production of greater understanding between diverse communities and/or cultures.

Considering that emotions influence cognition and personal backgrounds matter to academic endeavors, the process of creating a comfortable and productive learning environment for all students is no easy task. However, by providing opportunities to interact with multiple audiences outside of a classroom setting, service-learning manages to respect each of these didactic elements while promoting cross-cultural understanding. Of the 1,100 service-learning students from the Eyler and Giles study, “63 percent reported interacting with those receiving
services at least fairly often, 60 percent reported frequent interaction with other volunteers, 51 percent felt that professionals at the placement site often took an interest in them, and 57 percent reported that they had frequent chances to work with people from ethnic groups other than their own” (26). In regards to the first finding, this frequent contact with community members shows that the majority of students are not idle charity providers, but rather they are actively involved with their service. This level of interaction allows students to see the human face(s) of their work as well as its real world consequences, which can make the service experience deeply personal. Similarly, the second finding that half of the students interacted with fellow volunteers reveals that the pedagogy not only connects classmates with the community but also with each other. These bonding opportunities are critical for creating a sense of trust and facilitating open, honest conversations. Meanwhile, the third finding that many students felt like community partners showed interest in them proves they serve as potential role models if not mentors. Forming such relationships can expose students to new perspectives as well as different cultural beliefs and/or value systems, which the fourth figure appears to confirm. It is also important to remember that working-class students benefit from this contact for reasons discussed in Chapter 4, like the affirmation of working-class narratives and the inspiration to share. As for the fourth finding, that a significant portion worked with ethnic groups other than their own demonstrates how service-learning introduces students to new peoples and subsequently new ideas. While the study from Astin and Sax is helpful because it shows that service experiences generate knowledge and acceptance of different cultures, results from Eyler and Giles are invaluable because they illustrate how such growth occurs. To wit, numerous service-learning courses successfully place students in situations where they interact with those they help and at the same time these community members are likely to be from a different ethnicity. Also, community partners
showing interest in student volunteers is another likely contributor to increased awareness and understanding of community issues, which other results confirm.

In addition to their findings on interaction, Eyler and Giles report that “when asked to identify important things they had learned from their service, 23 percent [of service-learning students] indicated that the realization that people they work with in the community “are like me” was among the most important, and 52 percent placed this as most or very important” (31). These results matter to working-class students because they indicate that service-learning successfully (re)connects them with a community that is like their own. In other words, bonding with community members and/or partners reassures working-class students that they are not alone. However, for privileged students these results suggest that their social consciousness is rising, which means not only will they show more respect for different communities/cultures but they will be more accepting of students in their own class with different backgrounds as well. Indeed, Eyler and Giles recognize that “[g]reater appreciation of other cultures was also something many students felt they learned, with 33 percent indicating it was among the most important learning outcome and 68 percent either most or very important” (31). Thus, just like the Astin and Sax study, Eyler and Giles show that service-learning facilitates greater cross-cultural understanding, though they qualify these findings with an important warning.

According to Eyler and Giles, both placement quality\textsuperscript{24} and application\textsuperscript{25} influence the degree of success that interaction produces (33). Specifically, they learned that “students who

\textsuperscript{24} Eyler and Giles state that placement quality “refers to the extent that students in their community placements are challenged, are active rather than observers, do a variety of tasks, feel that they are making a positive contribution, have important levels of responsibility, and receive input and appreciation from supervisors in the field” (33).

\textsuperscript{25} Eyler and Giles define application as “the extent to which the academic study is related to the nature of the service experience” (33).
formed bonds with the people they worked with and found old stereotypes breaking down often did not take the next step to ask why, if these people are “like me,” this problem exists. Students who did question assumptions were those who were continuously challenged to do so” (146). By acknowledging the importance of placement quality Eyler and Giles reaffirm the link between the emotion and cognition explored by Fischer and Biddell. When students ‘feel’ like they are responsible and making a contribution they are more likely to benefit from the service experience. However, Eyler and Giles make sure to emphasize application because, just as Carolyn O’Grady and Susan Stroud warn, critical reflection is instrumental to recognizing ideas that are more complex than community members “are like me.” This finding is also similar to Paulo Freire’s discovery that not all action produces further investigation, which led him to develop the practice of action/reflection/action. Yet in both cases the message is clear; service experiences promote greater inter-cultural understanding, but to generate heightened awareness of real world issues there needs to be analysis of the service as well as the socioeconomic conditions that make it necessary.

**Increasing Retention Rates**

Although I found no studies directly relating service-learning to increased retention rates for working-class students or any other specific demographic, Chapter 4 and the previous section explain how the pedagogy effectively addresses issues that likely cause working-class students to leave college early. Therefore, in the absence of empirical data I will briefly restate both the challenges that lead working-class students to drop out of college and the assistance/alternatives that service-learning affords them.
First and foremost, service-learning does not eliminate academic under-preparedness, but the pedagogy does assuage its negative effects. Astin and Sax show that students who participate in service earn higher grades, which may be related to the finding that they are also more likely to meet with faculty more often. This extra contact is especially important for any working-class students unfamiliar with academic discourse because, as Rose points out, the ones who do not receive extra support to enter these new modes of discussion are likely to never acquire the confidence and/or ability needed to participate on their own (193). Likewise, increased faculty contact can attenuate excessive, self-imposed pressure that leads to underperformance. According to Eyler and Giles, service-learning students are 30 percent more likely to form meaningful relationships with professors, which working-class scholars like Rose, Joanna Kadi and bell hooks all admit was instrumental to their academic survival, not just success. More importantly, each of these scholars now advocates bonding as pedagogical praxis but, since it is difficult for professors to develop meaningful relationships with every student, service-learning is needed to facilitate other kinds of connections between students and even with community members.

When Eyler and Giles report that 60 percent of students frequently interact with fellow volunteers they indicate that service-learning provides students significant opportunities to bond outside of the classroom. Granted, these encounters are at service sites, but this shared experience is precisely what unites working-class students with their privileged peers. Placing working-class students in a more familiar scenario may also put them in a position to teach privileged students how to effectively interact with working-class communities, thereby empowering the working-class student and reversing the more typical classroom paradigm. Equally significant is that students interacted with service recipients 63 percent of the time,
which shows there are just as many chances to form a meaningful relationship with community members. Naturally, either relationship is beneficial for working-class students because, as Fischer and Biddell confirm, emotion can have significant effects on cognition. For some it may even be the difference between persevering and going home considering that relationships are imperative to counteracting the double-loss that working-class students often encounter upon entering college. Being able to bond with classmates over service experiences is a first step towards familiarity and eventually understanding, while interacting with community partners confirms working-class narratives are valued by academia as are working-class students. However, the relationships that privileged students sometimes form with community members also benefit working-class students by raising awareness of working-class issues. In fact, Astin and Sax found that students who participate in service display greater positive changes “with the largest differences occurring in understanding community problems, knowledge of different races and cultures, acceptance of different races/ cultures, and interpersonal skills.” (259). Similarly, Eyler and Giles report that 52 percent of students in service-learning courses considered learning that community members “are like me” among the most or very important outcomes. Results from both studies are very promising because these increases in social consciousness indicate if and when working-class students do share their own narratives that privileged classmates will be ready to listen thoughtfully and respectfully. Yet to ensure that working-class students stay in college long enough to speak about their experience(s) writing courses need to stop making their voices feel so unwelcome.

Academic writing can feel just as foreign to working-class students as campus life, particularly when there is no apparent connection between assignments and the outside world, but results from Eyler and Giles indicate that service-learning augments course materials in such
a way that promotes greater student involvement and comprehension. In their study, 58 percent of students believed that they learned more in service-learning courses and 55 percent felt they were more motivated (60). Both findings show that service-learning makes learning more accessible, if not more compelling, and this outcome likely has to do with how the pedagogy follows the recommendations of Peter Elbow and Shirley Brice Heath. They emphasize the importance of making course materials relevant to the lives of students as well as giving them the chance to experience what they are learning, both of which service-learning enables. In fact, Eyler and Giles also report that 30 percent “of the students agreed that “a deeper understanding of the things I have already learned about in my classes” was among the most important outcomes of their-service learning, and 62 percent agreed that it was either very or most important” (70). These results are no coincidence; students in service-learning classes are likelier to learn more, be more motivated and enhance knowledge from other classes because the pedagogy makes static knowledge both real and relevant. And for working-class students, these benefits reflect what is often lacking from their college experience, a belief that the work they do is real and relevant. In the essay “Writing and Teaching with Class,” working-class scholar Valerie Miner relates growing up with a similar belief that academic work is not real labor. She shares that:

One of my brothers grew up to be a carpenter. The other works for a maritime union. So I’ve always carried that Miner suspicion that laboring with words is not real work. I ask myself: Does writing mean anything? Do I have a right to feel tired at week’s end? Shouldn’t I be doing something useful? (74)
Due to her working-class upbringing, Miner finds it difficult to consider the work she does as legitimate as the more tangible forms of labor that her brothers perform. Indeed, this perspective that writing lacks value seems to be a repeating motif for working-class students, and it has the power to persuade them to leave college early to pursue other, more (seemingly) worthwhile endeavors. Unfortunately, the current state of composition does little to change this negative attitude.

Composition scholars like David Bartholomae and Sharon Crowley rightfully criticize the gate-keeper role that beginner writing classes often enforce because they typically discriminate against unauthorized working-class voices. It is a limited view of academic discourse that permeates all levels of higher education and leads to the teaching of writing as conforming, which only reiterates the misperception that writing is insignificant. Confirming this stigma are findings from Williams and Alden that show only 20 percent of extrinsically motivated subjects “place a high value on being able to write well” (107). Instead, grades are their most important concern, this despite the belief from 72 percent of the same students that grading writing is purely subjective. Not only do these figures illuminate a credibility gap between composition teachers and students, they illustrate the consequences of keeping academic discourse exclusive rather than trying to make it more inclusive and subsequently more representative of society. Perhaps if service-learning were utilized by writing courses more often, then more working-class students would learn to value writing because, as Eyler and Giles show, the pedagogy makes students feel more invested in their work.

As I mentioned before, all of these issues are interrelated and as such require a pedagogy like service-learning that is versatile enough to address each one, often many at the same time. Yet a comprehensive approach is necessary because any single consequence has the ability to
undermine academic self-confidence and/or authority of working-class students, so to address one issue without considering the others still leaves them at risk of failure. To improve the retention rates of working-class students, both educators and administrators need to consider the many benefits of service-learning and see how best to incorporate the pedagogy into their respective programs. If done properly, service-learning may even increase the number of working-class students that apply and are accepted to graduate school.

Inspiring the Pursuit of Graduate Degrees

To increase the number of working-class students who choose to pursue graduate degrees, it is not only necessary for them to finish college but it requires that they believe there exists a place for working-class students in academia. As earlier examples from Mike Rose and Bobby Allyn reveal, being accepted into an institution and feeling accepted once there are very different things, which means that working-class students who feel marginalized during their undergraduate experience are unlikely to apply to graduate school. However, convincing working-class students that they belong in academia has less to do with seeking the complete eradication of the many challenges they face and more to do with helping them make meaningful connections. Problems will persist because most courses are unlikely to utilize service-learning but, as I discussed in the previous chapter, some of the pedagogy’s benefits are enduring, and the one most likely to encourage working-class students to pursue a graduate degree is developing a meaningful relationship with a faculty member.

I must clarify that for the remainder of the chapter whenever I refer to graduate school, graduate degrees and/or academia, I am referring to graduate fields of study that would directly result in a professorship, not specialties that lead to other primary professions like medicine, law, business, etc.
Despite findings from Cole and Barber that “more [freshmen] students are interested in professor as an occupation than any of the other occupations” listed by their survey,27 earlier figures from the “Survey of Earned Doctorates” show that minority students are unlikely to achieve this goal (79). But the lack of fulfillment has to do with a lack of support, not ability. Cole and Barber find that students who have low levels of academic self-confidence are least likely to select professor as their first occupational choice whereas students with high levels are most likely to select professor (120). Also, they report that minority students consistently underperform their white peers (129), which means a higher percentage of minority students interested in becoming professors as freshmen are likelier to arrive in their senior year with lower grades and lower academic self-confidence, and this inevitably reduces the pool of potential graduate school applicants. However, bonding with professors and/or graduate students may keep minority students on task. Cole and Barber find that “faculty contact is one of the key variables influencing the decision to become a college professor,” and this result indicates that faculty-student relationships improve academic self-confidence if not overall academic performance (186). Indeed, receiving validation from professors may be more influential than encouragement from family or friends because it comes from someone who knows the demands of graduate school. Joanna Kadi, for instance, was not even thinking about graduate school until a professor told her she was smart and suggested she consider it (42). Meanwhile, Astin and Sax report that students who participate in service are 50 percent more likely to meet with faculty for at least one hour per week (260) while Eyler and Giles find students are 30 percent more likely to

27 The other options that Cole and Barber offer as possible occupations were physician, business, lawyer, teacher, social services, government, fine/performing arts, allied health and other research (77).
form meaningful relationships\textsuperscript{28} (52). Thus, when these findings are read alongside results from Cole and Barber, it becomes evident that service-learning can lead to higher rates of students pursuing graduate degrees, including those from working-class backgrounds.\textsuperscript{29} If faculty contact is a key variable for influencing students to become professors, then it should follow that increased interaction will lead to more meaningful relationships and subsequently more students pursuing graduate degrees. Additionally these relationships can, and often do last longer than a semester, so the sooner working-class students are exposed to service-learning experiences the better. Of course, receiving support from professors is only part of the issue because working-class students still need to earn good grades if they expect to be eligible for graduate school, though it appears service-learning accomplishes this as well.

Cole and Barber find that what makes the occupation of professor alluring to many minority students is having the opportunity to teach other minority students (142), but what often dissuades them is a belief that academia is too remote and/or elitist to help individuals from their community (160). However, professors can capitalize on this desire to teach, not only by bonding with students and proving that college faculty do make a difference, but also by giving them the opportunity to teach as undergraduates in service-learning courses. Research from Astin and Sax shows that “participation in education-related service enhances the student’s college

\textsuperscript{28} Although Eyler and Giles do not elaborate upon what they mean by “meaningful relationship,” they do offer some insight by providing a student response: “I got to know my professor really well personally. Every other class is pretty much the same: you go in and take notes and you leave. I could go out to dinner with my professor now because we have such a good understanding and knowledge of each other” (53). Based on this selection, I interpret “meaningful relationship” as achieving an advanced level of mutual trust and/or understanding between student and faculty member.

\textsuperscript{29} Once again, I acknowledge that the results from Cole and Barber are divided according to race, not class, though based on the U.S. Census Bureau figures cited in Chapter 2, I extrapolate there are higher percentages of working-class students in minority communities, which means that any figures concerning effects on minority students likewise relate to working-class students.
grade point average (GPA), general knowledge, knowledge of a field or discipline, and aspirations for advanced degrees and is also associated with increased time devoted to homework and studying” (257). Based upon these findings, professors should not only lead by example but they can motivate students to pursue graduate degrees by providing teaching experience via service-learning courses. More importantly, while the many positive outcomes that Astin and Sax report have benefits for any student, they mean even more to ones from working-class backgrounds, who are not only already interested in becoming professors but may be in need of forming a meaningful connection as well.
Conclusion: Building Better Class-rooms

Over the course of this study, I demonstrate that working-class students consistently face more challenges than their privileged peers, and I detail what these are. I also examine the consequences of these challenges and explore how service-learning successfully addresses them, especially when situated in composition courses. However, whatever the value of my findings and conclusions may be to the fields of service-learning, composition and/or class studies, I consider all of these matters part of a greater goal: learning how to better serve my working-class students.

They were the catalyst for this study and, knowing that I am likely to see issues related to class in the future, I prefer to be prepared to better address them. For me, being a good educator requires vigilance because if/when classroom teaching becomes monotonous so too can students seem like a homogenous group, which this study disproves. Beyond the classroom setting, working-class students are people with real world responsibilities and before college they were the same, so why do so many writing courses treat students as though they have neither a history nor an existence outside of school? Why do writing instructors neglect personal experiences that can generate new and exciting learning opportunities? Why does academic discourse continue to isolate students from their lives? And if we agree that the answer for each of these questions is the same, that there is no good reason for these kinds of discriminatory teaching practices, then why do working-class students continue to earn lower grades, have lower retention rates and receive fewer doctorates than their privileged peers? Based on the many works related to education that I read, these negative consequences are not due to a lack of awareness of issues concerning pedagogical practices or working-class student strife. Indeed, knowledge of each
subject is so prevalent in academic circles that they are at risk of becoming clichés. Instead, what the persistent low levels of achievement for working-class students signify is fear to act, quickly and dramatically, from instructors and institutions alike.

As I learned during my research, service-learning is not something to be taken lightly. It requires a tremendous amount of preparation, participation and critical reflection by both professors and their students to ensure success. Otherwise, the service experience may contradict ideas and undermine goals that the pedagogy actively promotes. Yet any educator that is serious about helping working-class students succeed should already be willing to invest the time and energy that it takes to execute a service-learning course. Similarly, institutions that claim to care about issues of diversity and tolerance must be willing to assist faculty members who wish to develop a service-learning course. In my experience, most professors go beyond what is asked of them to help students, but without administrative support starting a service-learning program, let alone maintaining one is extremely difficult.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that most of the benefits of service-learning I discuss apply to all students. Even though some service-related outcomes are more valuable to working-class students, this does not mean privileged students suffer as a result. As Paulo Freire makes abundantly clear, no pedagogy should elevate one group at the expense of another, and in the case of service-learning such a consequence would belie its claims to promoting democracy and diversity. Yet in spite of the many studies, statistics and personal testimonies that elucidate the numerous intricacies of both class and service-learning, there remain plenty of possibilities for further analysis.

Among the most interesting (and pressing) ambiguities are the effects of service-learning on working-class students who are financially independent adults. Not only is their limited
appearance in service-learning literature another example of treating students as a homogenous group, but learning about the unique experiences of older working-class students is necessary to refine service-learning praxis. Regardless of shared background, differences in age may significantly alter responses to service experiences, and until there is further research it is unwise to recommend that working-class students participate in service-learning. Also worth exploring is how service-learning might affect working-class graduate students. Having chosen to enter academia do they need further support to succeed? Did they choose to pursue a graduate degree due to a positive service-learning experience? Do they have regrets? Investigating questions like these is especially important because opportunities to participate in service-learning significantly drop in graduate school.  

If working-class graduate students do face challenges that are similar to the ones they experienced as undergraduates, might service-learning yield similar results in a new academic environment with higher demands and greater stakes? Similarly, if and when working-class students become professors, then what? What effects might this have on their conception of self? Will they attempt to help working-class students through service-learning as well? All of these are important questions to consider, though it is imperative that any further research on the effects of service-learning collect data on income levels and/or class to obviate the need for excessive inferences.

Although more work needs to be done to develop a better understanding of the effects and/or effectiveness of service-learning, the various sources of information I brought to bear on one another elucidate how the pedagogy benefits young working-class students.  

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30 Of the hundreds of service-learning programs I only found seven based in graduate schools. However, this excludes specialized fields of study that lead to other primary professions like medicine, law, business, etc.

31 By ‘young’ I mean students who are in undergraduate studies or lower grades, are still financially dependent on their parents and are under the age of 24.
forth to find a link between service-learning, composition, and working-class students, I was hopeful but unsure of what I might discover. However, I found myself nodding in agreement a lot more than shaking my head in disapproval, and now the mutually beneficial relationship between service-learning and composition, as well as the many benefits it offers working-class students is clear. Moreover, I learned that service-learning can augment any field of study, but its rightful place is the writing classroom. All students require help with writing of one sort or another, but they do not need the imposition of a literary voice and/or academic identity that neither reflects nor respects their unique background, as is often the case for working-class students. Instead, as writers, they need to know their literary voices belong in academia, that they belong in academia, both of which service-learning confirms. Only then will working-class students begin to trust their writing instructors and realize that the objective of such courses is not to hide working-class narratives but to hone writing skills in order to harness the power of their personal experiences.

For these reasons I embark on my first service-learning experience as a teacher this summer. Specifically, I will be leading an English course for 9th graders that attend the Meyers Institute for College Preparation32 (MICP), many of whom are working-class students. Not only will it be interesting to see how they respond to the experience, but I wonder about my own reactions as well. Despite having conducted this study and feeling more confident in my abilities to anticipate the needs and/or concerns of my students, there are too many variables to account for. Yet these involve issues I will not discover until my course begins, which means like any meaningful experience there are going to be surprises.

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32 According to the program website, “Georgetown University’s Meyers Institute for College Preparation (MICP) is a pre-college academic enrichment program that … adopts students, starting in the 7th grade, from targeted middle schools and supports them through their first year of college.” (Meyer’s Institute, emphasis mine)
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