First-Year Writers and "Student Success": A Framework for Supporting Multiple Pathways Through Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This project responds to increasing efforts in higher education to retain students, i.e., keep them enrolled until graduation, through various initiatives. Building upon the arguments of composition scholars Matthew McCurrie (2009), Sara Webb-Sunderhaus (2010), and Pegeen Reichert Powell (2013), who propose that retention efforts can overlook students’ needs, goals, and lived experiences, this study evaluates whether retention initiatives communicate a definition of success that ignores and/or aligns with how students value success. This project draws on a historical overview of US success ideology to contextualize a case study of Georgia State University, a leading institution in the country for raising its retention rates. Georgia State’s Strategic Plan and celebrated retention initiatives are then analyzed to determine how the institution defines success; that analysis is compared with data gathered from focus groups and interviews. Ultimately, this study suggests that the definition of success is not necessarily where students and universities diverge; rather, the data gathered has revealed that far more conflicting are the ideas students and universities possess for how to achieve success.

This project argues that while historically success has been valued as the achievement of social and financial upward mobility, Georgia State’s framing of student success communicates, more narrowly, the value of efficient mobility. From the analysis of students’ perspectives, a
framework is provided to show how a focus on efficiency provokes a shift in methods for how universities support students’ pursuit of success, a shift from what this author terms *facilitative* methods to methods that can be more *dictative* of students’ college experiences. This framework is used to argue that dictative methods of support risk removing agency from and present new challenges for students whose lifestyles and responsibilities conflict with their universities’ preferred path towards graduation; often these students are commuters, non-traditional and/or are students from low-income households. This dissertation concludes by providing a model for writing program administrators to consider how they can work toward promoting more facilitative, and thus more inclusive, retention practices.

INDEX WORDS: Student success, Retention, Persistence, First-year composition, Agency, Efficiency
FIRST-YEAR WRITERS AND “STUDENT SUCCESS”: A FRAMEWORK FOR SUPPORTING MULTIPLE PATHWAYS THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION

by

CRISTINE BUSSER

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
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FIRST-YEAR WRITERS AND “STUDENT SUCCESS”: A FRAMEWORK FOR SUPPORTING MULTIPLE PATHWAYS THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the people in my life from whom I have learned to persist.

To Sara, for never giving up on your dream. I cannot wait to see you walk across that stage. The world isn’t ready.

To Tara, my Day One. You helped me breathe again. I could not have gone through this without you.

To Courtney, for reminding me to dance.

To my mom, Connie Busser. I have thrown many curveballs your way, but your response has always been unconditional support. I am far too lucky.

To Katie, Ashley, and Heather, for teaching me independence, strength, and self-love.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1  HIGHER EDUCATION’S NARROW PERCEPTION OF SUCCESS</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Higher Education and Retention</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Writing Programs and Retention</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Composition and Retention</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Methodology</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.1 Research Questions</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.2 Institutional Context</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.3 Data Collection</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.4 Target Population</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.5 Data Analysis</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Outline of the Dissertation</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  U.S. SUCCESS IDEOLOGY AND THE UNIVERSITY’S EMBRACE OF EFFICIENCY</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 US Success Ideology</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Success and the Neoliberal Turn in Higher Education</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.3 Georgia State’s Preference for Efficient Student Success .................................................. 61

2.3.1 Georgia State’s Strategic Plan .................................................................................. 62

2.3.2 Georgia State’s Retention Initiatives ...................................................................... 69

2.4 Efficient Success and the Threat Towards Students’ Agency ..................................... 76

3 STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES: FACILITATIVE VS. DICTATIVE ......................... 79

3.1 Facilitative Methods of Student Support .................................................................... 84

3.1.1 Academic Support .................................................................................................. 84

3.1.2 Social Support ......................................................................................................... 88

3.1.3 Professional Support .............................................................................................. 93

3.2 Dictative Methods of Student Support ........................................................................ 97

3.2.1 Challenges with Time ............................................................................................ 99

3.2.2 Financial Challenges ............................................................................................ 108

3.2.3 Challenges with Planning ..................................................................................... 113

3.3 A Framework for Writing Programs ........................................................................... 119

4 BRINGING WRITING CENTER PEDAGOGY TO THE FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR COURSE: A MODEL FOR FACILITATING STUDENT SUCCESS ........................................ 124

4.1 The Writing Center’s Commitment to Student Agency .............................................. 126

4.2 Writing Center Pedagogy in the First-Year Seminar Course .................................... 129

4.3 Writing Center Pedagogy as Facilitative Support ...................................................... 136

4.4 Implications .............................................................................................................. 140
CONCLUSION ................................................................. 144

REFERENCES ................................................................. 149

APPENDICES ................................................................. 160

Appendix A: Focus Group Questions ............................................. 160

Appendix B: Interview Questions ................................................. 161
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Facilitative Retention Initiatives ................................................................. 82
Table 2: Dictative Retention Initiatives ................................................................... 83
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Tinto's Student Integration Model ................................................................. 13
PREFACE

The story of how I arrived at the topic of this dissertation begins in a Composition Theory course I took in the summer of 2014. Deeply immersed in composition’s most significant debates, I spent each day after class for its first two weeks questioning what the purpose was of first-year composition. I had just completed my first full year of teaching and was prepared to reflect upon and refine my pedagogy. But, as I tossed between the abolitionist arguments of Sharon Crowley and the writing studies stance of Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle, that semester prompted far more questions than it did answers. Then, for the course’s book review assignment, I was given an opportunity to read Pegeen Reichert Powell’s (2013) *Retention and Resistance: Writing Instruction and Students Who Leave*. Vulnerable to every argument that could bring me clarity and give my new job purpose, I learned from Reichert Powell that no matter what we do, approximately 45% of our students will still drop out.

A few months later, I was leaving my classroom to walk to another building when I found many of my students huddled up discussing something. It was unusual, as they all typically dispersed following our time together. When I asked what they were doing, they mentioned possibly protesting their first-year seminar course by refusing to show up. First-year seminar courses for most institutions are a one-credit hour course designed to ease first-year students into the university community. Instructors go over resources, assign modules on sexual misconduct, alcohol abuse, and financial literacy, and implement lessons intended to help students be successful in college. Because my students, and the majority of first-year students at my institution, Georgia State University, belonged to a cohort, wherein all students shared the same schedule for their fall semester, they maintained a close bond and could easily pull off what they were planning to do. As a scholar who had become increasingly aware, through Reichert
Powell’s book, about the many initiatives universities employ to keep students in school, like first-year seminar courses, I felt compelled to learn more about students’ perspectives on the dropout conversation.

Georgia State University is widely known across the country for the initiatives it employs to support students staying in school. On any given day, listeners of NPR and readers of The Atlantic, Insider Higher Ed, or The New York Times, may find Georgia State recognized once more for its innovative use of technology, particularly big data, to help predict how students may perform in their classes and advise them accordingly. Georgia State’s use of data also facilitates the use of unique alerts the university can send students when they show signs of getting off course. Beyond its use of data, though, Georgia State employs many of the most popular initiatives proposed by higher education scholars who have studied issues of retention, or the act of universities keeping students in school. These initiatives include organizing students into cohorts, mandatory tutoring, summer bridge programs and, of course, first-year seminar courses.

Together, the initiatives employed by Georgia State are intended to make it easier for students to stay enrolled and, as statistics show, Georgia State’s retention rates have increased gradually as more of these initiatives have been implemented. Today, 53% of Georgia State students graduate within six years, a number that is just shy of the national average, but displays an increase for Georgia State (“Graduation and Retention”). Reflected in those rising retention rates are major accomplishments, such as that Georgia State is graduating more African American students annually than any historically-black college or university (Quinn), and students are accruing less debt because they are finishing their degrees (Rosenberg). While these achievements should be celebrated, as Georgia State’s efforts are imperative to closing the achievement gaps between wealthy and middle-class white students and people of color and/or
students with low-income backgrounds, the following project calls attention to other costs that may present themselves when universities direct so much of their attention to students graduating within four years.

Behind Georgia State’s efforts are students’ stories, stories that explain why they may not finish college in four years and stories that make it difficult to believe Georgia State can know better than students what it will take for them to succeed. These stories include a veteran starting over after serving time in jail and an immigrant counting down until she can sponsor her parents’ citizenship. They include teenagers battling depression and single parents raising their children. They also include the story of one student who, in my class, wanted to write about survival as its own discourse, a discourse that so many of my students have had to learn. The stories of Georgia State’s students reveal hardships that may be found at other institutions, hardships that are often the result of students’ racial and economic status. With everything that my students have had to face and continue facing in their own lives, I questioned how Georgia State’s reputation of getting more students to graduate might overlook the strength and maturity these students already possess. When my students want to organize a protest of a course designed to help them succeed, I think it’s important to ask how the university defines success and whether that definition aligns with students’ individual needs, goals, and lived experiences.

My inclination that there may be a disconnect between my institution and the students I teach is shared by composition scholars Matthew McCurrie (2009), Sara Webb-Sunderhaus (2010; 2017), and Pegeen Reichert Powell (2013) who have examined at their own institutions how the rhetoric of retention, or of universities focusing their efforts on getting students to graduation, presumes all students want or are capable of graduating on the university’s preferred timeline. Each scholar challenges their institution’s concept of success, arguing that while the
institution values success as staying in school until a degree is earned, students may define success differently. However, while these authors presented the narratives of different students to make their arguments, students’ individual perspectives were still largely absent from the conversation.

With an interest in learning whether students do indeed value success differently than their institutions, I conducted a case study at Georgia State, wherein I examined whether its retention efforts communicate what Reichert Powell suggests is a narrow definition of success. I then collected students’ perspectives through focus groups and interviews to learn how they might define success. Through this case study, my intention was to understand how students interacted with retention initiatives and whether their individual goals for success were supported by the many initiatives in which Georgia State was investing.

The following dissertation presents the results of this case study and discusses the implications those results have for composition and writing program administration scholars. At the instructor level, this project is imperative for understanding how composition instructors can continue supporting their students’ goals in an environment that increasingly stresses retention as their institution’s priority. At the administrative level, this dissertation offers a framework with which writing program administrators can serve their institution’s retention goals in a way that still offers inclusive support for students whose ideas of success may vary from the expectations of their university. My hope is that this project will encourage writing programs to support students’ goals for success regardless of what their paths may look like.
1 HIGHER EDUCATION’S NARROW PERCEPTION OF SUCCESS

The history of scholarship focusing on retention in higher education is narrow. Becoming a central concern in the seventies, high student dropout rates prompted the development of a handful of theoretical models to explain why students drop out and offer strategies that could potentially curve unfavorable dropout rates. Only one model, though, is credited for initiating a culture shift in higher education that would inspire universities to implement many of the retention initiatives we see today on college campuses. This model, developed by Vincent Tinto (1975), encouraged scholars and administrators to view the university as a community, one where students would need to feel integrated both socially and academically to remain a member. Thus, today, we can see many retention initiatives are either directly or indirectly designed to assist with students’ integration into the university community.

As this dissertation attempts to understand students’ experiences with institutional retention initiatives, it is important for readers to consider the scholarship that has influenced the implementation of these initiatives. If writing program administrators can understand the motives influencing the design of various student support services, they can better negotiate their goals with the goals of their institution. Furthermore, when composition scholars learn the thinking behind retention programs that implicate the work they do and the experiences their students have during their first year of college, they can be more conscious of the way their actions engage with particular ideologies, in this case ideologies that support students’ integration into a university community as the most ideal way to support retention rates.

In the following sections, the evolution of literature on student retention within higher education scholarship will be reviewed. From there, I will discuss how such scholarship has produced a number of retention initiatives that intersect directly and indirectly with the work of
first-year composition scholars. Reactions to the overlapping of these fields will first be discussed from the perspective of writing program administration scholars. Following this section, I will offer recent studies conducted by composition scholars who form a small community of academics questioning how such a narrow approach to supporting student retention can pose ethical and pedagogical concerns. It is in response to the growing voice of concern from composition scholars, scholars positioned to develop some of the earliest and closest relationships with college students at their institutions, that this study was developed. The final section of this chapter, then, will present the rationale and methodology of my dissertation study.

1.1 Higher Education and Retention

In the same decade that CUNY turned to open-enrollment and Mina Shaughnessy published her groundbreaking study *Errors and Expectations* (1977), Vincent Tinto, prominent theorist of higher education, issued a challenge to colleges and universities struggling to keep their students enrolled in school. Tinto’s (1975) article “Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research” and future elaboration of that article (1987) initiated a shift in thinking among scholars and administrators in higher education who credited dropout rates to students’ inefficiencies. Calling attention to the “social and intellectual content of the institution, its formal and informal interactional environment,” Tinto argued for his field to look inward and examine its own role “in the longitudinal process of individual departure” (p. 113). Foreshadowing a career focused on holistic approaches to supporting retention, Tinto described colleges and universities as not just academic institutions, but communities with an inherent set of values and way of doing things, of which are not explicitly made known to incoming students.
If students’ values do not align with their institutions’, Tinto argued that it is the responsibility of the institution to assist in students’ transition into the community.

Tinto’s model relies on sociologist Émile Durkheim’s (1961) theory of “egotistical suicide,” or the idea that one’s “likelihood of suicide in society increases when two types of integration are lacking”; these two types of integration include sharing values central to the community and establishing personal connections with other community members. Tinto applied this concept to students’ departure from institutions of higher education, explaining that they too are their own “social system” with their own set of values, in order to create a model that could explain which students drop out and when and why they do. He explained that if students are unable to integrate into the social system of higher education, their “commitment” to that institution will decrease until the point that students choose to direct their attention and efforts elsewhere (p. 91).

For his model, the “Social Integration Model” of retention, to explain the long-term process of students’ decision to ultimately dropout, Tinto notes that one must view the decision as a result of interactions between students and their institution that either positively or negatively impact students’ educational commitments. As described in Tinto’s diagram of his model in Figure 1, Tinto divided students into three sets of factors to consider: characteristics of their family background, which include the family’s economic status and expectations for the children; the students’ individual attributes, such as personality, gender, and talent; and the students’ history of educational experiences. He also divided the institution into two separate systems that make up the entire community within which students must integrate in order to persist in school. These systems include the academic, with integration dependent on students’
grade performance and satisfaction with that performance, and the social, which calls on students’ to establish relationships with both peers and faculty of the institution.

Figure 1: Tinto’s Student Integration Model

As the model displays, Tinto suggests that student characteristics influence their level of commitment to their personal education goals and their commitment to the institution upon initial enrollment. Then, based on ongoing interactions with the academic and social systems of the institution and thus students’ possible integration into those communities, students either maintain their commitments or ultimately decide to depart from the social system entirely. For example, a student might enter the institution having performed well in high school and motivated to increase their intellectual development, but the student might have little emotional support from their family to continue on with higher education. These attributes may influence them to feel greatly committed to their goal of pursuing further knowledge, but not committed to the institution in which they must integrate in order to pursue that knowledge. If the institution can increase the student’s motivation to continue by making the student feel more a part of the
social community, and thus increase the student’s institutional commitment, that student has a
greater chance of persisting in school and earning a degree (pp. 94-96).

While other models were proposed (Astin, 1970; Spady, 1970; Bean, 1980) to explain
attrition, or the act of students dropping out, taking time off, or transferring from the institution,
Tinto’s Student Integration Model has been the most influential among scholars in higher
education. Unlike John P. Bean’s Student Attrition Model, for example, which focuses more on
the environmental factors that influence student departure, Tinto (1975) addressed factors
perceivably more within the institution’s control, notably the support it can offer students both
academically and socially. Specifically, he argues that the more successfully a student can
assimilate academically—a process evidenced by the extrinsic rewards of positive grades and
intrinsic rewards of intellectual development—and socially—developing relationships with
faculty and peers—the more likely the student will remain committed to their goals of
completing a degree (104). The Student Integration Model provided a useful foundation from
which scholars and administrators could begin examining their own roles in keeping students
enrolled in school.

Tinto’s scholarship and the work of other early researchers in higher education sparked
decades of focus on how the university could do more to raise its retention rates. For the
remainder of this project, I will refer to this line of research and the scholars who conduct this
research as persistence studies and persistence scholars, respectively. Employed by George Metz
(2004), in his article “Challenges and Changes to Tinto’s Persistence Theory: A Historical
Review,” persistence studies refers to any scholarship that focuses on student retention, attrition,
or success. I choose the term persistence because it positions students as agents over their
enrollment in school, rather than more frequently used terms such as retention studies. While
Retention can be found written in the names of journals, article titles, and programs promoting greater student persistence, the noun and its verb form retain place the onus on universities to keep students enrolled. Persistence studies allows for the inclusion of studies which acknowledge that there are factors outside of universities’ control that will cause students to drop out, stop out—taking a break from school—or transfer schools.

Alan Siedman, prominent leader of the persistence movement, developed the Center for the Study of College Student Retention (1996) to encourage further research and the Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, & Practice (1999) to help bridge the gap between that research and practice. Much of the scholarship produced has worked to expand (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993; Berger & Lyon, 1998; Guiffrida, 2006; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2007) or assess (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997) Tinto’s Student Integration Model. While Tinto’s sociological approach to explaining the process through which students leave or persist in higher education has been widely accepted, his work has also long been criticized for its lack of empirical support and narrow representation of college students (Metz). Thus much of the research Tinto inspired includes case studies of particular institutions and theoretical explanations that account for varying student populations.

Studies targeting specific student populations and their patterns of persistence in higher education have and continue to dominate persistence studies. Because Tinto’s model called on his readers to study the attributes students bring with them to college and the subsequent interactions with the institution upon initial enrollment, many persistence scholars studying unique student populations focus their work on identifying factors not accounted for in Tinto’s work. For example, Paul Thayer (2000) and Alan Siedman (2005) appealed to Tinto’s model in order to highlight the differences in “pre-college attributes” that minority students possess,
particularly students of color and/or with low-income backgrounds (p. 9). Thayer argued that many students outside the population targeted in Tinto’s original work do not have the same financial education or time management skills, are less informed about the college environment and its expectations, and often struggle with resistance from family members who may not support their pursuit of a college education. Persistence scholars have argued that this lack of preparation translates into students’ difficulty integrating into the academic community once enrolled (Ishitani 2003; Flowers 2004).

To increase the chances for minority students persisting in school, whether they be first-generation college students, people of color, women, or students from low-income backgrounds, characteristics that often intersect, persistence scholars suggest practical methods through which universities can intervene. These methods include offering pre-college advising, establishing faculty/student or advisor/student mentoring programs, incorporating summer transition courses, creating multicultural centers, and transforming curriculum to reflect a more diverse student population (Thayer; Landry 2002; Ishitani; Flowers). Landry, in her article “Retention of Women and People of Color: Unique Challenges and Institutional Responses,” extended her recommendations beyond the more common list above to include making the college environment feel safer and advocating for gender equality (pp. 5-6). Because it is widely known that most students who leave school do so their first year (Upcraft et al., 2005), scholars have advised that if universities want to increase students’ likelihood of staying in school, they should target all of these retention efforts toward students’ first year of college.

An exception to the findings on minority student retention comes from scholarship focused on the patterns of persistence among non-traditional students, or students whose age is above 25 (Markle, 2015). While scholars studying the experience of non-traditional students in
higher education have identified unique factors that may prevent non-traditional students from staying in school, they have also given reason to suggest that integration may not be the solution. Susan Kinsella (1998) and Gail Markle found that nontraditional students particularly struggle with balancing multiple life roles, with women often also having to manage guilt for not offering enough time to these roles. Kinsella and Markle also counter commonly held beliefs about college students by showing that nontraditional students are more likely to persist when they attend school part-time instead of full-time. Rather than require programs that will ease their integration into the academic community, non-traditional students tend to desire commuter-focused services, such as lounges and study groups, which could help them make the best use of the little time they do have to devote to their education.

Despite the variance in findings, persistence scholars have used the many factors influencing student attrition that have been identified over the years to inform adjustments to universities’ academic and social environments. With most attention paid to the first year of college explicitly (Tinto, 1999; Upcraft et al.), scholars have proposed a number of initiatives designed to promote student integration. While the list of these initiatives below is in no way comprehensive, the programs I describe can be found to be the most written about in persistence scholarship and appear to be the most widespread in their implementation across the country (Kuh et al., 2011). Reasons for their popularity appear to be their feasibility (i.e., it is easier to arrange students into cohorts than to require that faculty meet regularly with students one-on-one) and scalability (i.e., the programs allow for addressing the needs of small to large student populations). Frequently referred to as “Student Success Programs” on college and university websites, common initiatives, also referred to as retention initiatives because they display a university’s efforts to retain students, include:
• **Freshman Learning Communities (FLCs):** FLCs are a university retention initiative intended to promote academic and social integration among first-year students. They include organizing students into groups based on either their major, college, common interest, or “student-type,” which can range from first-generation students to honors students. These students often take at least two courses together, with residential students sometimes given the opportunity to live with peers in their FLC (Tinto; Zhao & Kuh). Bridging both the academic and social systems of an institution, FLCs are an initiative most advocated for by Tinto and his supporters.

• **Summer Bridge/Transition Programs:** Summer Bridge programs are designed to ease the transition for high school students into the college environment. While programs vary greatly in terms of length, content, college credit, and residential requirements, they essentially focus on facilitating students’ interactions with peers and faculty and introducing students to the expectations of college level work prior to enrolling in the subsequent fall semester (Ackerman, 1991; Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013). Summer Bridge programs signify universities’ efforts to address the attributes students’ possess or circumstances they face prior to enrollment that may influence their commitments to personal goals or to the institution. They also function similarly to FLCs as they facilitate the development of small social and academic communities through which students can begin feeling a sense of belonging to the institution.

• **Early Alert Systems:** In response to research suggesting student failure rates in first-year courses are often correlated with “excessive absenteeism” (Hudson, 2005), universities have begun developing efficient ways to track students’ attendance. Early Alert Systems request of instructors to contact students or advisors through specific software that will
flag the receiver and trigger a process of intervention (Faulconer et al., 2013). Embracing Tinto’s theory that students’ decision to dropout is the result of a series of interactions with the university, Early Alert Systems allow for early and positive interactions between students and university representatives in order to potentially curtail students’ declining commitments to their goals or the institution.

- **First-Year Seminars:** First-year seminar courses, also known as university experience courses, often accompany students’ course schedules in summer bridge programs and freshman learning communities. Offering class sizes comparable to composition courses, they present students with opportunities to become familiarized with their university environment and earn credit for doing so. Content for this course may consist of time-management skills, tips for conducting library research, and stress-reducing strategies (Williford, Chapman, & Kahrig, 2001). Also supporting Tinto’s Integration Model, university experience courses both allow social bonding among students and facilitate low-stakes opportunities for students who may not possess the cultural capital needed to navigate higher education to gain practical skills and understand institutional values helpful for academic integration.

- **Common Reading Programs:** Common reading programs, or common book programs, are a community-building tactic typically introduced at freshman orientations. The concept is to promote university-wide academic discussion centered around a single text by assigning freshmen to read a book, encouraging faculty to incorporate that book into their curriculum, and offering campus events related to the book (Benz et al., 2013; Ferguson, Brown, & Piper, 2015). Employing a similar concept to the university
experience course, common reading programs offer students a low-risk\(^1\) way to develop social connections over academic content.

The programs described above often form the core of college and university efforts to raise their student retention rates. Other programs have been proposed by scholars and are being tested across the country, programs such as data-driven academic advising, increased and mandatory tutoring, and mini-grants for students who are only a few credits shy of graduation, along with countless localized initiatives. However, the list above represents a widespread response by colleges and universities to decades of persistence research that has accepted and expanded upon ideas inherent in Tinto’s Student Integration Model: students are more likely to be retained at their institution if they feel a part of a social and academic community.

Because the programs listed are specifically designed for early intervention in students’ college careers, the work of writing programs is often implicated both logistically and pedagogically by university retention efforts (Holmes and Busser, 2017). Often charged with staffing their institution’s only required course, writing programs and specifically first-year writing programs are the most likely of academic programs to work with students enrolled in summer bridge programs, freshman learning communities, and university experience courses (Reichert Powell, 2013). They are also most likely to be tasked with implementing a common book (Benz et al. 2013) and house the greatest population of instructors submitting Early Alerts to their institutions’ retention or advising offices. Despite how often their work intersects with retention initiatives, though, few writing program administration (WPA) scholars have conducted persistence-based studies; the following section reviews the work of WPAs who have begun that research.

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\(^1\) I consider common book programs low-risk because the assignments related to the book may or may not be mandatory and often would not influence the students’ overall academic performance in a class.
1.2 Writing Programs and Retention

In line with Tinto’s Student Integration Model, which emphasizes factors within the institution’s control that can be changed to better support student persistence, discussions of retention within the field of writing program administration are also rooted in terms of what can be done on their end to keep students in school. Thus, when focusing their efforts on retention, WPA scholars appear to concern themselves both with issues of placement, or students’ potential for academic success within the writing classroom, and assessment, which calls for greater attention to students’ continued performance during the semester. However, as discussed later in this section, not all WPA scholars are necessarily interested in playing such a direct, supporting role in student persistence. Rather, some writing programs show concern over the autonomy they do or do not maintain regarding implementing institutional retention efforts.

One such example of WPA scholars addressing placement strategies for the purpose of supporting retention is described in Beth Brunk-Chavez’s and Elaine Fredericksen’s (2008) article, “Predicting Success: Increasing Retention and Pass Rates in College Composition.” Concerned with the high dropout and failure rates of first-year writers at their institution, the University of Texas-El Paso (UTEP), Brunk-Chavez and Fredericksen considered ways they could better support their largely non-traditional, first-generation, commuter student population. Following the collection of “anecdotal evidence concerning students’ lack of preparedness” for four semesters, the authors took particular interest in improving the university’s process of placing students, which at the time consisted of students taking a written test on the computer (p. 77). While changing the university’s placement measures was out of their control, Brunk-Chavez and Fredericksen appealed to Richard Haswell’s concept of employing multiple measures to ensure validity. In doing so, they chose to implement a diagnostic essay in all of their English
1311 courses, the first in a two-semester composition sequence, which would be employed during the first week of school. Their goal with this diagnostic essay was to better “predict” students’ outcomes by “assess[ing] their potential for success in the class” (p. 90). Success in this context was defined as students earning passing final grades.

While the results of Brunk-Chavez and Fredericksen’s study suggest that UTEP’s computerized placement test works well to determine students’ preparedness for their respective courses, Brunk-Chavez and Fredericksen use the reliability of both measures to make a recommendation that could target what Tinto would claim are “retention-related issues” in the university’s—and, more specifically the writing department’s—control (p. 90). However, recognizing the needs of their students aligned closer with the findings from Kinsella and Markle, Brunk-Chavez and Fredericksen sought to improve students’ experiences without inconveniencing a student population that did not necessarily find support in traditional initiatives designed to promote integration into the university environment (i.e., freshman learning communities and common reading programs). UTEP’s writing program, instead, designed and implemented a one-credit, one-hour per week, lab to be instructed by a “trained English instructor” (p. 91). Such an initiative, Brunk-Chavez and Fredericksen argue, allows for UTEP’s unique student population of non-traditional commuter students who often work full-time to benefit from a sense of community and greater faculty attention without burdening them with the pressures of more common retention initiatives that support Tinto’s Student Integration Model.

Also interested in supporting student persistence through first-year writing, Joe Moxley (2013), WPA of the University of South Florida (USF), offers his approach to improving assessment in “Big Data, Learning Analytics, and Social Assessment.” Inviting WPA scholars to
reconsider arguments against the use of common rubrics, Moxley claims that “new technologies are becoming available” that allow “assessment systems” to “[become] part of the teaching and learning process.” One such technology he discusses is a program called My Reviewers, “a document workflow, peer review, e-portfolio tool” that can be accessed by administrators, instructors, and students. Used simultaneously with a standard syllabus and “community rubric,” the program allows viewers to observe in real-time how students perform on assignments of different writing genres, among many other details. This system, Moxley argues, facilitates more authentic opportunities to judge, before it’s too late, if students are learning the material in their courses. By viewing students’ results on early drafts and improving instructors’ understanding of how students typically perform in different genres, writing programs can make important changes to support students’ academic success and thus likelihood of persisting onto their next semester.

Both studies, Brunk-Chavez’s and Fredericksen’s and Moxley’s, recognize the importance of supporting students early on in their college careers. By ensuring students are placed in writing courses most appropriately aligned with their academic potential, writing programs can do more to identify new strategies designed to boost students’ success within the institution’s academic system. Additionally, by employing innovative methods for understanding students’ academic performance in real-time, writing programs are given the opportunity to intervene in students’ potentially negative educational experiences early on, prior to facing the possibility of dropping out.

Unlike in the previous two studies discussed, which offer methods for writing programs to support students’ persistence through first-year writing, other scholars have begun examining the implications of being involved with retention initiatives altogether. Brad Benz, Denise
Comer, Erik Juergensmeyer, and Margaret Lowry (2013) directed their attention to common reading programs. A popular initiative implemented by Student Affairs departments at universities across the country, the common reading program aims to promote community among students, faculty, and staff; spark interdisciplinary discussions; encourage students’ engagement with their courses as well as the university at large, particularly through associated events, such as a campus visit by the author; and, ultimately, support student retention. In “WPA, Writing Programs, and the Common Reading Experience,” Benz et al. argue that writing programs and writing program administrators should concern themselves with common reading programs for curricular and institutional reasons. Because the field of composition has spent decades debating the role of reading in writing courses, WPAs should be aware of how assigning the common reader does or does not meet the reading-related learning objectives of writing programs, which are often to teach “rhetorical reading” that moves “beyond reading comprehension” (p. 14). The authors also call on writing programs to question how participating in the common reading program or opting out impacts the writing program’s relationship with the institutional community and “future collaborations” (p. 15).

After examining the interaction between common reading programs and writing programs at three different institutions, Benz et al. found many benefits and consequences for writing programs. Benefits include the potential for writing programs to consistently reevaluate their practices as they work toward designing new curriculum around a new text each year. The common reader can also provide writing programs with greater material through which to assess their effectiveness. A third benefit is the increased attention given to first-year writing programs by university administrators, which can positively impact writing program resources. However, greater attention, according to Benz et al., can also lead to threats toward a writing program’s
autonomy. For example, the authors found at UT-Arlington that while the writing program became “more visible across the university, the dynamic of shaping the course to support the book framed FYC as a service course rather than an autonomous discipline with discrete learning outcomes” (18). Other concerns were found in their study as well, such as the common reader potentially misrepresenting the goals and expectations of a writing program and creating resistance and resentment among writing faculty. Noting the benefits and risks of the common reading experience, Benz et al. ultimately intended “to help WPAs consider the ongoing complexities involved with how they can choose to respond to, strengthen, resist, and/or otherwise engage with” perceivably top-down university initiatives (p. 12).

Rather than frame WPAs as supporting actors in their universities’ fight for increasing student retention, Benz et al. call on WPAs to question how retention initiatives align, conflict, or challenge the values of writing programs, a call that has most recently been taken up by Todd Reucker, Dawn Shepherd, Heidi Estrem, and Beth Brunk-Chavez (2017) in their edited collection *Retention, Persistence, and Writing Program*. Separated into two parts, this collection offers a much needed critical analysis of the intersections between university retention goals and the work of writing programs. While some essays within the collection align with the work discussed previously, offering strategies to support retention within the authors’ respective writing programs, the collection as a whole functions to more carefully negotiate the work of writing programs with institutional retention goals. In one essay, for example, Ashley Holmes and I conducted a case study at Georgia State University, a Research I university that continues to make headlines for its retention programs and increased graduation rates. The study involved interviewing three university administrators affiliated with Georgia State’s Student Success Center, where all of the university’s retention programs are housed; two interviews with
administrators from Lower Division Studies, the department in charge of organizing all first and second year English courses; and two focus groups with Graduate Teaching Assistants who teach first-year writing. The results from these interviews and focus groups indicate that retention programs such as the common reader program, freshman learning communities, summer bridge programs, university experience courses, and early alert programs can significantly impact writing programs both logistically and pedagogically. Furthermore, the study found that the logistical and pedagogical issues that arise from the intersection of first-year writing courses and retention programs are not easy to resolve because writing programs are often positioned to react to decisions already made from university administrators, rather than work proactively alongside the offices for academic and student affairs. In our chapter, “Beyond Coordination: Building Collaborative Partnerships to Support Institutional-Level Retention Initiatives in Writing Programs,” Holmes and I suggest that programs implemented to help retain students would benefit from greater collaboration with English departments, whose work is often the most impacted by university retention initiatives, and whose instructors are known to have some of the strongest relationships with first-year students, and thus are positioned to gather insight regarding students’ unique needs for persisting in school.

Expanding upon the findings of Benz et al. and Holmes and Busser, the next section will review scholarship from composition scholars concerned with how university retention initiatives impact first-year composition theory and pedagogy. Informed by their daily interactions with students in small classroom environments, these scholars describe the unintended consequences that may result from a university’s push towards raising its retention rates. Rather than bring up issues of autonomy, however, like the WPA scholarship above, the growing conversation among composition scholars instead challenges readers to consider how
university retention trends impact students’ perceptions of success; this particular shift in focus, as will be discussed in the following section, allows scholars to more deeply consider the inherent values and presumptions of university retention goals alongside the unique circumstances and priorities of college students.

1.3 Composition and Retention

Discussing important revisions to Columbia College’s Summer Bridge program, Matthew McCurrie’s (2009) article “Measuring Success in Summer Bridge Programs: Retention Efforts and Basic Writing” encourages readers to critique the inherent values in programs designed to help students transition into the university community. Alongside one math course and extra-curricular activities, the English course associated with McCurrie’s summer bridge program at Columbia College is a non-credit bearing four-week course designed to immerse students into the academic and social environment. Should students pass their summer bridge coursework, they will then be admitted into the college. McCurrie found that the summer bridge program’s English course was ineffective because the curriculum focused on getting students to catch-up or “fix” existing deficiencies rather than introduce students to the level of rigor in first-year college courses (p. 32). The results of surveys and focus groups with administrators and instructors suggested to McCurrie that the course’s curriculum did provide greater educational access to students and offered opportunities to encourage student motivation; however, it did not sufficiently prepare students for first-year writing. McCurrie argues that this approach to summer bridge programs can “[exist] in tension with the reality that some students will not be ready for college, even after a bridge program.” He continues, maintaining: “[to] simply admit students who are not prepared may lead to expensive failures with lasting negative consequences” (pp. 43-44). McCurrie’s study raises ethical concerns about universities’ efforts to represent
themselves as accessible to students from historically marginalized backgrounds while maintaining questionable expectations for students’ academic readiness. Ultimately, McCurrie encourages readers to consider if summer bridge programs can do more harm than good for students if the curriculum design focuses more on students’ motivation levels and social readiness, rather than their preparation for college level work.

To design a more effective summer bridge program, McCurrie calls for a greater understanding of the varying definitions of success that exist among administrators, instructors, and students. In his study, he found that administrators framed student success in the summer bridge program as students’ ability to “[meet] admissions requirements for basic academic standards” (p. 31). Instructors, however, associated students’ success with “developing academic literacy” (p. 32). Finally, McCurrie found that students understood their own success to be the fulfillment of personal and professional goals, which are not necessarily earning a specific letter grade and advancing on to the next semester. Understanding how administrators’, instructors’, and students’ perceptions of success conflict can inform the decisions made with regard to retention programs. If students do not define success in the same way that administrators do—i.e., maintaining academic standards—then universities should be doing more to influence students’ development of an academic-based definition of success. Doing so, though, would require “teachers and administrators . . . involving [themselves] in the places where success gets defined for young people, like K-12 schooling, churches, clubs, jobs, and the many other places where young people form their attitudes about success” (p. 47). In the meantime, however, McCurrie argues for making the classroom a place for all students, for those who will persist and those who will leave.
Echoing McCurrie’s critique of summer bridge programs, Sara Webb-Sunderhaus (2010) asserts that providing access for basic writers to higher education is not enough; universities must also assist these students in achieving their personal versions of academic success. Combining David Bartholomae’s (1986) concept of “inventing the university” with the work of Vincent Tinto, Webb-Sunderhaus argues that both institutions and composition instructors encourage students’ assimilation into the university, rather than support “students’ desires and goals” for being there (p. 110). Webb-Sunderhaus’s article highlights the dichotomy of failure and success embedded in Bartholomae’s theory and Tinto’s Student Integration Model. If students fail to assimilate socially and academically, or if the university fails to retain them through these integrative methods, then these students are unable to be successful. Drawing on her own experiences working with basic writers, Webb-Sunderhaus dismisses this line of thinking and instead argues that students, particularly those who are marginalized, may “invent the university for themselves,” prefer not to gain “membership,” or, “for various reasons, cannot pursue [membership] at this particular stage of their lives” (p. 107). In other words, students may possess goals and values that conflict with those embedded in curriculum and programs designed to promote retention, goals that could reflect a different timeline toward graduation and values that do not immediately align success with persistence.

Positioned to work closely with first-year students, composition instructors McCurrie and Webb-Sunderhaus challenge the notion that retention initiatives have students’ best interest in mind. The authors note contradicting desires among administrators working to increase retention and students enrolled in their first-year courses. While primarily framed as a voice for students, the composition instructors in these two articles are also uniquely in the middle of administrators and students. They are simultaneously charged with helping meet the goals of administrators and
respecting the individual goals and values of their students. McCurrie and Webb-Sunderhaus call out the composition instructor’s role as a gatekeeper by questioning the risks of letting students in the gate who are unprepared or by assuming students want to enter through the gate at all. In both cases, the authors gave allowed to students to define success for themselves rather than support the idea that students can only perform successfully by continuing to persist in school.

Expanding upon the work of McCurrie and Webb-Sunderhaus, Pegeen Reichert Powell (2013) has written the most expansive exploration of the intersection between retention and first-year writing to date. In her book, *Retention & Resistance: Writing Instruction and Students Who Leave*, Reichert Powell traced the evolution of the term failure throughout history to higher education’s current usage. Uncovering the individualist nature through which the term is used, Powell warns of the damage the rhetoric of retention can have on students who are unable to persist. She juxtaposes her study with stories of three of her students whose academic careers were stalled due to financial and familial obligations. By communicating their experiences, Reichert Powell highlights the ethical implications of presuming a student’s withdrawal from school is the result of personal failure. Reichert Powell also displays the impossibility of institutions predicting or measuring students’ paths toward graduation. By doing so, Reichert Powell suggests that students may consider success to be any number of other definitions, like contributing financially to one’s family.

Revisiting the longstanding service debate in composition, Reichert Powell asks her readers to consider for what purpose they are teaching: to serve institutional retention goals and thus teach for transfer into the academic community, or to serve students where they are at in their lives, addressing broader applications of writing. Because Reichert Powell argues approximately 45% of students will eventually leave the institution regardless of retention
initiatives or a teacher selected pedagogy, her study suggests that instructors should work to acknowledges other moments of success rather than marginalize students who fail according to institutional standards. In her final chapter of *Retention & Resistance*, then, she proposes that instructors employ “a kairotic pedagogy,” an approach to teaching that focuses on students’ improving as writers for their current moment, rather than for a future assumed by their institution.

In each study wherein WPA and composition scholars are discussing persistence, whether retention efforts are being supported (Brunk-Chavez and Fredericksen; Moxley) or critically examined (Benz et al.; McCurrie; Webb-Sunderhaus; Powell), success has remained a consistent trope. Scholars working to support retention efforts within their respective English departments portrayed success as students’ persistence in school, not unlike representations of success portrayed by scholars in higher education (Tinto 1975; Upcraft et al. 2005; Kuh 2011). Scholars critiquing university retention initiatives argue that students may hold ideas of success that conflict with universities’ portrayals of student success, driven by different needs, goals, and life experiences. Consistent among the studies that have explored the intersections of retention initiatives and composition is the belief that writing faculty maintain greater access than university administrators to the understanding of students’ needs. However, WPA and composition scholars have yet to conduct a thorough study examining how students, indeed, perceive success.

Because of the direct impact retention initiatives have on the logistical and pedagogical processes of first-year composition (Benz et al.; Holmes and Busser), a study that allows first-year composition students the opportunity to discuss their experiences with retention initiatives is imperative. In the study conducted by Holmes and Busser, for example, Graduate Teaching
Assistants communicated their concerns that required 8 am classes for summer bridge students are what prevented some of those students from doing well. Other Graduate Teaching Assistants spoke of their students’ negative attitudes toward the books selected for the common reading program, relaying their arguments that the book has been either difficult to relate to or condescending. While valuable, these opinions offer only instructors’ interpretations of students’ perspectives, which can be influenced by instructors’ personal opinions about the retention initiatives they have been tasked to employ. The same argument can be made regarding claims from McCurrie and Reichert Powell, who both mentioned students in their studies, but primarily speak for those students based on their personal knowledge of their students’ circumstances. A study that seeks composition students’ opinions of retention initiatives, and in turn their perceptions of success, is necessary for writing program administrators and composition scholars deciding how to respond to their institution’s increasing focus on student retention programs.

1.4 Methodology

Outside of composition, one notable study by Deanna L. Fasset and John T. Warren (2004) explores perceptions of success among teachers and students through a series of focus groups. In their article “‘You Get Pushed Back’: The Strategic Rhetoric of Educational Success and Failure in Higher Education,” the authors apply Nakayama’s and Krizek’s concept of “strategic rhetorics,” or “the persuasive discourses that function hegemonically to continually re-secure the power of institutions by permeating the mundane talk of individuals” (p. 21). By doing so Fasset and Warren seek to uncover how students and teachers talk about success and failure and, thus, contribute to “the dominance of existing educational practices” (p. 21). In their study, they discovered three strategic rhetorics: “individualism,” “victimization,” and “authenticity.” When students and teachers discussed success, they either framed their
definitions as solely dependent on the individual’s own efforts and abilities, completely reliant on the systems within which individuals are positioned, or based off an “ideal” notion of success embedded in “standards,” a “mythical [other],” or a “model” in “popular culture” (p. 33). By conducting two focus groups with undergraduate students and two more with instructors of undergraduates, the authors were able to collect a significant amount of material from which to determine how language is used to uphold stereotypes and unjust educational practices. The authors conclude their article with a call for their readers to pay closer attention to this language in order to change the way success and failure are talked about, with hope that the identities constructed from this language (i.e., students as “at-risk,” failures, or “good”) might be liberated (pp. 36-38). While not situated within persistence or composition studies, Fasset and Warren contribute greatly to understanding students’ relationship with success. Conducting more formalized interviews than Powell and McCurrie, the authors allow for a fruitful analysis of how students’ perceptions of success and failure are constructed by their environment—an important point to consider when universities utilize the trope of success to justify and promote retention initiatives.

Employing similar methods to Fasset and Warren, this research project expands the work of McCurrie, Webb-Sunderhaus, and Reichert Powell by presenting data that constructs a more comprehensive understanding of students’ ideas of success, and their needs to achieve success, than what composition scholars have suggested so far. Conducted in the form of a case study, my data is drawn from a large public four-year university that has developed a national and international reputation for increasing its retention rates to the credit of numerous retention initiatives. I held focus groups and interviews with first-year composition students to learn about their experiences with university retention initiatives. I also performed an historical analysis on
success to better understand its construction in US culture and within higher education. Finally, I reviewed university documents, including a Strategic Plan and an institutional update on the progress of the university’s retention initiatives, in order to identify how Georgia State defines student success.

By using a combination of historical research, document analysis, focus groups, and interviews, my aim was to understand how students’ experiences with retention initiatives might communicate a definition of success comparable or variant from the definition of success often associated with university administrations. What I have found, however, is that the definition of success is not necessarily where students and universities diverge, as suggested by McCurrie and Reichert Powell; rather, the data in this study has revealed that far more conflicting are the ideas students and universities possess for *how* to achieve success. The remaining sections of this chapter will introduce the research questions, institutional context, and target population for this case study, along with details how the collected data has been analyzed.

1.4.1 **Research Questions**

The research questions that guide this study are as follows:

1. What are first-year composition students’ experiences with retention initiatives?
2. How do composition students’ experiences with retention initiatives compare to universities’ portrayals of student success?
3. How do the differences or similarities between composition students’ experiences with retention initiatives and universities’ portrayals of student success impact the work of writing programs and composition pedagogy?

Due to the complexity of the term success within the context of persistence studies and suggestions by composition scholars that there may be conflicting definitions among university
administrators and students, I chose only to use the term to assist with data analysis, rather than address it specifically in focus groups and interviews. Instead of asking students how they define success specifically, I set out to learn what their general expectations, needs, and goals were with regard to college and first-year writing, as well as their experiences with university retention initiatives, in order to put their responses in conversation with a historical perspective of success in US culture. Approaching the focus groups and interviews in this way resulted in much more thorough discussions about the individual paths students followed in order to achieve their idea of success. I then compared my data gathered from students to university representations of student success in order to better understand if higher education’s focus on retention has students’ best interests in mind, or is potentially marginalizing students whose priorities conflict with or exist outside of persisting in the way their university encourages persistence.

1.4.2 Institutional Context

In order to understand the perceptions of success among students impacted by retention initiatives, I conducted a case study at Georgia State University, a large, urban public research university located in downtown Atlanta, Georgia. Prior to a recent merger with a nearby community college (details for which will be discussed in the next chapter), Georgia State served approximately 32,000 undergraduate students and offers over 250 undergraduate and graduate degree programs (“About Georgia State,” 2016). Georgia State’s student population is very diverse compared to other public universities, with 36% of students identifying at Caucasian, 35% African American, 10% Asian, 8% Hispanic, with the remaining 11% identifying as Mixed-Race, Unknown, or Other (“Georgia State University,” 2016). Sixty-percent of Georgia State’s undergraduate students come from households with incomes ranking in the bottom 25% nationally (Renick, 2015). Evidenced by Georgia State’s institutional reports and studies
conducted by persistence scholars, students whose racial backgrounds have been historically marginalized and/or who have great financial need struggle to persist in school at greater rates than those who match the more “traditional” students originally studied by Tinto (Thayer; Landry; Flowers). With its unique student population and those students’ history of low retention rates, Georgia State has been particularly devoted to promoting student persistence over the past 30 years.

In 2014, Georgia State joined the University Innovation Alliance, “a coalition of eleven public research universities spanning the geographic, economic, and social diversity” of the United States. Because they “serve large numbers of first generation, low-income students,” the eleven schools are particularly committed to increasing students’ access to educational opportunities and financial “mobility” (“University Innovation Alliance,” 2016). Georgia State’s efforts towards achieving these goals are frequently referenced by major news publications including NPR, The New York Times, The Atlantic, and Inside Higher Ed, to name a few. Specifically, Georgia State has gained notoriety for its use of predictive analytics to help guide students through school and has been singled out by President Obama for its use of mini-grants to help students finish once their loans have run out. The Student Success Center, where Georgia State’s retention initiatives are housed, continues to explore new ways to help students persist in school and has seen major gains in graduation rates, with the greatest found among minority populations. In the last five years alone, degrees conferred among African Americans have increased by 59%, Pell Grant recipients, 93%, and Hispanic students, 171% (Renick, 2015). The combination of Georgia State’s nationally recognized retention initiatives and the favorable returns Georgia State has experienced perceivably to the credit of those initiatives makes the school a prime location for which to research students’ experiences.
Additionally, the previous study I conducted with Ashley Holmes at Georgia State suggests the need for improved collaboration between Georgia State’s Student Success Center and Lower Division Studies (LDS), the department in charge of the first-year composition sequence, Honors Composition, and lower-level literature courses. Currently LDS participates in a number of retention initiatives coming out of the Student Success Center. These programs include freshman learning communities, Success Academy (Georgia State’s summer bridge program), and Panther Excellence Program, a program similar to Success Academy, except the students begin in fall rather than summer. The Student Success Center and the work of LDS also intersect through Early Alert, Georgia State’s attendance tracking system, and the common reading program. With these initiatives, LDS is often forced to react to decisions already made within the Student Success Center, rather than have the opportunity to collaborate in the initiatives’ design and implementation. Yet, as argued by LDS administrators and Graduate Teaching Assistants, the initiatives present a number of challenges for Georgia State’s writing program. More significantly, LDS administrators and Graduate Teaching Assistants have suggested the initiatives do not always reflect the needs of their students (Holmes and Busser). Despite skeptical opinions held by members of Lower Division Studies, Georgia State is one of many institutions across the country employing nationally supported retention initiatives. For this reason, conducting a case study at Georgia State to collect students’ perspectives contributes greatly to current discussions about retention going on within WPA and composition studies.

While the results of this study have implications for universities of a similar profile, such as the members of the University Innovation Alliance, it is important also to note its limitations. Students’ experiences with retention initiatives range greatly based on the size, funding, and demographics of the institution. Smaller schools and private schools, for example, are often able
to facilitate a smaller teacher-to-student ratio and thus allow for students a potentially easier experience integrating into the institution’s academic and social communities. Programs such as freshman learning communities and the common book program might look much different at these institutions because more resources can be devoted to the programs’ implementation compared to a large, public university. Furthermore, schools who implement and assess certain retention efforts will likely gather different results based on the institutional demographics. For instance, I have asked students in my study their motivations for attending college and the data suggests these motivations can be heavily influenced by their family’s financial circumstances. Middle-class and wealthy students might offer alternative reasons for pursuing a degree. Thus, this dissertation may offer the most benefit to writing program and composition scholars who are seeking to understand how university retention goals intersect with the complex lifestyles and motivations of students attending large, public, urban universities.

1.4.3 Data Collection

Over the course of four months in the spring and summer of 2016, I conducted five focus groups and nine follow-up interviews with first-year students. I led focus groups prior to student interviews in order to encourage students’ collaborative reflection on their experiences. As an English instructor, I understand that students are more likely to engage in discussion and reflection if they can do so first with their peers. To recruit students to participate in focus groups, I partnered with peer Graduate Teaching Assistants who teach students enrolled in the Panther Excellence Program or Success Academy, and/or who had good rapport with students they taught in a fall freshman learning community. I visited those teachers’ classes, explained the details of my study, which had already been approved by Georgia State’s Internal Review Board, and invited students to participate. The five focus groups consisted of one group of students who
participated in a fall-enrolled freshman learning community, one group of fall-enrolled Panther Excellence Program students, and three groups of summer-enrolled Success Academy students. Each focus group consisted of 2-6 students, and did not last longer than 60 minutes.

As mentioned earlier, I did not explicitly ask students about how they defined success. Rather, in the focus groups, I asked a set of 8-10 questions that ranged from general inquiries about students’ goals, needs, and expectations for college and composition to more specific questions regarding their experiences with Georgia State’s retention initiatives (See Appendix A). Questions addressed issues such as students’ reasons for attending college, responsibilities students were balancing alongside composition assignments, and factors that were or were not contributing to students doing well on their schoolwork. Questions were also tailored to students’ respective class make-up, whether that was Success Academy, the Panther Excellence Program, or traditional freshman learning community. Finally, I also asked about students’ experiences and opinions regarding Georgia State’s first-year book program. These questions were left intentionally open, so students would have the opportunity to build off each other’s responses. Overall, my goal was to hear from students their thoughts on the initiatives designed to ease their first-year college experience, while also attempting to understand their personal needs and goals for success.

To recruit students to participate in interviews, I sought interest from those who participated in focus groups. I conducted nine total follow-up interviews. During these interviews, I continued with similar topics addressed in the focus groups, but made the questions more specific to students’ individual experiences. For example, rather than ask a student to describe his or her experience with Success Academy, I spent more time addressing the specific requirements students needed to fulfill in order to stay enrolled in Success Academy. Similarly,
instead of asking students to name factors that might contribute to their academic success, I asked students to reflect on specific examples of when they have done well or not so well on an essay and what they believe contributed to the outcome. Students from all three programs, Success Academy, Panther Excellence, and the traditional freshman learning community were interviewed; interviews took no longer than 45 minutes of students’ time.

### 1.4.4 Target Population

As mentioned above, Georgia State’s student population is very diverse racially and economically. Fifty-nine percent of students are women and 41% are men. Twenty-two percent of students live on campus (“Georgia State University,” 2016). Beyond these demographics, which represent the makeup of this study’s participants, all students I spoke with were enrolled in freshman learning communities, of which include Success Academy and the Panther Excellence Program, during the spring and summer semesters of 2016. By reaching out to these students in the spring and summer, I had the opportunity to speak with students in their final semesters participating in the Panther Excellence Program (spring), those who have persisted following a semester with a traditional freshman learning community (spring), and students who were enrolled in their first semester of Success Academy (summer). Thus, I was able to speak with students who were “successful” according to persistence scholarship, as well as students who may not have persisted into their fall semester. Below are more specific descriptions of the students belonging to each group.

- **Freshman Learning Community students:** Students belonging to a freshman learning community are organized with other students into communities that represent one of eight meta-majors, which include Humanities, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, Education, STEM, Policy Studies, Business, or Undeclared. These students begin school in the fall
semester and are enrolled full-time. During their first semester, they take four core classes related to their major, ENC 1101, Georgia State’s first of two first-year composition courses, and GSU 1010, a one-credit university experience course. Approximately 80% of Georgia State freshmen belong to a freshman learning community (N. Huot, personal communication, January 21, 2015). They may or may not live on campus.

- **Success Academy students**: Students enrolled in Success Academy begin school in the summer semester. They are accepted to Georgia State under the condition that they commit to being a part of the Success Academy program for three semesters (summer, fall, and spring). Acceptance into the Success Academy program is based on students’ freshman index, a calculation of their GPA and SAT or ACT scores. Success Academy students’ freshman index scores are lower than the average for students accepted to Georgia State. Students’ summer semester consists of taking three courses for a total of seven credits. These courses include GSU 1010, ENC 1101, and one course from the Social Sciences or Humanities selected by the university that will go toward students’ majors (“Success Academy FAQ”). Along with attending classes, students must meet a number of other requirements including:
  - Maintain at least a 2.5 GPA with no grade below a “D”
  - Meet with an academic advisor at least twice a semester
  - Attend and participate in academic and co-curricular activities
  - Attend and participate in weekly supplemental instruction sections
  - Meet regularly with a peer mentor
  - Agree to receive school related text messages (“Commitment Statement” 2016)
Should students earn below a 2.5 GPA in any of their semesters, they may face a probation period that requires part-time rather than full-time enrollment in the fall or spring. Students are highly encouraged to live on campus, but are not required.

- **Panther Excellence Program students:** The experience for students enrolled in Panther Excellence is very similar to that of students enrolled in Success Academy. Based on lower-than-average freshman index scores, Panther Excellence students are admitted to Georgia State under the condition that they commit to enrolling in the Panther Excellence Program for the fall and spring semesters of their first year. Similar to Success Academy students, Panther Excellence students must also meet specific requirements such as meeting regularly with mentors and academic coaches, attending a number of sessions with supplemental instruction, and attending monthly success workshops (“Panther Excellence Program,” 2016). They must be enrolled full-time in the fall semester, and their course schedule includes GSU 1010, ENC 1101, and three other courses selected by university staff that will count toward their major (“Panther Excellence Program (PEP) FAQ.” 2016). If they earn less than a 2.5 GPA in their fall semester, they may be required to reduce their course load to part-time in the spring semester. Panther Excellence students are highly encouraged to live on campus but are not required to do so.

Speaking with these three populations of students allowed me to gain perspectives of first-year students whose experiences in their first year were impacted in some way by higher education’s most widely implemented retention programs. All three student populations selected their classes from pre-made schedules, a practice necessary for the forming of freshman learning communities; they were all eligible to be flagged through Georgia State’s early alert program by their instructors; they were asked to participate in a common reading program and enroll in a
first-year seminar course; and they all received advising guided by Georgia State’s use of predictive analytics. Additionally, students who were enrolled in Success Academy and Panther Excellence engaged with Georgia State’s mandatory workshops and tutoring.

1.4.5 Data Analysis

Following the recording and transcription stages of data collection, the data was coded for common themes. Because the only current scholarship within writing program administration and composition that discusses retention initiatives and their impact on the experiences of first-year students does not include student voices as data, I wanted to avoid feeling restricted by creating themes prior to analysis. Instead, I allowed for the organic development of themes with an understanding that this research could ultimately reveal findings irrelevant to the trope of success pervasive in composition and persistence scholarship. As the third chapter of this dissertation illustrates, however, the data gathered on students’ experiences with retention initiatives suggest that scholars do have reason to address success as a point of conflict between students and their universities. Indeed, what I have found is that this conflict arises when universities pressure students to achieve success in a specific way, rather than support students through facilitating multiple paths toward graduation.

1.5 Outline of the Dissertation

The field of writing program administration has benefitted greatly from the WPA scholars who have addressed university retention efforts through concerns regarding placement, assessment, and autonomy. As mentioned previously, just recently Rucker et. al published the edited collection *Retention, Persistence, and Writing Programs* in order to continue examining how retention efforts are influencing writing programs at administrative and pedagogical levels. Many of the essays within this collection speak of the strategies writing programs are employing
to help more students achieve success, strategies such as placing mentors in the first-year composition classroom and attaching lab components to first-year composition courses, as Brunk-Chavez and Fredericksen did at the University of Texas-El Paso, in order to support students who have been identified as needing extra help.

This dissertation seeks to further underline the responsibility scholars are beginning to acknowledge that writing programs have to ensuring all students are receiving the support they need in order to achieve success. By adding to this growing conversation the voices of 21 students, of whom represent various marginalized populations, my intention is to emphasize the importance of developing support programs that are inclusive, rather than force upon students a particular pathway through college, as evidenced by Tinto’s Student Integration Model and exemplified further in the next chapter with an overview of Georgia State’s Strategic Plan and celebrated retention initiatives. In order to promote greater inclusivity among retention practices, writing programs must take advantage of the student-centered pedagogies employed within their classrooms, such as the ones that have helped construct the critical lenses of McCurrie, Webb-Sunderhaus, and Reichert Powell, in order to assess and advocate on behalf of students’ needs.

In the following chapter, an historical analysis of success within US culture will provide a foundation from which readers can more thoroughly understand how universities and students view the notion of success. This analysis will also include how the concept of success within higher education has narrowed with the US’s embrace of neoliberal economics. Shifting from a term that reflected the achievement of both social and monetary growth to only monetary, student support services within higher education began to shift toward market-driven priorities as well. I appeal to the work of critical education scholars to discuss the implications of this turn,
before wrapping up the chapter by showing how Georgia State’s retention goals reflect a market-based definition of success.

Following a discussion of success within US culture and higher education, Chapter 3 presents data gathered from focus groups and interviews with 21 first-year students. The chapter details the challenges Georgia State’s retention initiatives, and ultimately the motivations behind those initiatives, pose for students whose lifestyles do not allow for Georgia State’s preferred path for students toward graduation, a preference driven by higher education’s market-based priorities. These challenges include constraints on students’ time, finances, and ability to make short-term and long-term education plans. The chapter will ultimately provide a framework writing programs can use to advocate for and employ more inclusive student support services on their campuses. Finally, Chapter 4 of this dissertation will apply the framework provided in Chapter 3 to highlight how writing programs can draw on valued, student-centered pedagogies within composition and writing center studies in order to mitigate the challenges listed above and offer greater support to students pursuing success, regardless of the path they choose to take.
2 U.S. SUCCESS IDEOLOGY AND THE UNIVERSITY’S EMBRACE OF EFFICIENCY

The few scholars in composition who have begun examining the impact retention initiatives have on students suggest in one way or another that higher education’s focus on student retention is narrowing the definition of student success to only mean students’ persistence in school. The risks of this rhetoric include, according to McCurrie, Webb-Sunderhaus, and Reichert Powell, misunderstanding students’ needs, values, and circumstances. However, no composition scholar has yet conducted a thorough analysis of what success means outside of higher education. Rather, scholars have approached their arguments from within their contexts, examining the rhetoric of summer bridge programs, developmental classes, and faculty expectations for encouraging retention, before discussing their relationships to students’ perceptions of success. While there is value in beginning analyses from our current moment, conducting a historical analysis of success would offer writing program administration and composition scholars a stronger foundation from which to understand the values of success both within higher education and among our students.

In this chapter I appeal to the work of 20th century sociologists and historians to define success as it has long been perceived in the United States. Influenced by a strong middle-class culture, the definition of success has represented values of individualism and equal opportunity. Under this definition, each citizen, through hard work and a desire to serve, has had the chance to become successful by moving upward both socially and economically. Enrolling in the American university, furthermore, has been viewed by society as the most effective way to achieve one’s goals for middle-class success. Entering college with individual visions for their future, students utilized the university’s resources to fulfill that vision. Of course, the characteristics that have
defined success for so many years have also masked systemic issues keeping certain groups of people from achieving success. Thus, although historically all citizens have been known to view success in similar ways, not all citizens have enjoyed equal access to achieving their individual success goals. It is when various marginalized groups began calling for great access to the middle-class notion of success, the height of which may be represented by the Civil Rights movement, that neoliberal economics grew in popularity, a shift that has since influenced higher education’s relationship to and portrayal of success.

Following an historical overview of success ideology in the US and higher education, this chapter will draw on the work of education and critical education scholars to detail how the definition of success has evolved in higher education with the US’s embrace of neoliberal economics. I argue that four central practices of universities most influenced by neoliberal policies have shifted higher education’s relationship to success: support of industry, promotion of efficiency and accountability, embrace of consumer culture, and engagement with national and global competition. These four practices show how higher education’s universities most aligned with neoliberal policies prioritize student’s preparation for entrance into the market, rather than middle-class culture. In the pages that follow, I will explain how this difference in priorities encourages universities to employ initiatives that promote students’ efficient upward mobility, rather than just their upward mobility, a move that ultimately limits students’ agency over their educational pursuits.

To communicate the neoliberal university’s embrace of success as efficient upward mobility, the final section of this chapter will offer a brief analysis of parts within Georgia State’s most recent Strategic Plan as a way to provide insight to the university’s priorities. A discussion will follow of how the university’s retention initiatives promote for students a
preferred path toward graduation, one that Georgia State has identified to be most efficient. In Chapter three, then, I utilize data gathered from students whose first year of college has intersected with multiple retention initiatives to display how encouraging efficient success shifts the university from a place that facilitates students’ success to one that dictates how success can and cannot be achieved. With an understanding of how Georgia State promotes for students an efficient path toward success, writing program and composition scholars can move beyond approaching conversations about retention through any given retention program, as scholars within our field have done. Rather, the framework provided in this dissertation encourages scholars to think more inclusively about student support services by raising questions about who retention initiatives serve and which student populations may benefit from initiatives that do not place pressure on students’ timeline for graduation.

2.1 US Success Ideology

If one is interested in understanding popular ideas of success within US culture, an obvious place to begin might be the Google search engine. When entered, four basic definitions of success are provided, with the first three still considered modern in their usage. The first listed describes success as “the accomplishment of an aim or purpose” and gives us “failure,” as one might expect, for its antonym. The second definition aligns well with popular culture and the study of success within academia: “the attainment of popularity or profit.” Here, success accounts for social and monetary status, and the antonym for both is considered poverty. The third blends the first two definitions by explaining that success is “a person or thing that achieves desired aims or attains prosperity.” This third definition, though, also shows the potential for society to blur success from an outcome to an individual characteristic, one that the term “prosperity” and the definition’s example sentence “I must make a success of my business”
suggests has economic implications. It is with this final definition that one can begin understanding the weight of the term success in US culture. While often deployed to describe a positive outcome, the use of success risks equating financial gains with high moral character while simultaneously aligning poverty of status or profit with one’s failed character. The linking of a successful person with her economic standing has long been commonplace in the US, where middle-class culture dominates accepted ideologies. Representing achievement of the “American Dream,” middle-class status is the aim of those seeking “advancement, an expanding income, education, [and active] citizenship” (Bledstein, p. 7). Indeed, the middle class, an economic societal standing with an established culture of its own, offers citizens the opportunity to succeed socially and monetarily. In other words, while success might generally mean achieving one’s desired outcomes, the ideology of success in the US is one that has been synonymous with achieving the middle-class lifestyle.

Historically, the ideology of success in the US has sustained its dominance through two popularly held beliefs. The first belief is that success is a reflection of one’s character. In his 1943 article, sociologist Gustav Ichheiser explains that “the ideology of success” in western society, “demands, first, that competent and, second, that worthy people should have success—according to the level of their competence and worthiness.” “To be competent,” Ichheiser continues, “means to possess those personal qualities which enable us to make valuable achievements” (p. 137). Ichheiser goes on to problematize the subjective nature of this observation, claiming that to expect competent and worthy people to achieve success is a “norm of success” rather than a “condition” of it. In reality, various circumstances keep some “worthy” people from succeeding, while allowing people with less “worthiness” and “competence” to get ahead (p. 137). Despite the apparent contradiction of attaching one’s success to his or her
character, evidence in later texts show the pervasiveness of this belief. Robert V. Robinson and Wendell Bell (1978) note in their comparative study of American and British ideologies of success that “Americans are taught that anyone, no matter how humble his/her origins, can achieve success through hard work” (p. 141). In describing the role of higher education in the US, Burton Bledstein (1976) also explains that “the chance of success would be within reach of everyone who exerted himself” (p. 267). Whether referencing hard work or inherent traits, scholars examining societal notions of success within the US agree that success is believed to be achieved by individuals whose character, alone, brings them social and/or economic rewards.

The second pillar that has supported the US’s dominant ideology of success is the belief that every citizen has an equal opportunity to succeed (Thio, 1972; Bledstein; Robinson & Bell). The societal acceptance of equal opportunity as central to success in the US is credited by scholars for “raising aspirations” and thus cultivating middle-class values of upward mobility among all classes (Thio, p. 383). Noted as a strongly held belief among the poor, middle class, and rich, the concept of equal opportunity reinforces the idea that success is a reflection of one’s character. If each person is given the same chance to pursue success, then the person who does not achieve success must be lazy or, as described above, a moral failure. Taken together, success as a reflection of one’s character and as an achievement every citizen has equal access to pursue has developed into a prevailing ideology that has permeated throughout US culture, crossing boundaries of class and race (Form & Rytina, 1969; Thio).

Despite the hopefulness and bootstrap narrative\(^2\) that accompany the term success in the US, its dominant ideology has risked masking significant societal issues. Because society praises the individual who succeeds and blames the one who does not, each party tends to internalize his

\(^2\) The culturally held belief that with hard work and dedication, people from even the most disadvantaged circumstances can succeed.
or her outcome rather than argue that there are external factors at play. In other words, when someone born into a privileged lifestyle grows up, goes to college, and becomes a doctor, she believes she earned her achievements fairly, as do many who witnessed her success. Likewise, if someone is born into a lower class, does not attend college, and ultimately ends up unemployed or incarcerated, society will often believe the person’s outcome was fair, based on the choices made by the individual. Alex Thio’s explanation of US success ideology illuminates the individualized concept of success by noting that “people’s embrace of, among other values, the ideology of success” is the primary reason “class consciousness or class conflict can hardly develop in American society” (p. 383). Thio and others argue that inherent to US success ideology, which is marketed and normalized through the “language and ideas of…industry” and “the speech and thinking of our institutional and national leaders” (Ramage 2005), is the individualized nature of success and, in turn, the legitimizing of systemic inequalities (Form & Rytina; Thio; Robinson & Bell). Individuals who do or do not achieve success are more likely to view themselves as successes or failures and receive the same credit from their communities for their eventual outcome rather than consider that their successes or failures might be the result of a system that privileges certain groups of people and oppresses others.

The individualized, middle-class notion of success is one that has been accepted in US culture for over a century, and, as my data shows, still maintains its dominance over how today’s students view their own success goals. With that said, how US institutions of higher education have supported students’ success goals has shifted as neoliberal economics have gained strength over the past 30 years. In the next section, I explain how the growth and acceptance of neoliberal economics among politicians and institutions of higher education have influenced a much narrower approach to supporting students’ middle-class notions of success, one that ultimately
promotes students’ efficient entrance into the market, rather than entrance into the middle class. I then show how this process reveals itself in various institutional initiatives.

### 2.2 Success and the Neoliberal Turn in Higher Education

In the late 1970s and 80s, marked by the era of Reagan and Thatcher leadership, the US and Britain embarked on a national and global campaign to enact the theory behind neoliberal economics. In one of the most cited texts on the subject, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, geographer and anthropologist David Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as a system “meant to ensure market freedom for all people,” a definition that I find most suitable for explaining the economy’s influence on practices within higher education (p. 7). Harvey explains that market freedom, according to neoliberal theorists, would ensure the protection of individual freedoms. Thus, to protect individual freedom, the US and British governments committed themselves to ensuring each person had the support to succeed financially.

This shift toward neoliberalism, as Harvey defines it, can be characterized by a government’s increased embracing of deregulation, privatization, and competition. According to the tenets of neoliberal economics, individuals have a greater opportunity to succeed if the government is less involved in their daily life and, particularly, if the government and various social programs have less control over economic activity. In practice, deregulation has led to federal funding cuts in social systems such as “welfare, education, [and] health care” in favor of privatizing those industries for the purpose of encouraging capital gain (Harvey, p. 65). The belief follows that individuals have more opportunity to succeed if there are more opportunities to participate in the market; therefore, turning publicly funded programs over to the private sphere grants a greater number of individuals that chance. Finally, neoliberal theory relies heavily on the concept of market competition, which is supported by deregulation and
privatization. Further instantiating the US value of equal opportunity, neoliberalism promotes competition within the private sphere in order to give each person, regardless of their circumstances, opportunity to increase their financial status (Harvey).

The intentions behind the US’s shift from its previous economic system, one that maintained greater government control, to neoliberalism are debatable as there seem to be two sides to the neoliberal story. One side can be viewed by citizens who saw in neoliberalism a promise of greater access to achieving success. This promise was constructed and promoted by a government committed to squelching social inequalities through an evening out of market access (Littler, 2013). Convinced that neoliberalism would solve greater societal issues, supporters of neoliberalism appealed to the “common sense” of US citizens, or beliefs acquired from “longstanding practices of cultural socialization often rooted deep in regional or national traditions” (Harvey, p. 39). They referred to the pillars of US success ideology, arguing that through hard work and commitment to one’s goals, everyone had an opportunity to succeed. According to Harvey, accompanying the neoliberal shift was the message that “[i]ndividual success or failure are…entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings (such as investing significantly enough in one’s own human capital through education) rather than being attributed to any systemic property” (pp. 65-66). In the late 1970s and 1980s, the process through which neoliberal supporters gained approval from citizens for increased deregulation, privatization, and competition entailed capitalizing on values already held among them, like success being reflective of one’s individual character. With the help of the media, financial, and educational institutions, government elites and others were able to appeal to citizens’ values of the American Dream and convince them that neoliberal economic practice would help mitigate any barriers in their way of becoming successful.
The other side of the story, one that suggests less righteous intentions, argues that politicians and society’s wealthiest members manipulated citizens into accepting neoliberalism because they felt threatened by the growing strength of labor unions and social solidarity among marginalized groups fighting for their civil rights. Together, Harvey, who offers a global perspective on neoliberalism through the lens of US practices, and cultural studies scholar Jo Littler (2013), who discusses the spread of neoliberalism in Britain under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, provide evidence as to why neoliberalism may only have been employed as a tool to preserve the status of wealthy elites. Harvey contests that neoliberalism “[presumes]…no asymmetries of power or information that [would] interfere with the capacity of individuals to make rational economic decisions in their own interests,” a presumption he believes is “either innocently utopian” or a strategy to keep others from impeding on the elite’s wealth and power (p. 68). Littler extends this skepticism by underlining how neoliberalism values one kind of intelligence over others in the same way that it values certain professions over others (p. 54). Either way, under neoliberalism US success ideology continues to maintain that individuals, alone, can be blamed or credited for their achievements, rather than systemic qualities (like society’s privileging of certain careers), while social protections for marginalized populations are being removed for the purposes of encouraging greater market competition. In other words, it appears that the principles of neoliberal economics risk potentially expanding inequalities rather than eliminating them.

Understanding neoliberal economics is imperative to understanding how success is treated in higher education. For as long as the middle-class notion of success in the US has persisted, higher education has served as a “vehicle” for achieving that success (Bledstein, p. 289). Offering an “undeniable advantage in both career mobility and social mobility,”
individuals pursuing success have sought a college degree to develop their character, sharpen their talents, and guide them to fulfilling their social mission of interest. While students’ intentions in the US have historically been on raising their “status [in society] rather than enlightenment” (Robinson & Bell, p. 137), Bledstein argues that those who have attended college or a university sought training that would combine their skills and desires to provide a service of some kind to their community. Students had “freedom to control [their] social destiny” and, prior to the neoliberal turn, higher education served to facilitate students’ paths toward their own version of middle-class success (Bledstein, p. 250).

Since neoliberal policies began to gain traction, however, higher education’s relationship to the market has been of great interest to promoters of market freedom. Recognized as some of the most influential institutions in the country, as well as “centres of anti-corporate and anti-state sentiment,” colleges and universities have become targets to transform into vehicles for neoliberal support, rather than vehicles for middle-class aspirations (Harvey, p. 44; Letizia, 2016). As institutions of higher education are viewed as critical and necessary sites to support neoliberal policies, though, students who attend with middle-class aspirations are especially vulnerable to the “neoliberal rhetoric of freedom and choice” (Letizia, p. 5). In other words, students may see affirmed in neoliberal practices their internalized beliefs regarding success as the achievement of the sole individual. As noted by Harvey’s document of neoliberalism’s growth, neoliberal ideas “could find fertile ground [in universities] for propagation” (p. 44). Because of both its threats to neoliberalism and its potential to be an influential sponsor, higher education has experienced unique changes beginning in the 1980s that have altered its role in supporting students’ pursuit of success.
Known to many as the corporatization of higher education, higher education’s neoliberal transformation has begun to reveal itself in a number of significant and overlapping ways that are the result of neoliberalism’s emphasis on deregulation, privatization, and competition, as well as political commitments to protecting these practices. One of these ways is higher education’s developing commitment to supporting industry (Giroux, 2005b; Canaan & Shumar, 2008; Suspitsyna, 2012; Letizia). Communicated by advocates of neoliberal economics as a strategy to increase access to success for marginalized communities, the discourse surrounding the goals of higher education involves raising retention rates, or student graduation rates, in order to lead more students to jobs (Suspitsyna). Likewise, the more students who graduate, according to neoliberal thinking, the better chances the US national economy has for competing in the global marketplace for institutions of higher education. The connection between higher education and industry is not only revealed in retention discourse, however. Increasingly, university presidents are hired from business sectors, rather than from within universities, bringing to the higher education environment a market mindset and eye for fundraising (Giroux 2005a). Additionally, research institutions are encouraged, often through financial incentives, to promote skills most valuable to their state and national economy, a practice that is evidenced by higher educations’ nationwide investment in STEM programs (Letizia, p. 16). Viewed as central to ensuring students have access to compete in the private sector, which in turn strengthens the economy to compete globally, stakeholders in the maintenance of neoliberal practices have encouraged through multiple methods a closer relationship between institutions of higher education and the business world.

To further support their mission of positioning higher education as a pillar of neoliberal economics, governing bodies at the state and national level have also issued greater demands on
universities for efficiency and accountability (Canaan & Shumar; Suspitsyna; Letizia). In her analysis of discourse coming from the U.S. Department of Education, education theorist Tatiana Suspitsyna states that “Neoliberalism changes the formula of governmentality: the power to predict and regulate people’s behavior shifts from the social sciences to budget disciplines and accountancy” (p. 52). Numbers are increasingly relied upon to communicate “outputs” and to ensure universities are strengthening their economy by “[maximizing] profits” (Letizia, pp. 6-11). There are many ways expectations for efficiency and accountability practices show up in higher education, but one of the most prominent is performance-based funding. Critical education scholar Angelo Letizia offers the Lumina Foundation and The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation as examples of organizations that have influenced performance based funding policies. Complete College America, an initiative led by The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, has been especially influential in states like Tennessee and Georgia, where one can find their university systems applying many, if not all, of their recommended programs for increasing student retention (Complete College of America). Accompanying neoliberalism’s culture of accountability, often reflected in goals to increase graduation rates, is the standardized “measurements of these goals” (Letizia, p. 6). Measurements of efficiency can be seen in practices such as encouraging students to attend school full-time, take classes over the summer, and select between a set of schedules that have already been arranged by administrators. A neoliberal university is one that supports the economy through developing its workforce; if students take on debt, but leave without a degree, the university has failed the economy. Thus, institutions of higher education have become directly accountable to the state for students’ investments; therefore, much of their attention is increasingly focused on getting students in and out efficiently.
As neoliberalism has put pressure on institutions of higher education to be more responsible for students’ financial decisions, whether through monitoring students’ grades in major-specific classes or providing explicit instruction in financial management, students and their parents have begun to conduct cost and benefit analyses on their choice schools (Giroux 2005a; Giroux 2005b; Canaan & Shumar; Suspitsyna). The corporate culture of higher education, one that maintains a university’s profit as emblematic of its commitment to providing students’ greater access to success, has naturally given way to a culture of “customer satisfaction.” In order to recruit students to attend their school, and to keep them enrolled, schools have been exploring options that might make them more attractive to students who might otherwise choose to attend elsewhere or drop out altogether. These practices reveal themselves in many ways including universities partnering with popular brands, such as “Pepsi, Nike, [and] Starbucks,” or investing in and promoting the university’s latest research endeavors within STEM fields (Giroux 2005a). Likewise, while neoliberal economics have influenced the treatment of parents and students as consumers by universities, neoliberalism, which has earned its dominance through appeals to US success ideology, has also made “the consumption in education…a moral right of students and parents who are responsible for managing their life choices” (Suspitsyna, p. 61). The individualized notion of success combined with a culture of competition has developed in students and universities a relationship based upon money. The parent and student must decide whether the school is worth their financial investment and the university must try to sell themselves as a university committed to students’ pursuit of success. Once enrolled, however, it is up to the institution to carry through on their commitment not only to the student investing their money, but to the economy depending on the student to graduate.
A fourth identifiable practice of the neoliberal university is the school’s explicit concern with national and global competition (Canaan & Shumar; Bagley & Portnoi 2014; Letizia). With less funding from the state through deregulation, institutions of higher education have had to explore different strategies to communicate their value and importance to other funding agencies. The outcome of this shift, as underlined by Sylvia Bagley and Laura Portnoi (2014), is universities focusing heavily on increasing their reputation through various ranking systems by adhering to “externally determined criteria, with a skewed emphasis on research and elite status” (6-8). Shanghai Jiao Tong University’s Academic Ranking of World University’s (ARWU) is one of the most notable ranking systems, where universities are ranked globally overall as well as by subject. With regard to meeting these lists’ external criteria, it is not difficult to notice universities striving to conduct industry-valued research, increase their significance through institutional mergers, and build partnerships with universities across the globe, all activities aligning with neoliberalism’s value of competition (Bagley & Portnoi). As funding must continue to be sought from a multitude of non-government sources, an outcome of deregulation, universities must consider measurements of effectiveness constructed outside of their local context. Thus, the neoliberal university is one that compares itself to schools across the globe seeking acknowledgement based off standards potentially irrelevant to the needs of their student population.

The risks involved with the corporatizing of higher education continue to be analyzed by education scholars. Critical studies scholar Henry Giroux (2005a; 2005b; 2010) has devoted much of his career to highlighting the detrimental effects neoliberalism has had on students’ access to education and their preparation for engaging in civic life and sustaining democratic values. Addressing similar concerns, education theorist Tatiana Suspitsyna confronts the
economic discourse of higher education, arguing that higher education’s neoliberal shift makes impossible for college and universities to uphold their social and political roles in society, such as ensuring all students have an equal opportunity to succeed. Discussing the risks of globalization, education scholars Bagley and Portnoi examine the relationship between increasing pressures for universities to compete for higher rankings and maintaining their commitments to local communities. Finally, students’ ability to make choices for themselves is vulnerable to the corporatization of higher education, as Angelo Letizia underlines the control institutions of higher education are required to enforce to fulfill the expectations placed upon them for preparing students for the workforce. Understanding these risks as stemming from a singular movement, one can begin to realize how neoliberalism has shifted higher education’s focus from preparing students for citizenship to preparing students for the market. Unlike higher education’s longtime reputation as an institution that has helped facilitate students’ paths toward achieving their middle-class notion of success, one representative of social and monetary upward mobility, the corporatized institution of higher education is more likely to dictate how students achieve success, a process greatly influenced by market goals.

In the next section, I detail the ways in which Georgia State’s Strategic Plan values a definition of success that has evolved from one that supports students individualized notions of success to one that situates students to better achieve Georgia State’s market-based priorities. Following this discussion, I detail the many initiatives Georgia State employs to support its narrow version of student success. With an analysis of each initiative, readers can begin to understand how various institutional practices work together to communicate a preferred, efficient path through college, and thus risk the concerns critical education scholars have about leaving behind and/or removing agency from students whose priorities exist outside of or
conflict with graduating efficiently. For the purposes of this project, agency is defined through the “humanist-modernist theoretical orientation” described by Steven Accardi in *Keywords in Writing Studies*. While agency may also be understood as a situationally-negotiated construct (Herndl and Licona 2007), my intention with the term is to highlight the authority students desire and believe they have over their own life choices. In chapter three, then, the evidence of this analysis is compared to the results of focus groups and interviews with students, whose perspectives of college and Georgia State’s retention programs suggest that their perceived agency over how they pursue success is being exploited by Georgia State’s market-driven goals.

2.3 **Georgia State’s Preference for Efficient Student Success**

As mentioned briefly in chapter one, Georgia State has experienced significant gains in its graduation rates over the last five years, particularly among historically marginalized populations. An urban university with a student population now exceeding 50,000 students following a recent merger with a nearby community college, Georgia State’s students are incredibly diverse, and its challenges to support these students, arguably just as diverse. Tim Renick, Vice Provost and Vice President of Enrollment Management and Student Success, who has led Georgia State’s retention transformation, argues that because of the unique odds against so many of the university’s students, employing initiatives to support students’ success isn’t only about the “economic perspective” and “tax base.” “Much more profoundly,” he argues, “to have the gaping discrepancies” between the academic achievement of white, middle-class and wealthy students and students of color “is a matter of social justice” (qtd. in Collins, 2016). Echoing noted intentions of neoliberal policies, Renick grounds Georgia State’s retention efforts in the idea that they will help ensure more people are given the opportunity to achieve success. Despite the fact that Georgia State’s retention rates currently amount to 53% of students who enroll,
which falls lower than the national average, the university is recognized nationally and internationally by other universities, media outlets, donors of higher education, and politicians for the major gains it has made in first-year retention rates, which now reaches 81%, and graduation rates among minority populations (“Graduation & Retention”). Thus, by arguing to combat the achievement gap and by enjoying favorable attention for the progress it has made, Georgia State is able to promote and sustain its specific approach to supporting student success, one that I show in the following pages prefers the efficient traditional college student lifestyle and risks posing challenges for students who cannot experience college in the same way.

2.3.1 Georgia State’s Strategic Plan

In 2016, Georgia State was five years into its 10-year Strategic Plan, the primary document that has helped launch many of Georgia State’s current retention initiatives, including the Student Success Center, which offers a central department on campus for supporting retention. The Strategic Plan consists of a Preamble, which will be what is discussed most at length, and five specific goals, along with a number of initiatives to support each goal. Emphasizing retention, the economy, global status and competition, the Strategic Plan aligns the university closely with neoliberal priorities, as it echoes the language noted by critical education scholars like Letizia, Bagley and Portnoi regarding accountability and competition. Apparent also in the Preamble are hints suggesting the university’s shift from supporting more varied student lifestyles to celebrating its new mission of promoting a traditional college lifestyle, one that caters to students right out of high school, who live on campus, and attend school full-time. Drawing on the discussion in the previous section that reveals institutions of higher education as more influenced by neoliberal economics, I intend to show how Georgia State’s Strategic Plan
supports a market-based definition of success, one that is measured more by students’ efficient path toward graduation than the achievements made on their individual paths through college.

The Strategic Plan’s two-page introduction offers for readers a transition from Georgia State’s past to its goals for the future. Multiple clauses, in fact, acknowledge Georgia State’s history for the sole purpose of praising the school’s new directions. These notes of history comment on student lifestyles that are outside of what is promoted by persistence scholarship and programs such as Complete College America, which argue that students who integrate into the university’s academic and social communities are most likely to graduate on time. For example, in the Preamble’s second paragraph, the authors subtly comment on their preference for traditionally-aged students: “And while we have continued to provide access to nontraditional students, over the past decade GSU also has attracted many of the state’s most talented undergraduates” (Georgia State University, p. 1). Although nontraditional students, or those who are older than high school age and may balance a job with attending school, and talented undergraduates are not student populations that are mutually exclusive from one another, the clause itself constructs the two as separate, marginalizing nontraditional students by suggesting they are not talented and not considered typical undergraduates.

In the third paragraph, a similar strategy is used to separate the commuter student’s experience from the residential student’s:

GSU, once known as a commuter school, now offers a rich and vibrant student experience through a remarkable array of academic, social, and cultural opportunities including community-building programs in athletics, student life and recreation, Freshman Learning Communities, and peer-tutoring. Over the past 15 years we have also added extensive undergraduate housing. And over the past decade we have built exciting,
competitive NCAA athletic programs, including the GSU Panthers football team which established a winning record in its first season of play in the Georgia Dome (p. 1).

Similar to the sentence separating non-traditional students from traditional, the paragraph above seeks to reframe Georgia State as a school for residential students, rather than those who would live off campus. Of course, the paragraph does more than speak to its housing options. It offers for readers a description of Georgia State’s whole community, highlighting the academic and social communities of Tinto’s Student Integration Model for student retention. Thus, once more, students who do commute or who may not be able to join the well-rounded community offered by this new Georgia State are viewed as separate from the Strategic Plan’s focus. Instead, Georgia State communicates a preference for an efficient path toward graduation, one evidenced by elements of a neoliberal university that promote student persistence, such as undergraduate housing and consumers’ values of college football.

Beyond communicating its value of the traditional college lifestyle, Georgia State’s Preamble also explicitly honors the neoliberal themes of national and global competition, a pattern some scholars believe can redirect a school’s attention to priorities irrelevant to its own students and local community. As they discuss their students, the authors of the Preamble situate Georgia State as a global competitor by stating, “We take as a matter of course that all of our students, who come from every county in Georgia, every state in the nation and more than 150 countries, deserve a first-rate education.” This sentence is then followed by a claim that Georgia State’s alumni have impacted communities from local to international. With regard to faculty, Georgia State highlights the increase among faculty research, “as measured by external funding, publications, rankings, and prestigious awards” (p. 1). The Preamble then grounds the university’s pride in its diverse student body and active faculty by announcing a number of
sources through which the school has been recognized, such as *Forbes* magazine, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Business Week*, *Financial Times*, and the White House, as well as listing totals in financial awards that different departments on campus have earned. While the document does include in its discussion of students and alumni impact a nod to its local community, great emphasis is placed on Georgia State’s global presence. The Preamble celebrates students for choosing Georgia State over other schools across the globe, and faculty are prized for conducting research that has received recognition from external agencies. Little attention is paid to Georgia State’s local community; for example, the city of Atlanta is mentioned only once and only as a point of distinction for Georgia State among other universities in Georgia. Later on in the Strategic Plan, when Atlanta is expanded upon, the discussion focuses primarily on how the university can utilize its urban context to inform and collaborate with other urban universities across the globe.

Focusing the university’s goals on a global presence is not inherently a bad thing, as elements of globalization allow for the positive exchange of ideas among international communities. However, when a global presence is sought after for the purpose of external recognition, one might question what informs such priorities. Bagley and Portnoi argue that universities seeking a greater national and international presence are a direct result of them having to seek funding from other sources beyond their state government. In highlighting the pressures of efficiency and accountability, then, Letizia notes that states like Georgia experience at a higher rate than other states performance-based funding policies. Taken together, Georgia State’s celebration of its growing recognition as a global university in the Preamble reveals the university’s market-driven priorities, priorities that ultimately inform the plan’s five goals and their accompanying initiatives. Such market-driven priorities provide context for the kinds of
student lifestyles that appear favored by Georgia State in the Preamble’s earlier paragraphs; in this case, if Georgia State is facing the realities of performance-based funding and is thus seeking funding from external sources, then it is little surprise that they are also expressing preference for the traditional college lifestyle, one that encourages students to enroll full-time, purchase on-campus housing, and invest in the consumer culture of college sports.

Towards the end of the Preamble’s first paragraph, the authors summarize Georgia State’s growth from a night school in 1913 to its current status in a way that further emphasizes the university’s increasing commitment and responsibilities to the market: “Our boundaries and influence are growing as our campus extends throughout the greater metropolitan area, with an economic impact on the metro area of more than $1 billion annually” (p. 1). This sentence comes directly after the Preamble’s only mention of Atlanta, suggesting that Georgia State values as its most important contribution to its local community an economic contribution. Likewise, the Preamble lists a number of projects that have “[contributed] to the broader community,” almost all of which are STEM-focused projects, efforts Letizia names as marking a university’s close relationship to the business world. Described through recognition the university has received for its various projects, Georgia State’s Strategic Plan once more communicates its desire to compete with other universities through its support of the market. This particular move to praise the university’s relationship with STEM fields suggests not necessarily a preference for the traditional college student lifestyle, but rather a preference for specific kinds of faculty and student research; in other words, Georgia State’s Preamble establishes the university’s explicit support for research that can directly contribute to the economy, support of which can adversely impact university departments who promote research and fields of study that aren’t necessarily lucrative.
The Preamble of Georgia State’s Strategic Plan reflects many elements that might define a university as neoliberal. By praising the university’s growing on-campus community, global recognition, and economic contributions, Georgia State is celebrating an identity that thrives off of a direct relationship with the market. In a number of clauses within the Preamble, Georgia State also highlights the kinds of college experiences that may be less effective in helping to achieve its market goals, such as the non-traditional and commuter lifestyle. Georgia State’s market-driven priorities, then, raise questions about student support services, or retention initiatives, and whether or not they would focus primarily on supporting students who are able to adopt the lifestyle preferred by the university.

The five goals outlined in the Strategic Plan suggest that Georgia State would indeed narrow its support for students who accommodate its preferred path toward graduation, especially Goal #1, which communicates Georgia State’s intention to “become a national model for undergraduate education by demonstrating that students from all backgrounds can achieve academic and career success at high rates” (p. 3). Appearing well-intentioned, the goal references Georgia State’s longtime commitment to promoting success among minority student populations. The kinds of success mentioned within the goal also appear to align closely with the US success ideology, which considers the achievement of social and monetary status. However, the initiatives listed for achieving this goal suggest that Georgia State’s desired outcomes are narrower than simply helping students achieve their middle-class notion of success. Rather, the initiatives further emphasize the university’s priorities of efficiency and global recognition. These four initiatives are as follows:

1. Increase the level of scholarship support for undergraduate students
2. Establish a Student Success Center
3. Implement an Undergraduate Signature Experience

4. Establish an Honors College

The first, third, and fourth initiatives are straightforward and appear to expand support for students financially while also developing new ways to encourage students’ connection to the university through academics. Together they work to improve what is in the institution’s control to support student retention. By combating students’ financial issues and ensuring there are many opportunities for students to feel challenged and recognized by the academic community, Georgia State provides incentive for students to persist in school. Nonetheless, these initiatives are worthy of deeper analysis: for example, the Strategic Plan connects the Undergraduate Signature Experience to supporting the workforce and the university’s global presence, and the Honors College is described as offering a way for faculty and students to gain external recognition. However, for the purposes of this project, I am interested in discussing the initiative most explicitly emblematic of Georgia State’s definition of success. Therefore, in the next few pages I will expand on how the second initiative in Georgia State’s Strategic Plan, “Establishing a Student Success Center,” communicates an understanding of success that is much narrower than how success is defined in Goal #1. Taking ownership of the term success through developing a center and various programs with the same term, Georgia State’s Success Center promotes through its numerous retention initiatives a definition of success that favors efficiency. With these various initiatives, Georgia State works to support market-driven goals while it risks removing agency from students’ who may seek paths toward graduation that are not deemed efficient by the university.
2.3.2 Georgia State’s Retention Initiatives

In order to discuss the ways Georgia State’s retention initiatives communicate an efficient definition of success, one that ultimately expresses a preference for one college experience over others, I have utilized a document produced in 2016, five years after the Success Center was established. Labeled as Georgia State’s 2016 “Campus Plan Update,” this document has been submitted by Tim Renick to the website for Complete College Georgia, a state branch of Complete College America. Using the updated document allows not only access to descriptions of the initiatives as they are written internally and within Georgia State’s Student Success Center, but it offers language on an initiative’s performance and lessons the university has taken away from their first few years working with the initiative. The document also gives insight to where the university is headed moving forward. The initiatives I will go over are those that are most celebrated by the university and in the media for their contributions to “student success.” These include Georgia State’s Graduation and Progression Success (GPS) Advising system, Summer Success Academy, Panther Retention Grants, Keep Hope Alive, and Freshman Learning Communities. Reviewed together, these particular initiatives show the university’s attempt to take charge of students’ choices throughout college and encourage a trajectory that while beneficial for some students, could ultimately marginalize certain student populations, such as nontraditional students and commuter students as evidenced by the Strategic Plan’s Preamble. In chapter three of this dissertation, student voices will be provided to show the unique ways Georgia State’s preference for efficiency, supported by its retention initiatives, can impact students on an individual basis.

Arguably Georgia State’s most influential retention initiative in terms of how it guides students’ college paths toward graduation, the GPS advising system “uses 10 years of student
data to predict how current students will do in classes” and sends alerts when students might need an intervention (Georgia State University, 2015). The system maintains more than 800 unique alerts to “track all undergraduates daily, to identify at-risk behaviors, and to have advisors respond to alerts by intervening in a timely fashion to get students back on track” (Renick 2016). Listed on the Campus Update Plan, the specific goals for the GPS system are as follows:

1. **Goal #1:** Increase the number of undergraduate degrees awarded by USG institutions.
2. **Goal #2:** Increase the number of degrees that are earned “on time.”
3. **Goal #3:** Decrease excess credits earned on the path to getting a degree.
4. **Goal #4:** Provide intrusive advising to keep students on track to graduate. (p. 4)

The GPS system is an example of the way higher education is employing big data methods in order to increase retention rates. As one can see by Georgia State’s methods and goals, the GPS system, through the use of predictive analytics, strives to support every student’s path toward graduation, and based on the “51,000 individual meetings between advisors and students to discuss specific alerts” following the GPS’s implementation, the system is indeed experiencing the impact it seeks (p. 4).

Through the prompting of more “intrusive advising” the GPS system asserts the university’s values of efficiency. As might be expected by the goals that lead this initiative, Georgia State’s Success Center celebrates the achievements of the GPS system in their Campus Update Plan, which include increasing six-year graduation rates by 6%, increasing undergraduate degree “conferrals” by 19%, eradicating “wasted” credit hours by 8%, and eliminating “achievement gaps” (p. 4). In other words, for the stated purpose of increasing access to success for historically underrepresented populations, Georgia State has invested greatly into a program, of which has been acknowledged by numerous organizations and news outlets (Cook, 2016;
Kamenetz, 2016; Treaster, 2016), that uses increased interventions in order to lead more students to graduation at a quicker pace (Renick, p. 4). According to the university’s goal to lessen the amount of courses students take that do not apply to their degree and increase students “on time” graduation, Georgia State prefers a path toward graduation that is direct, and therefore does not include time off or degree exploration. While an on-time graduation might be ideal for many students, Georgia State’s GPS system and the advising it prompts can also clash with students’ lifestyles when they require taking time off for personal or financial reasons, or when they require more flexibility in their course selection. Some students may also feel uncomfortable meeting with an advisor who utilizes other students’ previously earned grades to convince them that their current path will not be a successful one. Most significantly, Georgia State’s practices for promoting efficiency, which include taking greater control over students’ paths, suggests that it is necessary to sacrifice students’ agency, or control over their own college experiences, in order to eliminate the achievement gap.

Georgia State’s promotion of efficiency as a way of helping more students succeed is emphasized even further in its Summer Success Academy program, which is another initiative that “uses predictive analytics,” but in order “to identify admitted students for the fall freshman class who are academically at-risk.” Relying on students’ freshman-index score, which is a calculation of students’ high school GPA and either their SAT or ACT score (Huot, personal communication, April 21, 2015), Summer Success Academy requires this “at-risk” population to “attend a seven-week summer session before fall classes” (p. 5). This program enrolls students in seven credits total, with those courses being for most students first-year composition, an elective that can fulfill a general education requirement, and Georgia State’s first-year seminar course, GSU 1010. These courses are credit bearing, just as they would be for fall-enrolled students.
However, Summer Success Academy requires, in addition to its courses, a number of other tasks students must complete. These include attending mandatory workshops once a week on topics such as stress management and financial literacy and weekly study hall sessions monitored by graduate students. Students must also complete one Supplemental Instruction visit per week and maintain communication with an academic coach (“Success Academy,” 2017).

According to the Campus Update Plan, Georgia State’s Success Academy program has increased the retention rates among at-risk students by 37%, when one compares the summer enrollment of at-risk students to spring, which is the semester students who receive deferred acceptances used to begin their college careers. Additionally, the plan states that Success Academy students persist at a higher rate their first year than traditionally-enrolled first-year students (Renick, p. 5). However, in order to achieve these numbers, Georgia State positions students to sacrifice their time and overall agency in order to participate. For example, according to data gathered from student interviews for this study, the numerous requirements that accompany the program limit students to taking only 12-13 credits during their entire first year and disallow students from taking math and science courses their first year unless their major requires that they do so (see Chapter 3). Thus, through an initiative particularly designed to work with students less likely to succeed, Georgia State once more seeks to support those students by way of controlling certain aspects of their path through college. Furthermore, Success Academy initiatives show the kinds of presumptions Georgia State makes about at-risk students in order to inform their decisions, such as that all students with a low freshman-index score require workshops on financial literacy, mandatory study hall, and time off prior to taking a math or science course, presumptions that may not serve all students and their individual needs.
Beyond supporting students academically, Georgia State also employs initiatives that assist with students’ persistence through financial support. Two main ways the university does this are by implementing Panther Retention Grants and Keep Hope Alive. Unlike the previously discussed initiatives, which the university argues are employed to help students save money, Panther Retention Grants and Keep Hope Alive are initiatives designed to help students literally finance their way through college; these efforts are understandable in one of the worst climates for college affordability. Panther Retention Grants, in particular, “provide emergency funding to allow students who want to get their degrees the opportunity to stay enrolled” (p. 6). Primarily targeting seniors just a few credits shy of graduating, Panther Retention Grants support students who are at risk of being dropped from their classes because of just a few hundred dollars. Similar to the Panther Retention Grants, Keep Hope Alive also provides emergency funding, but does so for students who have lost Georgia’s Hope scholarship, the scholarship that offers to cover the majority of students’ college expenses so long as they maintain a 3.0 GPA. Because Georgia State found that the majority of students who lose Hope do not end up gaining it back, they offer Keep Hope Alive, which grants a $500 stipend for two semesters to help students pay for classes and get their GPA back up.

While motivated once more to increase graduation rates, Georgia State’s financially-focused retention initiatives do not appear to explicitly remove agency from students in order to promote students’ efficient success. However, for students to accept the funding assistance, they must also agree to fulfill certain requirements, such as meeting “with a financial advisor” and “[participating] in a series of programs and interventions designed to get them back on track academically and to make wise financial choices in the aftermath of losing the scholarship” (pp. 3).

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3 Students’ GPAs get reevaluated for Hope every 30 credits.
Although it seems logical that students fulfill certain requirements in order to receive funding assistance, the data I have gathered from students suggests that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to students’ individual obstacles toward graduation, and that the many programs Georgia State requires of these particular students in need could end up posing new challenges for students, such as having to sacrifice time from their work schedule to attend a workshop or navigate the tone of condescension many students find accompanies such programs. In other words, even indirectly, Georgia State’s financially-focused retention initiatives can impact students’ paths toward graduation in ways that may ultimately mask specific needs students possess for achieving success.

The final initiative described on the Campus Update Plan is Georgia State’s Meta-Majors, or the name for how the university’s freshman learning communities are organized. Having been a part of Georgia State even prior to the establishment of its Student Success Center, Georgia State’s freshman learning communities are required for all “non-Honors freshman,” which has in 2016 placed about 80% of first-year students into designated cohorts. Students within freshman learning communities are organized into cohorts based on “academic interests, otherwise known as ‘meta majors’”; these meta majors include “STEM, business, arts and humanities, policy, health, education, and social sciences” (interestingly, Georgia State’s eighth meta-major, Undeclared, is not included on the Campus Plan submitted to Complete College Georgia). Participating students take all of their courses together and share a block schedule, which offers courses close together in time so as to “accommodate students’ work schedules and help to improve class attendance” (p. 9). Working in tandem with Georgia State’s GPS advising system, meta-majors also seek to increase students’ “on time” graduation and prevent students from taking credits not relevant to their degree program.
Freshman learning communities can offer a number of great benefits for students. As I have been able to gather from the participants for this study, freshman learning communities do well to ease students’ transition into the university community and calm what may feel like an overwhelming process of making one’s schedule for the first time. However, the pattern indeed continues among Georgia State’s retention initiatives to support a streamlined process for students to achieve success through the university’s increased control over how students experience college. With a growing student population and recently granted funds from organizations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the university also intends to continue expanding its efficient notion of success and “intrusive” methods to support such efficiency as it works more closely with students enrolled at the campuses recently merged with Georgia State.

While the retention initiatives discussed above do not account for all of Georgia State’s methods for supporting students’ on time graduation, they highlight the primary angles through which the university supports these goals: academic, financial, and social. The university seeks through academic advising, financial support, and the facilitation of social and academic communities to support the academic and career success of students at high rates, as outlined in Goal #1 of the Georgia State’s strategic plan. Furthermore, these particular initiatives display a consistent pattern for how the university works to support students’ success; this pattern shows the sacrificing of students’ agency over what courses they take, when they take those courses, how their schedules are arranged, and what support they receive, for the purpose of promoting not just students’ success, but students’ efficient success. While the university employs other initiatives, such as a first-year seminar course, common book program, and Panther Excellence Program (a program identical to Success Academy, but begins in the fall), those initiatives serve in many ways to further facilitate the goals outlined on Georgia State’s Campus Plan Update.
Thus, the analysis provided here can offer a lens through which to make sense of and raise questions about other initiatives at Georgia State, such as the ones that will be touched on in chapter three and the initiatives being employed at other college campuses.

### 2.4 Efficient Success and the Threat Towards Students’ Agency

Composition scholars have rightly targeted success as a contentious term worth further exploration as retention continues to impact our students’ college experiences and the work of writing programs. However, while McCurrie argues that students might possess a different definition of success than their institutions, I would argue that students’ definitions continue to reflect the pervasive middle-class notion of success within US culture—a concept I explore more fully with reference to student interviews in Chapter 3. It is because society values success as one’s individual achievement, for which everyone should have equal access, that neoliberal policies have become so popular within institutions of higher education. Politically, neoliberal advocates have encouraged deregulation, privatization, and competition to even out the playing field for all citizens, including those who historically have been marginalized from avenues that would lead them to social and financial success. Such practices have increasingly influenced the practices of higher education to also support market-driven goals for the purpose of closing the achievement gap. According Tim Renick, Georgia State’s efforts to lead more students to graduation at a quicker pace are indeed eliminating this gap.

However, Georgia State’s rapid increases in retention rates and bold claim that it’s “achievement gap is gone,” a claim made on the first page of the university’s Campus Plan Update, leave room for questions regarding what methods are employed to ensure all students succeed. According to Georgia State’s Strategic Plan and celebrated retention programs, employing initiatives that focus on getting students to graduate quickly offer the greatest
opportunity for more students to succeed. Georgia State does not just support the middle-class notion of success; rather, the university values more specifically students’ efficient achievement of middle-class success. Because of its direct focus on students’ paths toward graduation, Georgia State ultimately implements student support programs that threaten students’ agency over how they experience college. Whether the university requires interventions for students who flag one of the GPS’s 800 alerts, limits scheduling choices, or requires students to participate in a series of programs in exchange for financial support, Georgia State’s numerous programs work together to pressure students toward a singular path to graduation. As hinted in the Preamble of Georgia State’s Strategic Plan, this singular path would likely conflict with the needs of non-traditional students and those who commute and, later, I offer more details of how those conflicts may manifest for first-time students. In the next chapter, I draw on the voices of 21 of Georgia State’s first-year students in order to show how a university pressing for the most direct route through college can ultimately marginalize individuals who require different forms of support in order to achieve success.

Understanding higher education’s values for efficiency, and particularly the way such values narrow how universities support student success, is imperative for writing programs and composition scholars whose work is impacted by their university’s retention efforts. Because the writing classroom so often allows for an environment where students reveal their unique needs and challenges, writing programs maintain a heightened awareness of the ways in which students’ lifestyles may clash with the expectations of their university. As writing programs become more involved in supporting student persistence, administrators and composition faculty can work to ensure university support services are more inclusive, allowing for varied routes through college that encourage rather than present greater challenges for the student who cannot
commit to the very specific college experience promoted by Complete College America and its associative branches. Chapter 4 provides recommendations for how writing program administrators and composition scholars can begin to promote inclusive support strategies on their own campuses.
3 STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES: FACILITATIVE VS. DICTATIVE

In the previous chapter, I examine the history of US success ideology, one that has long been accepted among the majority of US citizens, regardless of systemic inequalities that have been known to limit the progress of marginalized populations. This ideology suggests that every individual has an equal opportunity to achieve success and, if he or she works hard enough, will do so. Success in this case is the achievement of the middle-class lifestyle, which signifies an individual’s comfortable income, specialized education, and/or active citizenship in his or her community. For as long as this ideology has been embedded within US culture, higher education has served to support individuals’ pursuit of success. Students have sought a university education in order to fulfill the image they had for themselves as a middle-class member of society; as Bledstein (1976) explains, universities were the “vehicle” that students drove to reach upward mobility.

Facing economic and political pressures to graduate more students at a quicker pace, however, institutions of higher education began in the 1970s and 1980s to analyze factors they could control that may increase students’ chances of graduating. Traced back to Vincent Tinto’s Student Integration Model (1975), those factors today can be categorized into academic and social support services; although, I would add that a third category, financial support, has developed from the increasing costs of higher education throughout the turn of the century. As evidenced by the analysis provided in the previous chapter, Georgia State has become a national and even international model other institutions study to inform their services to support student persistence. Georgia State’s numerous retention initiatives have contributed to major gains in student retention rates over the last 10 years among historically marginalized populations, including African Americans, Hispanics, and low-income students (Renick, 2015; Renick, 2016).
Higher education, exemplified by the efforts and results of Georgia State, has experienced a transformation regarding how they support students’ achievement of success, a transformation that appears to benefit populations who may not have previously been able to realize the pervasive concept of success in US culture.

When one learns of Georgia State’s initiatives and their increased retention rates likely to the credit of those initiatives, it is easy not to question these methods of student support. They are, it seems, working to achieve what Georgia State, the University Innovation Alliance, and Complete College America set out to achieve: closing the achievement gap between white wealthy and middle-class populations and people of color and/or those from low-income backgrounds. The pattern of universities investing greater resources in how they support students academically, socially, and financially, however, can greatly influence not only a student’s opportunity to achieve success, but also the process through which they can and cannot pursue that achievement. As the previous chapter shows, these retention initiatives display a shift in universities supporting students’ upward mobility to ensuring that students’ upward mobility is efficient. Institutions of higher education, in other words, appear no longer as simply vehicles students drive toward the middle class; rather, the various initiatives employed by universities like Georgia State align higher education with newer models, equipped with predictive technology and self-driving features. My interest, and the question behind this dissertation is, how do these innovative methods, designed to lead more students to graduation, impact students’ college experiences?

Composition scholars (McCurrie; Webb-Sunderhaus; Reichert Powell) have argued that universities’ increasing focus on retention, and thus greater investment in supporting students’ efficient mobility, does not necessarily align with students’ goals, needs, and lived experiences.
However, students’ perspectives on retention initiatives are greatly underrepresented in the conversation of persistence. While recent research in writing program administration has begun to give students’ voice on the topic, students’ perspectives are largely presented as a singular counter narrative to challenge the rhetoric of retention (Reichert Powell; Webb-Sunderhaus 2017) or as feedback on a particular initiative implemented within the writing program to support students’ success (Buyserie, Plemons, Freitag Ericcson 2017; Chemishanova & Snead 2017). To construct a fuller picture of how higher education’s shifting definition of success can impact the process through which students’ might achieve their goals, I conducted focus groups and interviews with 21 first-year students, all of whom were recruited based on their participation in either a traditional fall-enrolled freshman learning community, fall-enrolled Panther Excellence Program, or summer-enrolled Success Academy. Seventeen of the participants identified as racial minorities and six students did not live on campus. Many participants also self-identified as low-income and first-generation. For the purposes of this study, pseudonyms have been used in place of students’ actual names.

By gathering perspectives from students whose first year of school is greatly impacted by retention programs, writing programs can more confidently engage with retention practices happening on their campuses. As mentioned in the first chapter, writing program administrators and composition instructors are uniquely affected by retention initiatives because so many of them intersect with students’ first year of college, and thus also the university’s only universal requirement, first-year composition. With greater understanding of how these programs impact students’ college experiences, writing programs can serve as informed collaborators to design and implement retention programs that effectively support all students. Composition scholars
may also benefit from this study by utilizing students’ perspectives to ensure their own pedagogical practices cultivate an environment that values all students’ paths toward success.

What the present study has revealed, and what the remainder of this chapter will expand upon, is that some retention initiatives, particularly those that promote an efficient definition of success, are more *dictative* of students’ paths toward graduation than *facilitative* (See Table 1). Some initiatives facilitate students’ independence, giving opportunities for students to employ their own strengths and ingenuity in order to pursue their academic goals. Others are more dictative in their methods, limiting students’ agency and presenting new challenges for students whose lifestyles and responsibilities may conflict with a university’s focus on graduating students’ efficiently, namely students who commute, are non-traditional in age, and/or are from low-income households. As displayed in the tables below, when initiatives are facilitative, they can effectively offer students academic, social, and/or professional support. When initiatives lean more toward dictating students’ college experiences, that can cause challenges to students’ time, finances, and abilities to plan. Taken together, these challenges display an institutional preference for how students should graduate, a preference that risks marginalizing students whose priorities exist outside of graduating efficiently.

*Table 1: Facilitative Retention Initiatives*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilitative Initiatives</th>
<th>Academic Support</th>
<th>Social Support</th>
<th>Professional Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freshman Learning Communities</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplemental Instruction</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer Bridge Programs</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-Year Seminars</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the following sections, I examine initiatives my data has shown to be more facilitative of students’ pursuit of success, regardless of what their paths toward success look like. The intention of this section is not necessarily to highlight which initiatives are working to keep students in school; rather, by focusing on their facilitative nature, my goal is to highlight how these particular methods of student support can help maintain students’ agency through an openness to students’ circumstances and diverse college experiences, and thus allow for students to pursue success in a way that best accommodates their lifestyles. The second half of this chapter, then, discusses retention initiatives that are more dictative in their methods and the consequences these methods can pose for certain student populations. It is important to note that most initiatives are not wholly facilitative or dictative. The following analyses draw greater attention to the qualities of retention initiatives that support students’ unique paths toward success, while noting how initiatives can improve to be more student-centered. References to current student support services being employed by writing programs, such as writing fellows programs, lab components for composition courses, and English stretch courses, will be put in conversation with student data, and the chapter closes with a discussion of implications these findings pose for writing program administration and composition pedagogy.

### Table 2: Dictative Retention Initiatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dictative Initiatives</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Finances</th>
<th>Ability to Plan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fixed-Schedules</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-Year Seminars</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>Out-of-Class Requirements</td>
<td>✓</td>
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3.1 Facilitative Methods of Student Support

Among Georgia State’s many retention initiatives, I have found that a few serve to facilitate students’ individual paths toward success. These initiatives cultivate students’ independence and ingenuity and encourage students to utilize the initiative in a way that best suits their academic, social, and/or professional needs. Such facilitative initiatives include freshman learning communities and supplemental instruction, as well as aspects of Georgia State’s summer bridge program, Success Academy, and first-year seminar course, GSU 1010. Freshman learning communities and supplemental instruction, in particular, exemplify the academic and social support called for in Tinto’s Integration Model, yet appear to ease students’ integration process into the academic community rather than attempt to force their integration. This allows for students who do not seek membership into the community or who would prefer, or can only accommodate, partial membership to still benefit from the university’s support services (Webb-Sunderhaus 2010; 2017). Georgia State’s summer bridge program and first-year seminar course also offer facilitative attributes worth noting, yet walk a line that risks overstepping their role in students’ educational pursuits. The following section will be divided into three areas of student need—academic, social, and professional—that these retention initiatives aim to support and through which students are given flexibility to use in a way that is most effective for their individual path toward graduation.

3.1.1 Academic Support

As supported by Tinto’s 1975 Student Integration Model and persistence scholarship thereafter, institutions of higher education have looked internally to examine how they can better support students academically. While, ironically, little attention is paid by persistence scholars and higher education administrators to promote collaborative efforts between student success
administrators and academic departments (Holmes & Busser; Ruecker et. al, 2017), universities have sought to enact strategies outside of the classroom that can assist in students’ academic improvement. Some of these initiatives can be ineffective, for the reason I have just stated: because they require students to complete certain tasks out of context or that are seemingly irrelevant to their academic needs and expectations. However, my study has found that both freshman learning communities and supplemental instruction effectively facilitate students’ abilities to assess their individual academic needs and utilize the retention initiative to improve their chances of success. These findings support initiatives being launched within writing programs across the country to support student persistence, including writing fellows’ programs (which I explore in Chapter 4) and students’ directed self-placement into English courses with lab components (Brunk-Chavez & Fredericksen; Chemishanova & Snead).

At Georgia State, over 70% of students participate in freshman learning communities, cohorts of students that are grouped together usually for all of their classes in their first semester based on commonality, such as their major or, as one participant experienced, a shared scholarship. Success Academy and the Panther Excellence Program are examples of freshman learning communities. While freshman learning communities are not mandated for all students, they are highly recommended by the university, which positions incoming students to have to opt out of the program if they do not want to be in a cohort.

Freshman learning communities are one example of an initiative that facilitates students’ individual abilities to persist in college. Specifically, students representing varied lifestyles and possessing a range of priorities are able to utilize the cohort dynamic they are provided to build academic support systems. In one scenario, for example, many of the participants with whom I spoke, representing 10 different cohorts, created with their peers a group messaging system by
using the app GroupMe. A messaging app that can be downloaded to an iOS, Android, or Windows device, GroupMe allows users to send text and picture messages to as many people as they want in a single, private conversation. For some students, like Destiny, a low-income student who balanced participating in school clubs and job hunting with her first year of college, this app allowed her and her peers to work together on assignments and keep each other accountable, a practice she explained continued to take place following her first semester, when her and her cohort shared only one or two classes together rather than a full schedule. According to Destiny and other students I spoke with, the messaging app was used often to check in with others about what they might have missed in class, to set up study groups, and at times, to offer each other an advantage over particular assignments, such as talking through their answers before posting responses online, or what Destiny refers to as “finess[ing] your way through college.” Prompted solely by the ingenuity of students, the GroupMe app is the result of students identifying on their own a strategy that could effectively leverage their familiarity with technology and relationships within their freshman learning community to improve their chances academically. The structure of freshman learning communities, in other words, allowed for students to be creative and identify how best to use their resources.

Another retention initiative at Georgia State that effectively facilitates students’ paths toward academic success is supplemental instruction, an initiative that is optional for students in freshman learning communities and mandated for those enrolled in Success Academy and Panther Excellence Programs. Very similar to supplemental instruction programs found at other universities, Georgia State’s supplemental instruction program consists of free study groups for typically difficult courses led by current Georgia State students who have already excelled in that particular course. Supplemental instruction leaders attend the course lectures and then prepare
engaging lessons for their study groups to complement the lecture. Students in Success Academy are required to attend one of two supplemental instruction sessions offered per week during the summer and Panther Excellence students are required to attend a certain number of times during the fall semester.

While the supplemental instruction initiative posed some logistical constraints for students and bothered others because it was mandatory, all participants spoke highly of supplemental instruction because of its small group, student-centered dynamic. Illuminating the pedagogical style of one supplemental instruction leader for Philosophy, Sydney describes why the mandatory tutoring worked for her:

He [the SI leader] really just summarizes the whole thing, because we just discuss in Philosophy. We don’t really talk; well, we don’t really figure out if this is right, like what it really is. So, he really summarizes it for us and gives us kind of like, breaks us up and gives us like a question and answer, like that’s the opposite of other groups and it really helps for the test.

Here, Sydney, a residential student, is referring to the practice of providing half the group with questions and the other half with answers so that students can work together to learn, not just what the solutions are, but how to achieve those solutions. She and other students, commuters and campus residents, consistently talked about how the small group dynamic and their leaders’ different perspectives worked well to reinforce what they were learning in their courses.

Mandated supplemental instruction posed some time constraints for commuter students and prompted much confusion for students who, repeatedly, spoke of the Student Success Center’s poor communication regarding when sessions were available and how many times students needed to attend. Nonetheless, the majority of students I spoke with found the initiative
useful because they were given space to address the things they did not understand in their classes. Offering similar benefits to writing fellows programs (Severino & Knight, 2007), or programs that embed writing center tutors into classrooms to work with students’ one-on-one on their assigned papers, students realized with supplemental instruction the importance of speaking with someone else about their work, while also recognizing the value of support services more generally. Because, like freshman learning communities, supplemental instruction gives room for students to use the initiative as a resource in order to boost their own success, in this case through asking questions they personally had from their classes, students planned to or already were attending voluntarily following the semesters it was mandatory.

Both freshman learning communities and supplemental instruction reveal the potential retention initiatives possess to boost students’ academic progress should those initiatives respect students’ agency. While these particular initiatives are not voluntary for all students, a factor writing program administration scholar Sarah Harris (2017) argues is central to the effectiveness of supplemental instruction meetings, the initiatives themselves are not intrusive in nature, as Georgia State touts of its advising system. Rather, freshman learning communities and supplemental instruction provide structures within which students can choose how the service can best accommodate their unique set of academic needs.

### 3.1.2 Social Support

A second area persistence scholars have long argued is an important contributor to students’ chances of staying enrolled is the university’s social community. Representative of students’ relationships with their peers, teachers, and university environment, scholars argue that the more students can feel connected to their university through relationships and identification with various social circles on campus, the more likely they will feel motivated to stay in school.
(Tinto 1975; Schroeder, 2005; Reichert Powell; Webb-Sunderhaus, 2017). Thus, universities have sought ways they can encourage students to make those connections, employing initiatives that range from requiring students to visit teachers’ office hours to offering lectures on joining student organizations. As I will discuss later, many of these initiatives can be viewed by students as contrived, and thus not helpful for students who do not require membership into social circles or do not want to follow their university’s instructions for how to do so. However, according to students in this study, freshman learning communities and aspects of Georgia State’s summer bridge program offer opportunities for students to more organically develop relationships in ways that serve their individual needs.

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

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

Recognizing his lifestyle did not allow him access to the same information as students living on campus, Eshan was able to work around that issue by appealing to the app. While the app served as a student-led support strategy, it likely would not have existed without the structure students
were provided by freshman learning communities. By organizing students into cohorts, freshman learning communities facilitated more consistent communication among students, who were then able to utilize the cohort dynamic to build social support systems through means they found most useful.

Beyond its contribution to greater communication among students, the cohort dynamic of freshman learning communities also gives students the opportunity to meet with like-minded peers and benefit from each other’s motivation. For example, Jason, a Success Academy residential student, explained to me how he and his peers motivate each other in both implicit and explicit ways. Engaging in activities other than school, such as grabbing food in the dining hall, students would often still mention something about an assignment or a class, which prompted others to make sure they had things done in order to feel caught up with their peers. Jason also mentioned gathering with his classmates one day to discuss the fact that they were all in college for the same reasons and so they need to hold each other accountable to be successful.

By situating students to attend all of their classes together, freshman learning communities facilitate for students organic, peer-driven forms of motivation. Appearing to work against the characteristics that lead to Durkheim’s theory of egotistical suicide, which serves as the foundation for Tinto’s Student Integration Model, the peer motivation that develops from freshman learning communities helps cultivate students’ shared values within their community and strengthens students’ personal relationships with each other.

While freshman learning communities are required for many students, this kind of requirement promotes students’ ingenuity and allows students the agency to use the social aspects of cohorts in a way that works best for them to succeed. Freshman learning communities also facilitate students’ independence, as students are positioned not to do their work because an
authority figure tells them to, as might be the case in high school or with other university retention initiatives, but because they determine on their own and among their peers that getting their work done would lead to future success. Similar results, of course, can be found when instructors assign certain forms of group work—with the right balance of parameters, students can benefit both academically and socially through conversation and peer-motivation. While some students in this study were indifferent about having required cohorts and a few wish they could have had more experiences with other students, all participants recognized the value in having people they could get to know throughout the semester, a factor they said benefitted everything from peer-review in the classroom to feeling less alone on a large and busy downtown campus.

Another initiative housed in Georgia State’s Student Success Center, Success Academy, or the summer bridge program, offers facilitative attributes valuable for students navigating their relationship to the university community in order to achieve their goals. Specifically, many participants commented on the opportunities beginning school in the summer provided for them; taken together, their comments suggest more than anything that an early start eases for them the transition into college because it allows them to adjust to the university environment and community expectations. Brianna, a residential student, explains that the early start allowed her to reconsider and readjust her priorities before potentially facing the backlash of carrying her partying mentality into the fall semester:

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

Reflecting a similar mentality as Jason, who spoke about the implicit and explicit forms of motivation students receive from their peers, Brianna alludes to a process of introspection and self-responsibility. Because her acceptance to Georgia State was granted under the condition that she begin school in the summer, a condition that she and the majority of Success Academy students felt grateful for, Brianna was positioned to face social pressures earlier, and arguably with less intensity, than if she would have begun her college pursuit in the fall. In addition to learning lessons of work/life balance earlier, and prior to managing a full-time class schedule, students also mentioned the usefulness in establishing friendships and familiarizing themselves with the campus before the university would return to its standard, much higher number of attendees in the fall and spring semesters. In other words, while the summer bridge program mandated that students begin in the summer semester, the students themselves took advantage of the early start to negotiate what kinds of lifestyles best served their goals; in addition, students capitalized on the less populated campus environment in order to become more comfortable with downtown Atlanta. Regardless of whether students were traditional in age or non-traditional, commuter or resident, all were given time with the early start to acclimate themselves to and accommodate their new lives within the university community.

Similar to what students found effective for supporting them academically, the initiatives that appear most effective for students to connect with their universities socially are those that cannot necessarily predict or control how students will or will not make use of the initiative. Students, for example, sought relationships through means that the university facilitated but did
not define and, because of that, were able to establish ways of accommodating their unique needs, such as Eshan, who relied greatly on the use of technology to stay in the loop with his friends who lived on campus. Likewise, the greatest benefits for students enrolled in the summer bridge program appeared to be the self-reflection and growth they experienced by beginning college earlier than the fall semester. While the summer bridge program requires students to complete a number of deliberate, out-of-class tasks intended, according to the Student Success Center, to support students’ success, most useful for students was the work they did within themselves while capitalizing on the early, part-time structure of a summer bridge program.

3.1.3 Professional Support

Not identified in Tinto’s Integration Model, but an area that appears more and more relevant in today’s era of market freedom established by neoliberal economics and spread through consumer culture, students are seeking ways to ensure their experiences in higher education lead them to financial security following graduation. Universities, as well, are interested in easing students’ experiences financially, evidenced by efforts to give grants to students trying to graduate (Panther Retention Grants) or keep students in school with initiatives like Georgia State’s Keep Hope Alive program. Universities are also increasingly offering financial advising and workshops on obtaining scholarships. As I have suggested earlier, however, some of these initiatives to support students from an economic standpoint are more facilitative than others, in that they encourage students to maintain agency over how they consider the relationship between higher education and finances.

One such example of facilitating students’ success through supporting them economically is through Georgia State’s first-year seminar course, GSU 1010, which is a one-credit course intended to provide students with opportunities to learn earlier in their college experiences how
to utilize the university in a way that would best support their paths toward success. While the
course itself utilizes a standard syllabus, those who teach the course are given flexibility for how
they require students to meet the various course objectives; this flexibility results in vastly
different student experiences. While much of this course provides more challenges for students
than it does facilitative support, students found useful the opportunity given by the course to
think more explicitly about their careers in relation to their education. Those whose instructors
discussed resumes and brought in speakers to discuss potential majors, for example, valued the
exposure and chance to ask questions about their individual majors and future careers. Jessica, a
student in a traditional, fall-enrolled freshman learning community, commented on the direction
GSU 1010 offered her:

Walking in, I didn’t know, I changed my major like three times before walking into that
class. Like, I literally changed from Anthropology to Political Science to Biology. I had
no idea what I was going to do and like, when she talked about scholarships, she talked
about career counseling and that really helped me figure out what I kind of wanted to do.

Jessica and other students found helpful activities, at least if they were engaging, that could get
them thinking about their individual trajectories. Jessica’s experience aligns closely with Webb-
Sunderhaus’s (2017) findings in her study of one student’s counter narrative to universities
pressing for students to graduate efficiently: “early professional development” can “increase
students’ interest and commitment to their degrees,” an argument that greatly supports writing
programs that offer internship opportunities for English majors. Even when students criticized
the course for other elements that caused them added stress or felt condescending, such as
assigned tasks that felt irrelevant to their goals and lectures on stress management, they
maintained that researching and discussing their majors was useful.
With each area of student support discussed above, students either opted or were mandated to engage with one of Georgia State’s strategies to increase student retention. Regardless of whether the initiative was required, however, students were given enough flexibility to maintain agency over their college experiences. Then, with that agency, students could capitalize on the support services in a way that would best serve their individual paths toward success. Freshman learning communities, for example, brought students together through shared schedules, but the Student Success Center in charge of implementing freshman learning communities could not anticipate that students would organize a group messaging system or arrange meetings with each other to discuss their goals, nor could the Center attempt to arrange these student-led support strategies as part of Georgia State’s freshman learning community program. Student-led support strategies function effectively to serve student success because they develop organically in response to students’ needs. The strength of freshman learning communities is merely that they facilitate students’ own ingenuity and resourcefulness. Students remain in the driver’s seat of the university vehicle, and, therefore, can utilize the resource, or not, to help achieve their personal success goals. The same can be said for supplemental instruction and GSU 1010, at least when students are able to participate, ask questions they need answered, and align course goals with their individual goals.

Facilitative methods of student support offer writing program administrators and composition instructors a framework through which to reflect on their own practices and put them in conversation with retention practices happening at their respective institutions. Recognizing contributions one-on-one and small group instruction can make toward students meeting their personal, academic needs, writing programs can explore internal ways to further support students, such as offering first-year English courses with lab components, as writing
programs are beginning to do at various institutions (Brunk-Chavez & Fredericksen; Chemishanova & Snead), or developing initiatives that collaborate with the university’s writing center to encourage students’ conversations with a university representative as part of the writing process. For campus-wide initiatives, writing programs may also leverage field-specific research on collaborative pedagogy and writing fellows programs to advocate on behalf of students’ needs for greater agency when it comes to student support services. Finally, facilitative methods of student support call on composition instructors to consider the impact their classroom pedagogy has on students’ commitment to the course’s content, such as making connections to students’ professional goals, rather than students’ commitment to continued attendance. Chapter 4 will elaborate on each of these points by providing specific recommendations writing program and composition scholars can consider moving forward.

The following section will discuss retention initiatives that appear, at Georgia State, more dictative of students’ college experiences than facilitative. Rather than encourage students to reflect on their individual needs to achieve success and then seek ways to capitalize on university resources to meet those needs, these methods of student support tend to prioritize moving students through school efficiently, a priority that risks sacrificing opportunities for students to participate in how they pursue their goals. By prioritizing efficiency, these retention initiatives end up presenting challenges for students whose lifestyles require having more control over their paths through school. My study has found that these challenges range from obstructing students’ use of time and finances to preventing students from making short-term and long-term plans. I intend with the following analysis of dictative retention initiatives to highlight the responsibility writing programs have to their students to advocate for more inclusive approaches to supporting student retention.
3.2  Dictative Methods of Student Support

Methods of student support that can risk causing adverse effects for students attempting to pursue success are those that are more dictative of students’ experiences in college than they are facilitative, and therefore, are less student-centered than the initiatives described above. Dictative methods of student support tend to presume students’ needs and restrict their agency. While well-intentioned and supported by retention scholarship, dictative initiatives can cause challenges for students, especially students who commute, are non-traditional in age, and/or are from low-income households. These challenges include increased pressure on both students’ time and finances, as well as reduced agency over their college trajectory. While retention programs do benefit and challenge students in unequal ways, these particular challenges seem specifically to impact students whose lifestyles require a less traditional college experience. These students balance responsibilities or face circumstances that make difficult for them a college lifestyle that is promoted by organizations such as Complete College America, which encourages universities to offer students incentives for taking 15 credits per year, and described in Georgia State’s Strategic Plan, a document that celebrates Georgia State’s transition from a commuter university to one that offers brand new dorms and a complete academic and social community of which students can join. In other words, students most at risk of experiencing challenges posed by dictative methods of support are students who are unable to or do not desire to fully integrate into the university community, a process higher education research has long suggested is necessary for students’ success. However, as the previous analysis of facilitative methods suggests, students of varying lifestyles and circumstances can still pursue success should they be given the resources and agency to assess their individual needs and make choices accordingly.
The remainder of this section is organized by the specific challenges outlined above. The retention initiatives to be addressed in each section include Georgia State’s fixed-scheduling system, the first-year seminar course, and the numerous out-of-class requirements for students enrolled in Success Academy and the Panther Excellence Program. The out-of-class requirements include supplemental instruction, study hall, workshops, and regular meetings with professors. These initiatives have been singled out because of how their methods tend to dictate students’ college experience and thus reduce students’ agency to make choices more accommodating for their lifestyle. With the following analysis, writing program administrators and composition instructors can inform their own efforts to advocate on behalf of students and their diverse lifestyles; ideally, writing programs would also utilize what we know about dictative methods of student support to inform conversations regarding inclusive classroom pedagogy.

The challenges posed by retention initiatives impact students in different ways, typically based on their financial or commuter status. However, in this study, the one participant who was non-traditional in age and residential students who were highly motivated, also found difficulties with Georgia State’s retention initiatives, the clashes manifesting when students’ priorities clashed with the university’s preference for efficiency. Challenges students face with more dictative methods include conflicts with how their time is structured, financial risks, and limited ability to make plans. As each challenge will be described more in detail with the inclusion of student voices, I call on readers to consider how multiple initiatives come together to limit students’ agency for the purpose of graduating more students efficiently.
3.2.1 Challenges with Time

Students’ use of their personal time is impacted by a number of initiatives, although largely by Georgia State’s fixed-scheduling system. Described in detail in Chapter 2, fixed-schedules are pre-made schedules that Georgia State’s advisors present to students at their orientation prior to their first semester in order to sort them into meta-majors. Students, whether in Success Academy, the Panther Excellence Program, or a traditional freshman learning community, are given a number of schedules to choose from. According to the explanations given by participants in this study about selecting their schedules, if students attend an earlier orientation date, they are given more options of schedules from which to choose. If they wind up attending the final orientation date, students’ choices are much more limited. In the summer, the first orientation for Success Academy students offered about 12 schedules; on the final day, students had only about three from which to choose. Because fixed-schedules are arranged by meta-majors, students are not only attending school with peers of shared interests, but they are also selecting schedules that can fulfill their chosen major’s requirements. For students enrolled in traditional freshman learning communities, fixed-schedules include first-year composition, the math requirement for students’ shared meta-major, the university’s first-year seminar course, and three electives. Students enrolled in Success Academy or the Panther Excellence Program are prevented from taking a math and science course their first year in college, unless their major requires them to do so—a limitation I will expand upon later.

Success Academy students, who are required only to take seven credits over the summer, are ultimately selecting a fixed-schedule that matches their major and (or if they are undecided) offers, in their opinion, an elective they find interesting. Of the Success Academy students with whom I spoke, some chose their schedules because they had an interest in American
Government; others chose or were “stuck with” Philosophy, the most available general education elective on the final orientation day. The process is very similar for Panther Excellence students and those in traditional Freshman learning communities, except that students in these cohorts have the flexibility of choosing a schedule based on more unique electives. One participant in the Panther Excellence Program noted her appreciation of this scheduling process because she otherwise never would have considered taking History of Motion Pictures, a class that has since inspired her to consider a degree in film (Kennedy).

Fixed-schedules serve to streamline the process for scheduling students into cohorts. They also work to ensure that students are signing up for courses that will indeed go toward their major, an objective Complete College America and Georgia State’s College Plan Update argue is necessary for saving students money and getting students to graduation at a faster rate. In other instances, fixed-schedules can serve to avoid students having to wait a number of semesters before a needed class is available (Emanuel, 2016). Nonetheless, scheduling students in this way becomes more complicated when students enroll with AP credits that exempt them from the first or both composition courses within the first-year sequence and/or their major’s first-year math requirement. Students who want to double-major in fields that represent different meta-majors are also faced with greater complications. Ultimately, these students can negotiate with advisors to change out of their fixed-schedules, but doing so often counters the impact freshman learning communities are designed to have on students’ sense of community and prevent faculty from trying to collaborate; thus, these schedule changes are not necessarily encouraged by advisors.

Participants in this study found that fixed-schedules limited their agency over how they structured their lives. For example, fixed-schedules often include courses that are earlier in the day, which can especially complicate the experience for commuters who must navigate Atlanta
traffic during rush hour. Michael discussed his frustration over early classes in relation to his process of selecting a schedule at orientation:

The fact that it was at 9:30 and it was my first year in college and I live in Conyers, meaning I had to get up at like no later than 7, leave by 7:30 just to get there about 15 minutes late. So…I just hate the time. Like, we had options to choose from, but being in marching band and having other things going on, I could only choose between one or two [schedules] and one was full, so I had to go with two.

Michael notes two themes that were addressed by multiple participants. First, he comments on the early wake-up time that students felt did not always accommodate their commuter lifestyle or learning strengths. Even students who did not live as far as Michael described driving at 8 am as “hell” (Eshan); others, whose schedules included first-year composition in the morning, did not feel awake enough to fully participate in class discussions (Destiny). Additionally, Michael explains how his balance of other responsibilities, including marching band, volunteering, and a part-time job, forced him to narrow his options even further than those who did not maintain other commitments. Destiny, a low-income student who lived on campus, described a similar difficulty in trying to take up a new responsibility while enrolled in the Panther Excellence Program. A Hospitality major, Destiny mentioned applying to over twenty hotel positions, but continually being denied due to her class schedule overlapping with morning and night shifts.

The scheduling conflicts faced by commuter and low-income students who were placed in retention programs in order to support their success echo the experiences faced by Roxie, the student whose story Webb-Sunderhaus (2017) shares to illuminate the difficulties students face in moving through college. In Roxie’s case, she missed classes or did not sign up for core classes, often because either her daughter was sick or she needed to attend work; Webb-
Sunderhaus, in turn, calls out Roxie’s institution for its “inflexible” course offerings, of which are often limited to on campus courses between the times of “9:00 AM-6:00 PM” (2017, p. 124). Roxie’s story, alongside Michael’s, Eshan’s, and Destiny’s, highlight not just an inflexibility among writing programs and their respective institutions, but also the systemic marginalizing of students whose lifestyles and circumstances prevent them from pursuing success in a way that is preferred by their university. If devoted to the success of their students, writing programs and composition instructors must consider supporting students’ agency over their schedules, not just with regard to placement, as Brunk-Chavez and Fredericksen support, but also with the time of day their courses are scheduled.

Beyond lacking flexibility in their class times, math and science majors at Georgia State who were enrolled in Success Academy were found doubly challenged by the time constraints of fixed-schedules, as they were required to take more courses than their peers in order to meet their major’s prerequisites and fulfill Success Academy’s numerous requirements. Below is an account from Jasmine, one of only two participants who were STEM majors enrolled in Success Academy:

Our schedule sucks. Like today, we have a class from 9 to 11:30, and then the same teacher we have a lecture from 12 to 12:50 and then right after that, 1:15, we have GSU 1010 and tomorrow we have a stupid math class, it’s a support class. So we’re doing that from 9 to 10:40 and then our next class won’t start till 2 o’clock. So we have nothing to do and I commute so I can’t go back to the dorm and just sleep or something. So I have to find something to do and then Thursdays they make us go to study hall during that three hours, but it’s still two hours after that we have nothing to do. I feel it would be easier in
the fall a little bit, ‘cause everything’s so squished together in the summer, so like with fall it’d be more spread out. We’d have more time to turn in our assignments. (Jasmine)

Jasmine provides another perspective on retention initiatives that limit when students can and cannot take certain classes. In Jasmine’s case, the initiative appears to make life more complicated for students who want to major in math or science because it requires students to begin their college careers taking a full load of courses in a short, summer semester in order to complete Success Academy and remain on track for graduation. Jasmine’s particular narrative once more raises questions regarding the sacrifices universities are willing to make in order to keep all students on track for a four-year graduation; in this case, the benefits Success Academy students enjoyed for beginning college in the summer, with just half the coursework as a fall semester, were not shared among math and science majors, whose summer made them long for a fall semester in order to have more time, rather than serve as a helpful transition. Later on, students who do not major in math or science will discuss their personal challenge of having to delay taking their major’s math and science requirements until their second year.

The concerns of STEM students enrolled in Georgia State’s summer bridge program about workload are also shared by non-STEM students in the Success Academy and Panther Excellence Program, but for reasons that relate not to courses but to their programs’ various out-of-class requirements. For both programs, these requirements apply to students’ first semester in the program and include:

- Attending Supplemental Instruction
- Attending Success Workshops
- Meeting with professors to discuss grades and collect signatures
- Attending Study Hall (Success Academy only).
The sentiments primarily expressed by students about these requirements deal with the value they placed on time. Overwhelmingly, students identified many of these requirements as disruptive of their process to finish work for their classes and get other, more important, tasks complete. Destiny, who consistently alluded to her feelings of not being in control over her own schedule, describes this disruption:

Even though SI [supplemental instruction] you can do it on your own time, it’s still kind of, you know, that’s another thing I got to do on top of going to this and changing around what I had to do just to go to this. Now, I gotta stop this teacher just to get my grade when they have their own lives, so it’s a lot of requirements. I mean, seeing that technically we weren’t supposed to be in the university, I guess it’s fine, but actually being here and doing the requirements, it’s just, some of the stuff is a waste of time.

Destiny was enrolled in Panther Excellence, which gave her more flexibility to complete her requirements than students in Success Academy; Success Academy students, for example, only had two times during the week for which to attend supplemental instruction, as a consequence of beginning college in a short, summer semester. Nonetheless, this flexibility did not prevent Destiny from feeling stressed about what to her felt like “a whole other class on top of everything else.” The extra workload students face when enrolled in summer bridge programs and programs similar further illuminates how well-intended support services can do more harm than good for students who do not see in these services a benefit to their current needs.

As mentioned earlier, however, students were willing to put in time to fulfill requirements that they felt directly impacted their ability to be successful. For these reasons, most students supported visits to supplemental instruction, despite the extra workload those visits seemingly posed. Other requirements did not offer the same exchange value. In particular,
students found workshops a great misuse of their time because the content did not provide information they found new or useful, as described by Sarah:

I think one of them was about diversity, which they told us at Incept. And it was just a lady talking about like how you can go and join different clubs. It was an interesting thing ‘cause diversity is cool, but it’s something we already know and didn’t have to take that amount of time.

These workshops, which range in topic from “How to Meet with Your Professors” to “How to Effectively Manage Stress” are optionally available for students enrolled in freshman learning communities, so typically students are able to select which advice they need to serve their success goals (“Success Workshops,” 2017). Success Academy and Panther Excellence students, however, are required to attend workshops selected by their university administrators, a difference from freshman learning communities that appears a source of frustration for many students. Unlike the case described in the previous section, where Jessica capitalized on her first-year seminar course to decide which major would be best for her career trajectory, students who were required to attend workshops often could not make connections between the workshop’s goals and their own, a pattern that calls on all higher education stakeholders to examine the presumptions we hold about how and why students may be struggling to succeed.

Students’ sensitivity regarding the impact workshops have on their time is further exasperated when those students are also commuters. Jasmine, for example, highlights the ripple effect a brief workshop can cause for her schedule as a commuter:

Success Academy just has a lot of workshops and stuff, so it’s kind of hard for the people that commute like me, to come on a day when I don’t have class, but I have to come for like a workshop that’s 45 minutes and then drive 45 minutes to get home.
On the Success Academy website, made clear to students is the need to possess an availability on weekdays between 9:30 and 4 pm (“Success Academy,” 2017), a more explicit timeframe than what Webb-Sunderhaus noted of her own institutions’ course offerings. However, what Jasmine’s comment brings light to is the agency then given to the program to dictate how students can and cannot balance their individualized lifestyles with their academic selves. For campus residents who are able to blend their academic selves with their social identities, 45-minute workshops, which often end earlier than their allotted times, do not greatly impact their days. For commuters, however, this workshop, often equipped with content students do not value as productive to being successful, takes away much of their time that can be devoted to something else and also costs them financially in the form of gas or public transportation. Once more, requirements imposed upon students in the name of success display the university’s efforts to equate success with students committing more of their time and presence to their university community, a process that is far easier for a traditional college student living on campus than a student who commutes and/or must balance other responsibilities while attending school.

The issues of retention initiatives dictating how students use their time does not end with conflicts between students’ personal and academic lives. As one student in a traditional freshman learning community explains, even if the content’s exchange value is worth the sacrifice of students’ time, the delivery of the content itself does not always support the content’s value. Jessica discusses this concept as it relates to Georgia State’s first-year seminar course:

It [GSU 1010] helped with the first semester jitters, like a lot. But, since it’s only one semester, it’s kind of like you retain it and then lose it. I think also the fact that I don’t think it’s important too, like my brain doesn’t consciously remember. Like of course it’s important information, but I don’t think it’s important at that time.
Jessica’s comment suggests the difficulty students may have engaging with the content of a first-year seminar course or mandatory workshops because rather than be provided in response to the assessment of students’ needs, they are required with the presumption that students currently need information on topics such as diversity, stress management, scholarships, and financial literacy. In other words, students’ processes of learning about these subjects are out of context and inorganic, posing a risk to students’ overall interest and commitment to taking advantage of the support their university is attempting to provide through mandatory initiatives.

Confronted with fixed-schedules and mandatory requirements, students find challenging the ability to negotiate the many responsibilities they have with the time constraints some retention initiatives present. And, while one might be inclined to respond with the notion that all students can find difficulty in balancing their lifestyles with school, the data above presents also the limited agency students possess to ease the balancing process. Certain student populations, it seems, are also presented with further challenges because retention initiatives appear to value and promote a traditional college student lifestyle, one that can accommodate mandatory workshops on students’ days off and early morning class times. Thus, as writing programs continue to face pressures from their institution to support retention initiatives, whether explicitly within their own departments (i.e., improved placement measures or writing fellows programs) or implicitly through supporting initiatives that are employed to complement the work happening within our classrooms (i.e., first-year seminar courses and requirements of meeting with faculty), it is imperative to ask whether these initiatives support students whose lives require greater flexibility in scheduling and whose needs require great options for support.
3.2.2 Financial Challenges

This case study of students’ experiences with retention initiatives has also revealed somewhat controversial financial challenges students can face when their lifestyles clash with pursuing success efficiently. While this section does not offer as many passages from students as the previous section, the scenarios addressed by Destiny and Kennedy speak to the unique position low-income students are placed in should they be accepted into a fall-enrolled support program like Georgia State’s Panther Excellence Program. As mentioned previously, the time constraints students face, often a result of universities valuing efficiency, can prevent students from getting certain jobs or keeping up with the ones they do have. Beyond those time-related financial risks, students may also face more explicit financial problems due the restrictions a university may place on how many courses students can take per semester, restrictions put in place, of course, to support students’ success.

Enrolling in the Panther Excellence Program, Destiny and Kennedy knew they had not earned Georgia’s Hope scholarship, the “merit-based award” given to students who graduate with a 3.0 grade point average (“Hope”). As discussed in Chapter 2, if students earn Hope, they receive tuition assistance to cover the costs of 30 credits per year along with student fees. Students must maintain a 3.0 GPA in order to continue receiving Hope every 30 credit hours until they have earned a degree (they are limited to seven years of assistance). If students do not earn Hope coming out of school, they have the chance for their GPA to be reevaluated for the scholarship once they have earned 30 credits. This is an excellent opportunity for all students, but especially low-income students.

Destiny and Kennedy were very aware of the work they needed to do in order to avoid paying out of pocket for tuition following their first year of college. What they did not know was
that they would not be given the opportunity to earn 30 credits between their spring and fall semesters. In other words, Destiny and Kennedy enrolled in their Panther Excellence Program without knowing that they would have to pay for summer school and summer housing the following year. Destiny, who entered college with one AP credit, realized after she enrolled that she would not be able to take 15 credits in the spring, and therefore, experienced a number of stresses during her school year to manage summer enrollment:

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

Destiny’s elaboration on the financial struggles she faced managing the Panther Excellence Program’s requirements and earning Hope presents tension once more between a traditional college lifestyle, one where students have time to integrate into the university community both academically and socially—as evidenced by Destiny’s involvement with her school’s step
team—and the circumstances faced by low-income students. Destiny worked to experience college the way Tinto’s Integration Model suggests facilitates the most successful outcome: she attended school full time, lived on campus, and got involved in a social community at the university. However, with the limitations placed on students enrolled in Panther Excellence, limitations employed because of students’ low freshman index scores, Destiny was unable to afford the traditional lifestyle. Georgia State, in other words, accepts low-performing students into the university, many of whom are Pell-eligible, but then does not help these students pursue their 30 credits to earn Hope in a way that is financially inclusive and responsible.

It is important to note that offering lower-performing students less coursework during their first semesters in college is well-intended. As discussed earlier in this chapter, students enrolled in Georgia State’s summer bridge program benefitted greatly from the opportunity to begin school earlier without the pressures of a full course load. However, limiting students’ credit hours is also enforced with the presumption that all students can afford to attend school on the university’s preferred timeline, a presumption that once more favors the student who can afford to integrate completely into the university community, rather than those who have to balance that time with earning money or juggling other responsibilities. Therefore, for universities to offer more inclusive pathways toward success, administrators must work to ensure students maintain some agency over how and when their money is spent. For writing programs, this finding speaks once more to the need for students’ commuter and low-income status to be considered when deciding whether certain initiatives to support students’ success should be required or optional.

In another example that highlights the complicated notion of requiring certain retention initiatives, Kennedy, who did not bring any AP credits into college, offers a perspective similar
to Destiny’s, but also gives insight as to why some students must also pay for on campus housing should they be required to attend in the summer:

Most college students take 15 credits their first year, but PEP stopped it at 13 credits, so I mean, if I had taken 15 credits that last semester and this semester, I would automatically get Hope in the fall and we wouldn’t have this problem. But, since it was 13 and 13, I have 26 and now I have to somehow go to summer school, spend more money to make money in a way. So my parents have to try to come up with $2000 for me to go to summer school and they don’t want me to stay at home since my home is in a bad condition, so they, you know, had to take out even more loans. So, my mom is trying to take out this parent plus loan to make sure I’m able to stay on campus. I mean she said if push comes to shove, then I’ll have to stay home. It’s not like that big of a deal, but I mean, you know, we don’t, I don’t want to.

Kennedy’s story is one that also includes the Student Success Center reevaluating her GPA and explaining to her at the beginning of the fall semester that she did not have to enroll in the Panther Excellence Program; however, Kennedy appreciated all of the free tutoring and support the program offered and so opted to remain in it. Her situation is unique because at the last minute she was given the choice to avoid the program’s many requirements, but at the time, Kennedy was also not aware of the program’s limitations. As she does above, Kennedy spoke of the way her and her family needed to strategize simply to raise the funds for her to attend Georgia State. Her father borrowed money from a friend. Kennedy wrote a letter to someone she once worked for and asked for a donation. It seems especially important then, that if universities and writing programs are interested in supporting diverse student populations through various
initiatives, that they be transparent in how these initiative will specifically impact students’ paths
toward their education goals.

The narratives provided by Destiny and Kennedy speak to the great attention paid by
students, particularly low-income students, to how their money and their family’s money is
spent. While they can respect the efforts made by their university to support them, they also do
not think the university always has their best interest in mind. Kennedy further alludes to this
point with regard to Georgia State’s first-year seminar course:

It was kind of like, I’m going to say BS, like a freshman orientation class. I think it’s
good for some people, but I also thought like low key, you know, if I’m paying for that,
that’s the kind of attitude I’ve gotten now. I’m not going to take a class that I don’t need
because I am paying for it. And I think Georgia State really doesn’t, especially when
you’re in a freshman learning community, they kind of don’t try to understand that. It’s
just like, yeah, I know you’re talking this is good for me, but at the end of the day, we’re
talking money because who is going to have 40k of debt when they come out of college?

Me.

While persistence research might claim that initiatives such as a first-year seminar course and
limited credit hours for low-performing students can support students’ retention, low-income
students face unique challenges that can make participating in retention initiatives far more
difficult. For students like Kennedy and Destiny, being able to have more control over where
their money goes and when it is spent can be the difference between living in a rough situation at
home that isn’t supportive of schoolwork and remaining safe on campus. It can mean the
difference between having to find a job in the middle of a school semester or continuing to
benefit from the traditional college lifestyle. Understanding the low-income student’s experience
with retention initiatives compels all stakeholders in higher education to reevaluate the risks involved with removing students’ agency over how they experience college for the purposes of promoting an efficient path toward graduation. Likewise, the stories shared by Kennedy and Destiny compel writing program administrators and composition instructors to pay closer attention to the way the requirements they deem as supportive, such as non-credit bearing courses within a stretch program (Peele 2010), may impede upon students’ finances.

3.2.3 Challenges with Planning

The final issue raised in the data gathered for this study concerns students’ abilities to make both short-term and long-term plans. This issue stems from two different aspects of Georgia State’s student support efforts. First, retention initiatives designed to control the pace of students’ pursuit toward graduation, such as Success Academy and the Panther Excellence Program and their respective credit limits for students, can disrupt the very specific agendas some students bring with them to school. Secondly, the Student Success Center’s facilitation of the numerous requirements it demands of students ultimately puts students at the whim of the Center’s administrators, a situation that makes vulnerable students’ daily schedules to others’ organizational skills. Students enrolled in Success Academy and Panther Excellence, for example, frequently expressed frustration with the Student Success Center’s lack of timely communication that caused them to shift their daily plans at the last minute. In the following section, I will elaborate on the varied ways low-income, commuter, non-traditional, and even traditional students struggle with making plans because of the dictative elements embedded in various retention initiatives.

Typically, there are about 250-300 students enrolled in Georgia State’s summer bridge program, a number that is growing despite the university’s reluctance to increase its resources
that would help facilitate a growing student population (Holmes and Busser). Within the seven weeks that these students complete the summer bridge program, they must fulfill a number of requirements, some of which were described earlier in greater detail. Many of the students with whom I spoke described the program’s communication about these requirements as “jumbled” and “hearsay” rather than organized in a manner that would help students get what they needed complete (Chris). Alicia elaborates on her experience managing the program’s demands:

   We were kind of just like fish thrown into water having to fend for ourselves and I know that college kind of is, you know, you got to do what you got to do, but whenever they explained this summer success to us at Incept, it was just kind of like, yea you’re going to have required things that you’re going to go to, but it was just like “required things.” So we’re like, okay, I’m guessing that you know, when we get there, they’re going to tell us these required things and they didn’t tell us these required things. So, like, I think it was last week we just figured out at a workshop, um, last Friday we figured out that if you go to two SIs [supplemental instructions] a week, you don’t have to go the following week.

   Like, you don’t have to go to one the following week, which, we didn’t know about that.

Alicia and many other participants in her focus group discussed instances of not knowing exactly what they needed to complete, but also fearing that if they didn’t complete the requirements, they would risk their spot in the program. Beyond supplemental instruction, students also spoke of receiving notifications of meetings being rescheduled within a few minutes’ notice and advising sessions being cancelled, but not rescheduled by the program’s administrators. Thus, students were faced with having to figure out how to reschedule the session themselves to avoid getting into trouble. For commuter students, quick changes to their schedules were especially difficult to accommodate, but for all students, poor communication caused unnecessary obstacles to
achieving what they needed to achieve to be successful. While, again, summer-bridge students are asked, prior to enrolling in the program, to be available between 9:30 and 4 pm during the week, students attempting to negotiate their multiple priorities with those expected of them from the program demand, on some level, to know ahead of time how their week will be structured. Not granting students such courtesy inarguably displays a university’s preference for a student lifestyle that is devoted only to the university, a lifestyle that is not possible for all students.

Beyond the potential for certain retention initiatives to disrupt students’ daily and weekly plans, the credit limits placed on students enrolled in Success Academy and the Panther Excellence Program and Georgia State’s general advising for all students often can cause significant alterations to students’ college trajectories. Although persistence research and Georgia State’s initiatives promote students graduating in four years, not every student enrolls in college with the same timeline. Non-traditional female students, for example, are more likely to persist if they attend school part-time and maintain a balance among all of their life roles (Markle 2015). According to Gail Markle’s study on what influences the persistence of non-traditional students, non-traditional students do not require social integration in order to perform better in college. Rather, their biggest priority is ensuring they can attend school while serving the demands they face outside of the classroom. For George, a married non-traditional student with a part-time job, this meant graduating more quickly than what Success Academy had in mind for him:

I’m not trying to be here for four or five years; I’m trying to graduate in three, three and half because that’s when the GI bill stops paying me. So I’m trying to get in, get out, and they’re like oh yea, you know, you’re only allowed to take 12 hours. It’s like, what do you mean? I’m trying to take 14 or 15.
George was accepted in the summer bridge program because, like others enrolled in the program, his freshman index score was below Georgia State’s standards, a factor George attributes to taking the college entrance exam years after graduating high school. While he is grateful for being accepted anyway, George does not require many of the same initiatives designed to support traditionally-aged students. The more dictative retention initiatives, for example, such as monitored study hall, weekly workshops, and credit limits, are employed with the presumption that students need to be given a university-designated time to do their homework, require formal discussions on stress management and financial literacy, and should pace themselves in order not to get overwhelmed their first year with too many classes. George, a 23-year-old who has already served four years in the military, finds it more difficult to study among students who do not take seriously the monitored study hall; his definition of stress ranges drastically from his peers and he lives on his own, sharing bills with his wife, and thus does not see a point to learning from Georgia State’s workshops how to manage his finances. Finally, with the many other responsibilities he balances, George is interested in finishing school as quickly as possible, especially while he still qualifies for the GI bill. In other words, in order for George to fulfill his personal goals for success, he requires an institution that will trust in his ability to construct his own path toward graduation, rather than engage in “hand-holding,” as George often described his many out-of-class requirements.

Also navigating credit limits, Kennedy was less concerned than George with graduating quickly, despite the finances section discussing her concern about quickly earning 30 credits. Rather, Kennedy struggled with the university dictating which credits she could earn when. Specifically, she did not want to skip a year before taking math and science courses, a restriction that is placed on students in Success Academy and Panther Excellence Program who have not
declared a math or science major. Having taken AP Calculus in high school, Kennedy explained that she wanted to get “her math over with now while it is so fresh in [her] head.” Kennedy’s uneasiness with taking a year off of a specific subject speaks to how students’ lack of agency over their college experience prevents students from planning their schedules in a way that best meets their learning needs.

Restrictions placed on students’ credits and courses during their first year forces reconsideration of a university’s first-year retention rates, which, at Georgia State, are currently celebrated at 81% (“Graduation & Retention”). If more students are being retained their first year, as numbers may show, but students are prevented from taking classes considered more difficult their first year, then do these retention rates alter how universities are presenting themselves to the public and funding organizations? After all, Georgia State’s overall graduation rates remain below the national average at 53% (Renick, 2016). Understanding retention statistics and the rhetoric surrounding them, alongside students’ stories is important, and for students like George and Kennedy, can reveal significant conflicts between a university’s priorities and the priorities of its varied student populations. As pressures to raise retention rates increase for colleges and universities, it is natural also for writing programs to seek ways to support students staying enrolled in their respective writing classes, as doing so can lead to writing programs earning greater attention and resources from their institution. The stories above, however, warn writing program administrators of the ways prioritizing attendance over students’ agency can prevent, rather than support, students’ overall success.

Not all students, however, face the restrictions of those who are involved in programs such as Success Academy and Panther Excellence. Students enrolled in typical, fall-enrolled freshman learning communities at Georgia State are less likely to interact with dictative methods
of student support and, therefore, are given greater flexibility for how they can experience college. Nonetheless, these students are not necessarily exempt from the university’s overt preference for students to graduate within four years. Maria, for example, was interested in declaring a second major, but when she sought advising to advocate on behalf of her academic interests, she still faced an advising system that ultimately valued efficiency. A Linguistics major at the time, Maria described to me how the meeting with her advisor went: “I wanted to double major, but then when I went to talk to my advisor, they were like mehh, maybe because they just want us to get out earlier and not like spend so much time doing college stuff.” A high performing student who speaks three languages and took a year off between high school and college in order to work in Germany, Maria was interested in complementing her Linguistics major with French, a decision that would likely make her more successful on her career path. Yet after speaking with her advisor, Maria left with the impression that adding a second major was a waste of her time. As evidenced by the stories of George, Kennedy, and Maria, universities like Georgia State may utilize both formal and informal strategies to influence the structure of students’ paths through college, despite the potential for students maintaining very different intentions.

Georgia State’s retention initiatives are structured in ways that dictate how students can and cannot make use of their time and money. Because the university prioritizes students graduating in an efficient manner, these dictative elements push students to divide their time among their many priorities in a way that emulates the traditional college student’s lifestyle, or one that can accommodate integrating academically and socially into the university community. Such a lifestyle, which is difficult for some students to maintain, and simply not preferred by others, ideally serves to support the university’s retention goals. While this lifestyle might prove
beneficial for students who live on campus, do not struggle financially, and are of traditional college age, it can make more difficult the college experience for students, such as those who spend each semester figuring out how the next one will be paid. The conflict between how universities like Georgia State want students to use their time and money and how students actually need to use their time and money is exemplified best in the issues faced by George and Kennedy, who sought to structure their college paths in ways that best suit their unique needs, but were ultimately restricted from doing so. As Reichert Powell accurately accounts in her study of the rhetoric of retention on her own campus, universities that promote a single college experience ultimately marginalize populations who cannot experience college in the same way. The preference universities communicate for how students should use their time, finances, and ultimately plan their college trajectories takes away from students the agency required to assess their own needs and make adjustments to accommodate their individual circumstances. This agency, I argue, is required if all students are to be given the opportunity to pursue their personal goals for success.

3.3 A Framework for Writing Programs

In Benz et. al’s (2013) cross-institutional study of the common reading program and its intersections with writing program work, the authors argue that understanding the program’s risks and benefits ultimately better informs writing program administrators to “respond to, strengthen, resist, and/or otherwise engage with” the retention initiatives taking place on their campuses. Indeed, although paying attention to retention rates has always been a responsibility of the writing program administrator (Hult et. al, 1992), writing programs are increasingly facing pressure by their institutions to more actively engage with retention initiatives, as exemplified by the climate at Georgia State and the growing body of persistence research coming out of writing
program and composition scholarship. It is imperative, therefore, for writing programs to develop a framework through which to negotiate their values, and the responsibilities they have to their students, with the goals of their institution. By appealing to the methods of facilitative and dictative initiatives, writing program administrators can approach conversations about student persistence with a specific focus on student agency and inclusivity, rather than simply a focus on attendance—an angle that can limit our ability to consider the numerous student narratives that conflict with a university’s preference for efficiency.

The above analysis on dictative initiatives offers insight to the conflicts that can arise when administrators design student support services with a preference for students to achieve success efficiently. By focusing entirely on getting students through each semester, a result of the widespread acceptance of Tinto’s Student Integration Model, universities risk limiting students’ options for how they can experience college. In the examples above, for instance, Georgia State’s fixed-scheduling system and out-of-class requirements make a number of specific demands on students’ time, such as summer bridge students must be available during the week for classes between 9:30 AM and 4 PM, and they must attend workshops with content determined by the university as necessary for the success of all students within the program. For students who intend to work while going to college and for those who commute, these time constraints can impede greatly upon their ability to be successful. Likewise, Georgia State’s institutional emphasis on efficiency results in support programs that overlook or do not consider the very real financial struggles students face every semester; had the Panther Excellence Program been more inclusive to low-income students, students like Destiny and Kennedy would have been given guidance up front for how best to pursue earning the Hope scholarship over the course of their first year of college. Most significantly, universities who prioritize efficiency
position students as feeling less in control over their own plans for higher education; for students working with external financial assistance (George), students who show awareness of their specific learning needs (Kennedy), and students who are interested in double-majoring (Maria), this limited agency over their individual pursuits toward a degree raise questions regarding who intends to benefit most from student support services that solely promote a four-year timeline toward graduation.

When retention initiatives are facilitative, students with various needs, goals, and life experiences are given the flexibility to capitalize on the initiative in way that works best for them. Because of this flexibility, students within freshman learning communities and students attending supplemental instruction can determine for themselves relationship between these resources and their end goal of passing a class. For these reasons, students are not only motivated to make use of the resources they have been given, in this case a cohort and mandatory tutoring, but are in charge of how they decide, or not, to leverage their resources in order to succeed. Eshan and Destiny capitalized on the GroupMe App for academic and social needs. Jason appealed to his cohort for motivation. Trisha, a commuter student interested in transferring schools, did neither of those things, but appreciated the course’s content because it helped her engage more critically with current events. George found motivation in the expectations he faced outside of the university. Facilitative initiatives, in other words, support students’ pursuit of success, but they do so while protecting students’ agency to negotiate just how the resource fits into their path.

The benefits of facilitative retention initiatives have the potential to transform how writing programs support students within composition classrooms as well as across the university. With it known that the kinds of existing retention initiatives that are most inclusive,
or most supportive of students’ diverse pathways toward success, are those that bring students together into cohorts and provide supplemental learning to students’ classes, writing programs can capitalize on their history of field-specific research into collaborative pedagogy (Bruffee 1984; Trimbur 1989; Lunsford 1991; Bizzell 1994) and put that research into conversation with student persistence. Research coming out of writing center studies, particularly as it pertains to writing fellows program, is on its way to serving as one bridge between writing program and persistence scholarship. The special double issue on Course-Embedded Writing Support Programs in Writing Centers (2014) in *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, by Russell Carpenter, Scott Whidden, and Kevin Dvorak, and the forthcoming collection *Writing Studio Pedagogy: Space, Place, and Rhetoric in Collaborative Environments* are examples of writing program administration scholars seeking ways to support more students’ success by way of supporting writing courses and/or writing intensive courses with writing center pedagogy and classroom embedded tutors, not simply with a writing center space offered on campus.

Whether across the university or within the composition classroom, though, facilitative initiatives offer new reasons to support group work and one-on-one conferencing with students. While the field of composition has for decades researched and honored the benefits of collaboration in the classroom, understanding collaboration’s relationship to students’ abilities to succeed in higher education more generally reinvigorates conversations regarding why and how we ask students to work together. Finally, the benefits students in this study gained from their first-year seminar course illuminate Reichert Powell’s notion of kairotic pedagogy in that if a course’s content can relate to students’ current goals, students will more likely find the course helpful in achieving success. While Reichert Powell makes this point to argue that composition instructors have a responsibility to serve students’ current needs, whether or not they end up
dropping out, my own analysis suggests that making clear the connection between a course’s content and students’ current goals will ultimately offer students an opportunity to negotiate, for themselves, how the course fits in with their overall pursuit of a success, regardless of their particular path. Overall, writing program administration and composition scholars possess a unique set of expertise that, combined with an understanding of facilitative retention initiatives, could help inform more inclusive support services for students at their institutions.

Chapter 4, the final chapter of this dissertation, applies the framework provided in this chapter to one example of a retention initiative that implicated the work of Georgia State’s writing program. Although the initiative was, in many ways, dictative, the writing program in collaboration with its writing center, appealed to writing center pedagogy to make the initiative more facilitative of students’ paths toward success. This example intends to serve as a model for how writing programs can counter the challenges posed by dictative retention initiatives by employing pedagogy that supports students’ agency.
The analysis provided in the previous chapter calls on writing programs to distinguish between retention initiatives that are designed to support students’ various pathways toward success and initiatives that prioritize a single, efficient pathway toward graduation. As I have suggested throughout this project, writing programs serve a unique role in the conversation on student persistence because they are typically in charge of first-year writing, the one class all students are likely to take prior to dropping out of school. Thus, writing programs are often positioned to implement or support institutional retention initiatives seeking to keep those first-year students in school, whether by teaching students organized into cohorts, participating in summer bridge programs, or agreeing to support students’ mandatory meetings with faculty. In less direct ways, writing programs also tend, perhaps more than other departments on campus, to be exposed to the conflicts that arise between students’ various lifestyles and circumstances and the retention initiatives they experience. Reflective in the accounts provided by McCurrie (2009), Reichert Powell (2013), and Webb-Sunderhaus (2010; 2017), students often feel comfortable to confide in their composition instructors and, at times, appeal to them as mentors beyond the semester they share together. Thus, writing programs are in a powerful position at their institutions to inform retention initiatives of how they are or are not effectively serving all students.

Communicating isolated scenarios of conflict between students and retention initiatives, of course, may not be most effective for enacting sustainable and positive changes to a university’s retention efforts. Therefore, the framework of facilitative and dictative retention initiatives that I established in Chapter 3 allows writing programs to identify why and how
certain retention initiatives appear to conflict with the needs, values, and experiences of some students, while also highlighting which initiatives cultivate students’ strengths and ingenuity to continue pursuing their success goals. This framework also supports efforts within writing programs to implement departmental initiatives and evaluate those already in place, such as the one-credit English lab components implemented by Brunk-Chavez and Fredericksen at the University of Texas-El Paso, to ensure students can take advantage of resources without having to significantly sacrifice their time, finances, and individual trajectories. Most importantly, understanding the benefits of facilitative initiatives allows writing programs to leverage their own valued pedagogies in ways that can counter the marginalizing of student populations who cannot pursue success in the way their university prefers. While further research is needed to fully assess how this framework interacts with varying institutional contexts, this chapter aims to provide one model for how writing programs can utilize existing pedagogies to help preserve students’ agency in the face of dictative retention initiatives.

The model provided in the following chapter is based on a pilot initiative at Georgia State, for which I played a leadership role as the Associate Director of Georgia State’s Writing center. Prompted by Georgia State’s writing program, this initiative tasked the writing center to teach 12 sections of Georgia State’s first-year seminar courses, GSU 1010. I argue that because these sections were taught by writing center tutors, trained in writing center pedagogy, the typically dictative elements of Georgia State’s first-year seminar course could be identified and replaced with more inclusive, facilitative methods of student support. To supplement the discussion of this initiative, I will periodically draw on comments made about GSU 1010 from students who participated in the focus groups and interviews for this dissertation.
The history of writing centers is one that aligns closely with the dictative initiatives described in the previous chapter. Their institutional role for years had been to bring student writers in line, to help all students acquire academic literacy so that students could more seamlessly integrate into the academic community. In the words of Elizabeth Boquet (2002), the writing center had long been considered by university administrators and faculty as a place to bring “order” to the “chaos” (p. 73). Boquet describes the reputation of writing centers, per those outside the writing center community, as a place that supports institutional efficiency. However, with great insight into students’ individual needs and an institutional role less accountable for students’ grades and retention than writing programs, writing centers have, over the years, established values and practices that inherently work to protect students’ agency as they navigate the expectations of their institutions. Nancy Grimm (1999), for example, expresses the concerns of many writing center scholars (Carter 2009; Denny 2010; Greenfield & Rowan 2012) by explaining that “literacy learning is not always a happy march of individual progress but really a matter of conforming to predetermined expectations which are for better or worse, set by the dominant white middle-class cultures” (p. 57). Grimm calls on writing centers to not just embrace and amplify the differences students bring with them to the writing center, as Boquet ultimately does as well, but to actively acknowledge the values embedded in institutional expectations; otherwise, writing centers become “complicit in institutional oppression” (p. 104). Grimm and other leaders within the field argue that writing centers should question the ways in which they are silencing student populations by carrying forward certain institutional agendas. Writing centers and writing center pedagogy, in other words, have actively engaged in ongoing conversations regarding how to most ethically and most inclusively support students, regardless
of what their institutions expect of them. Writing centers may be considered, based on their attention to students’ agency, a support service on campus that is more facilitative than it is dictative.

In the writing center, the stories we hear that challenge institutional expectations and goals of efficiency are countless. In one article, Rebecca Jackson (2008) reflects on her experiences with her writing center implementing an institutional retention initiative that required certain students to attend mandatory tutoring sessions. This initiative is not uncommon and has been considered at Georgia State as well, where the Student Success Center inquired about the writing center’s ability to accommodate mandatory tutoring sessions for all students enrolled in the summer bridge program\(^4\). Jackson’s analysis defines the writing center as a “discursive site,” “characterized by both institutional role-keeping and institutional rule-breaking.” She continues:

[The writing center is] a space where students…might feel comfortable articulating resistance to policies they considered unfair, and challenging conventional institutional narratives about students and writing and success in the academy with their own very different personal stories, stories often informed by race, class, and gender. (p. 27)

In Jackson’s experiences with one student, Yolanda, she learned of how various material conditions, such as limited time and financial obstacles, prevent Yolanda from engaging in traditional stages of the writing process, such as taking time away from a paper prior to reviewing it, and that it was these material conditions, not Yolanda’s cognitive abilities, that ultimately led to her required participation in mandatory tutoring. Hearing Yolanda’s story within the context of mandatory institutional initiatives position the writing center not only as a

\(^4\) Had the writing center possessed the resources, it likely would have accommodated this request due to the financial support The Student Success Center provided the writing center to remain open during the summer semester.
trusted site for students to engage in institutional critique but also as a potential advocate for student populations who may not feel represented by dominant institutional narratives.

Indeed, writing centers have long possessed a thirdspace-like identity, one constantly shifting between “transmit[ting] status-quo values” and working toward “transform[ing] the status-quo” (Lerner 2003, p. 224). This identity has been constructed over time through material conditions and pedagogical practices of writing centers (Boquet). As physical spaces, writing centers give students an environment removed from authoritative classroom layouts, instead supplying tables, couches, friendly front-desk staff, an aroma of coffee to support a peer-to-peer social space. Writing center tutors also do not discuss grades as an evaluation of students’ work nor in defense of professors’ judgements, offering instead conversational feedback and informative resources. Pedagogically, writing center tutors facilitate “negotiation[s] between a student’s goal and the tutor’s sense of responsibility within the ethos of a particular center” (Lerner, p. 229), typically beginning with a question about the student’s agenda for the session and ideally informing the agenda with knowledge of academic expectations and strategies most beneficial for the writer’s long term growth. A writing center’s unique identity, informed by its physical space and valued practices, has ultimately served to generate important reflections on the clashing of values among varied student populations and their respective institutions. The generative capability of writing center spaces and practices to reveal conflicts between students and their institutions’ values, I argue, is critical to ensuring student support services are facilitative, rather than dictative, of students’ pursuit of success. Because writing center pedagogy, in other words, relies first on assessing students’ agendas, those who enact writing center pedagogy are positioned to negotiate university values and resources accordingly. Thus,
writing center pedagogy helps maintain students’ agency over how they pursue success in higher education.

4.2 Writing Center Pedagogy in the First-Year Seminar Course

In the fall of 2016, Georgia State’s writing center was given the opportunity to employ writing center pedagogy in Georgia State’s first-year seminar course, GSU 1010, a course identified by the participants in my study as not always supportive of students’ goals. First-year seminar courses are typically one-credit courses designed to help ease first-year students into the university community. The curriculum for this course can range drastically depending on the institution. Some schools, like the University of North Alabama and University of Central Arkansas offer these courses within departments, so that students are learning about their university community, but through the lens of an academic interest. For example, one course offered by the Writing department at the University of Central Arkansas is “Emojis, Memes, and Media”; the syllabus was designed by a Writing faculty member, but the course itself still works toward meeting the university’s overall objectives of their first-year seminar. Georgia State currently does not situate these courses within specific departments, even those it has shown interest in doing so. Therefore, every GSU 1010 course shares a standard syllabus, which includes financial literacy presentations and quizzes, alcohol and sexual conduct modules, stress and time management lessons, as well as segments on university resources and a service-learning component. Beyond these components being required, however, their delivery and the remainder of the syllabus are left up to the administrators, university staff, and graduate students leading the course. As I demonstrated in quoting from students in Chapter 3, this lack of direction for GSU 1010 has led many students to find the course a waste of time and money, unless the instructor chooses to be creative with his or her lessons. If instructors are engaging, allowing students to
talk and learn about their peers, and addressing topics of interest to students, students find the
course to be a break from all their other classes. If instructors deliver the content in the same
structure of Georgia State’s success workshops, offering resources without learning about what
their students need, the course serves as a source of frustration for students and disruptive, rather
than productive, of their goals.

With the intention of capitalizing on the pedagogical flexibility offered by these courses,
Georgia State’s writing program secured 12 GSU 1010 seminars for the fall semester of 2016
and asked the writing center to staff them and design a syllabus devoted to supporting students’
writing. For the writing program administrators, these 12 courses, which were linked only to
Humanities and Undeclared meta-majors, were an opportunity to advertise the English major
earlier in students’ college careers, potentially recruit English majors, and support students who
have already declared English as their major. Two of the first-year seminar courses, in fact, were
designated specifically for two English freshman learning communities (within the Humanities
meta-major), so that the writing program could encourage collaboration among the students’
Literature course, composition course, and first-year seminar course. The idea was for GSU 1010
to serve as a writing support class for students’ composition courses. In the case of the English
cohorts, the composition course functioned also to complement the Literature course’s
curriculum.

One way to interpret the writing program’s intentions for seeking out these courses is that
the writing program was taking advantage of a retention initiative in order to recruit students
who were undecided of their major to switch to English. Looking at the decision this way, one
might align the writing program’s practices with other more dictative retention initiatives, such
as Georgia State’s Graduation and Progression (GPS) advising system. As discussed in Chapter
2, Georgia State’s Campus Update Plan lists the goals of the university’s GPS advising system as the following:

- **Goal #1:** Increase in the number of undergraduate degrees awarded by USG institutions.
- **Goal #2:** Increase the number of degrees that are earned ‘on time.’
- **Goal #3:** Decrease excess credits earned on the path to getting a degree.
- **Goal #4:** Provide intrusive advising to keep students on track to graduate. (Renick 2016, p. 4)

Reflected in these goals is Georgia State’s efforts to quicken students’ processes toward obtaining a degree. To increase degrees awarded within Georgia State’s preferred timeline, the university aims to eliminate chances of students taking courses outside of their degree program and employ “intrusive” advising with the help of their GPS’s predictive abilities and alerts system. By transforming the GSU 1010 courses to a writing-focused support class for students whose majors either fell within the Humanities meta-major or were still undeclared, with the intention of serving the English department, the writing program was, likewise, seeking to increase the number of students graduating, but with English degrees, by reaching out to students earlier, through what some may consider an intrusive strategy. However, because the writing program specifically called on writing center tutors to teach these courses, the outcome of this pilot initiative was far from the writing program employing another dictative retention initiative. Rather, because these tutors were trained in composition and writing center theory, they could identify how the course’s rigid and presumptuous syllabus did not serve the needs of their students and then make changes mid-semester to help students use the first-year seminar course in a way that best served their paths toward success.
As the directors of Georgia State’s writing center began designing a new syllabus for GSU 1010 and tutors started teaching the courses, conflicts between the retention initiative and students’ needs began to reveal themselves. One of these conflicts related to the complexities of enrollment. As discussions on fixed-schedules in the previous chapter attest, the structure of cohorts at large universities is far from perfect. Many students enter college having already earned credit for the first, and sometimes the second, English course in the school’s first year composition sequence. Despite this fact, these students who are exempt from taking English 1101 and 1102 at Georgia State are placed in the same cohorts as students who must still take those courses, but a few students will not be in the same English course, if they are in one at all. This reality made it difficult for the writing center directors to design a syllabus intended to work in tandem with students’ English classes. How can one create a unit supporting students’ rhetorical analysis essays in English 1101 if some students are working on research papers for English 1102? The outcome of this issue included disengagement from students and frustration from instructors.

Another challenge faced by students and tutors involved in this pilot initiative stemmed from conflicting agendas of Georgia State’s Student Success Center and the writing program. Some of the components in the original GSU 1010 syllabus are required by Georgia’s Board of Regents, the governing body of over many of Georgia’s public universities. Students must acknowledge, through the seminar’s online modules, that they understand the consequences of alcohol abuse as well as sexual misconduct. Other non-negotiable components include many of the topics listed above: Georgia State’s Success Center requires discussions of stress and time management and financial literacy, a community learning experience (specifically, an outside of class experience devoted to either providing a service or studying the city of Atlanta), and a
lesson on university resources. The writing program, however, envisioned the seminar as a devoted supplement to students’ composition courses. While enrollment issues prevented the seminar from being devoted solely to students’ composition courses, the writing center directors designed a syllabus that would at least allow students to reflect on their literacy practices. Added to the syllabus, therefore, was a Writing Process Narrative assignment and Community Literacy Presentation. Because the seminar is only one hour per week, the conflicting agendas of the Student Success Center and writing program further complicated instructors’ and students’ experiences with GSU 1010 and further distanced the syllabus from being flexible enough to support students’ individual needs.

The two major conflicts outlined above are the result of Georgia State and its writing program attempting to dictate how students, in this case first-year (potential) English majors, transition into the university community. While the writing program envisioned that GSU 1010 could serve an entire class the way writing centers serve individual students, by supporting the class’s composition course, Georgia State’s preference for all students to be a part of freshman learning communities meant that even students exempted from first-year composition would still take the remainder of their classes with a cohort; thus, students within the cohort could share four of their five classes excluding composition, the one course that the writing program intended to link with GSU 1010. Additionally, once a syllabus was finally put together for the writing program’s GSU 1010 courses, it became clear that to meet the objectives put forth by the Student Success Center and accommodate the vision of the writing program, the course would risk requiring too much work of students.

The issues of enrollment and conflicting agendas manifested for students about halfway through the semester, when instructors began recognizing patterns developing in students’
behavior. The online modules students needed to complete, for example, on financial literacy, alcohol, and sexual misconduct were either being entirely skipped by students or turned in very late. The relevance of their other assignments, such as the Writing Process Narrative, were questioned as students used class time to work on essays from other classes. Many students chose to skip the class entirely and others received lectures from university advisors with disinterest and criticism. In the first few weeks, in other words, the majority of students within the writing program’s GSU 1010 courses were completely disengaged, and thus not benefiting from the resource to support their writing or their transition into the university community, as the initiative intended.

Despite the semester’s rough start, however, the GSU 1010 instructors did not give up on trying to make the course productive for their students. After seeking permission from the writing center directors to diverge from the original syllabus around mid-semester, the group of instructors—there were eight tutors total teaching the 12 courses—returned to their students and engaged in candid, open discussions with them about how their issues with the course could be resolved or mitigated for their final month and a half together. Because the instructors were all tutors trained in writing center pedagogy, rapport was, across the board, easy for instructors to establish with their students. Serving as an extension of the writing center, then, these seminars became “discursive sites” where students felt comfortable discussing their criticism of the institutional initiative and their desires for how they would like the initiative to change (Jackson). Overwhelmingly, students brought up with their instructors their feelings about having to enroll in a one-credit course. More specifically, students expressed annoyance over the amount of work they were assigned for a course only worth one credit. These concerns echo those brought up by students interviewed for this dissertation. Kennedy, for example, a low-income student enrolled
in Georgia State’s Panther Excellence Program, conveyed her personal frustration with the university requiring her to spend money on a one-credit course that did not count toward her overall degree, nor did the information offered in the course appear pertinent for her ability to be successful. Likewise, Destiny, also a low-income student enrolled in the Panther Excellence Program, emphasized the difficulty in fulfilling tasks assigned by the university unrelated to her core courses, in her case, outside-of-class requirements such as workshops and mandatory tutoring. Describing these extra responsibilities as “a whole other class on top of everything else,” Destiny notes the importance of workload offering students something of worth in exchange for their efforts. In the case of students enrolled in GSU 1010, they did not see putting forth effort to complete the work as worth one course credit.

The discussions between the instructors and students also shed light on the aspects of the course students did find useful. For example, the classes that went well for tutors and students included in-class discussions on current events and students’ miscellaneous questions about college. Students, additionally, found valuable opportunities to ask questions to university representatives, rather than only listen to a presentation by them. Students also appreciated the flexibility to choose which site they visited for the seminar’s community assignment\(^5\), as well as time in class to request help from their instructors on writing assignments for other courses.

While the experiences for each instructor and their students were far from identical, the more

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\(^5\) Typical first-year seminars at Georgia State require instructors to pick from service opportunities arranged by the Student Success Center or organize their own; instructors may also choose to host an outside-of-class opportunity for students to learn more about the city of Atlanta. One student I spoke with, George, was enrolled in a traditional first-year seminar course that participated in an activity with Paint Love, a non-profit organization that holds workshops for underserved youth. In the writing center pilot initiative, the eight instructors chose different locations in Atlanta they felt could facilitate for students conversations about literacy in the community. Unlike the other first-year seminar courses, the instructors of these eight courses allowed students to sign up for any instructors’ selected location. In other words, one instructor may have chosen to take her class to the Civil and Human Rights Museum and another instructor may have selected the CNN Center. Students of all 12 courses could choose any site, and therefore any instructor, with which to fulfill this particular requirement. This option was only possible because the instructors chose to collaborate.
successful classes for all of the GSU 1010 courses were indisputably those that gave students more agency over how their time was spent.

While I do not intend to use this summary of our writing center’s first semester teaching first-year seminars as evidence for the program’s overall assessment (the instructors intend to write up a more comprehensive analysis of their experience), it is important to consider that 12 classes led by writing center tutors, half of whom had not taught prior to teaching the first-year seminar, all experienced mid-semester open reflections on the course’s successes and failures. The information these instructors gathered from their students regarding the first-year seminar is strikingly similar to the perspectives I presented in the previous chapter. The students I spoke with revealed that the course had potential to cultivate a sense of family among students’ cohorts, but that the seminar could equally spark strong feelings of resentment from students. Characteristics of seminars aligned with the former utilized engaging activities and allowed students to learn more about themselves and their peers. Characteristics more likely to invoke resentment included lectures on topics that felt a waste of time to students or like common sense, such as stress and time management—lectures informed by institutional presumptions about what prevents students from succeeding in college. Had those discussions on obstacles to success been formed more organically, perhaps after students presented to their instructors what their biggest obstacles were, the seminar would likely better serve students’ needs.

4.3 Writing Center Pedagogy as Facilitative Support

The benefits of employing student-centered pedagogy, whether in a classroom or writing center session, for students’ educational experiences has long been known to scholars of writing program administration. What the findings from Georgia State’s writing center engaging with the nationally utilized retention initiative of first-year seminars suggest is that institutional retention
initiatives can risk implementing unproductive and potentially offensive practices, despite their well-meaning intentions. Retention initiatives also possess the potential to provide important support systems for students struggling to navigate their first year of college. However, retention initiatives are most supportive when university faculty and staff are professionally committed and open to hearing narratives that may counter their institution’s agenda for graduating students efficiently. Fortunately, the anecdotes gathered from the tutor-instructors during and following their first semester employing a retention initiative reveal writing center spaces and writing center pedagogies as particularly generative for this purpose. As Jackson proves through her student’s [counter]narrative and Grimm reminds us:

Students tell stories every day in writing centers. Taken together, these stories can provide all of us in higher education with an understanding of the ways we might make literacy education more socially responsible and more open to the needs and desires of the real people who pay and work for an education. (Grimm, 1999, p. 120).

In writing center spaces, tutors are trained to prioritize, through a number of practices, the preservation of students’ agency as writers. Tutors ask non-direct questions, avoid writing on students’ papers, and often begin each session inquiring about the students’ agenda. In other words, best tutoring practices ensure that a “tutorial is guided by the writer’s own needs and goals” (Ianetta and Fitzgerald, 2015, p. 18). Because the tutor’s goal is the student’s agenda, tutors are often also given access to the varied factors that may contribute to a student’s writing issue. This dialogue may reveal distractions at home, valid criticisms of a professor’s assignment, or gaps in the kinds of resources students may require from their institution to be successful. Most importantly, the interaction between students and those who employ writing
center pedagogy can offer space for students not only to identify their needs, but to then consider how they can best capitalize on the resources they do have (in this case the tutor) in order to continue pursuing their goals. In Yolanda’s case, this meant using the mandatory time she was assigned to meet with a tutor to get feedback on her poetry. In the case of students enrolled in the writing center’s first-year seminar courses, this meant requesting the class be used to learn about professional documents, such as resumes, engage in conversations about current events affecting their lives, and/or request their instructors’ help on essays they had for other classes. In Todd Ruecker’s *Transciones: Pathways of Latinas and Latinos Writing in High School and College* (2015), his study of ESL students and their transition from high school to college, he found that across the board, ESL students were not receiving enough feedback from their English instructors, whether in high school, community college, or at a university. In spaces informed by writing center pedagogy, this information is either alluded to or mentioned regularly in the format of organic dialogue. There is no doubt that students are telling stories every day; the question is, are universities enacting student support services devoted to hearing and honoring those stories, even if they counter the university’s preferred timeline for students to graduate?

The first-year seminar course at Georgia State, like other universities, is designed to help students “make a successful transition to university life.” Utilizing the course’s original syllabus described above, the university intends to facilitate students’ transition by “[providing] students with essential information about the academic demands of the University, its rules, procedures, resources, and academic, social, and personal ‘survival skills’ that contribute to academic success” (“GSU 1010”). While higher education scholarship has noted since the publication of Tinto’s Student Integration Model, that indeed many students, particularly from marginalized backgrounds, do to not enroll in college with the same amount of preparation as those from
white, middle-class backgrounds (Thayer, 2000; Landry, 2002; Ishitani, 2003; Flowers, 2004),
the first-year seminar course’s approach to closing this gap appears not to consider the nuances
of students’ obstacles toward achieving success, nor the unique strengths students bring with them. Rather than considering that students may already have acquired skills necessary for
“survival” within the university community, or that they would already know what skills they
need to improve upon, the university requires all students to pay for and attend a one-credit
course, which offers a great amount of information that is either not needed or is given out of
context of students’ needs. Because the university values a particular path through college,
however, the methods employed by the first-year seminar make sense. This information,
according to the university, is what students need in order to integrate into the university
community and, therefore, pursue graduation efficiently. Nevertheless, many students found the
components within Georgia State’s standard first-year seminar syllabus and the additions from
the writing program counterproductive of their goals.

What allowed the instructors of the writing program’s first-year seminar courses to serve
students more effectively was the concern they possessed for students’ personal agendas. The
instructors, originally trained as writing center tutors, were uniquely committed to their students’
individual goals and thus motivated to sacrifice some of the rigidness of the course’s syllabus to
ensure students could get something out of the courses intended to support their success. The
agency given back to students through the instructors’ actions is not unlike the agency students
maintain while interacting with the retention initiatives of freshman learning communities and
supplemental instruction. Like first-year seminar courses, freshman learning communities and
supplemental instruction are mandatory initiatives for many students. Unlike first-year seminar
courses, however, freshman learning communities and supplemental instruction thrive as student
support programs because they facilitate students’ pursuit of success rather than dictate how students must interact with their university’s resources. For freshman learning communities, students are brought together through shared schedules, but the choice to make use of those shared schedules as a resource to benefit their own pursuit of success remains theirs. Supplemental instruction is similarly beneficial for students only if students choose to interact. The exchange value of supplemental instruction, or what it offers students in exchange for students’ time, is also viewed by students as worth their sacrifice to attend something other than class because students see a direct link between the resource and their ability to pass a course. The first-year seminar curriculum, as structured by Georgia State and as altered by the writing program, did not allow students flexibility to assess their needs and use the course to meet their needs for navigating the university; in turn, students could not see the value in putting forth effort for a one-credit class.

4.4 Implications

While the pilot initiative described above is very specific to its institutional context, the experiences of the writing center interacting with a first-year seminar course offer useful implications for other institutional contexts, particularly those managing the employment of new retention initiatives. Understanding the impact writing center pedagogy can have on students’ early transition into college equips writing programs and their affiliate writing centers to engage more explicitly with their institutions’ retention offices, such as the Student Success Center at Georgia State. Such engagement would allow writing programs and writing centers to not only voice their opinions on the various initiatives that intersect with the work they do, but could position them to advocate on behalf of students who would benefit from more student support services, but not those that tend to push forth the agenda of graduating efficiently. By seeking
new strategies that draw on facilitative methods of support, such as writing center pedagogy, writing programs and writing centers would offer for all students the agency to negotiate how to use university resources for their own needs.

One such strategy already being employed, but not necessarily brought up within the conversation of student persistence, is writing fellows (WFs) programs (Severino & Knight 2007). Different from Writing Across the Curriculum and Supplemental Instruction tutors, whose focus leans more toward helping students with the content of a course, WFs are students trained in writing center pedagogy and then embedded in the classrooms of writing-intensive courses. Rather than work in a writing center space, WFs attend, at least periodically, the class they have been assigned and then meet with students one-on-one or in a group-like setting to talk with them about their papers. While structures of WFs programs may vary, the intention of WFs is to allow writing centers to “extend outward toward campus communities…and bring valued practices to places that are not writing centers” (Macauley, 2014, p. 45). As the tutors in the pilot initiative appealed to their own pedagogies to better serve their students’ needs, so too can WFs assist students in various classes through prioritizing, in one-on-one sessions, the students’ agenda.

Reflecting on one college’s experiment using WFs in its first-year seminar course, Susan Pagnac et. al (2014) describe WFs as serving vital roles that exist between classroom instructors and their students. While their first-year seminar courses appear more demanding than those at Georgia State, the findings Pagnac et. al share about their WFs program in many ways support the same outcomes pursued by instructors in the pilot initiative. In their article, “An Embedded Model: First-Year Student Success in Writing and Research,” Pagnac et. al explain that when students in the first-year seminar worked one-on-one with WFs, they could “[learn] to use the
Tutoring and Writing Center early and often and [become] comfortable seeking help with their writing throughout their four years” or more in college. Furthermore, the authors explain that the “tutor’s role in the classroom became one of support for the instructor,” by way of assisting the instructor with in-class activities and relaying to the instructor issues or concerns the student may have with the class, instructor, or classroom material (3). For example, if students are struggling to interpret a prompt for a classroom assignment, a WF familiar with the instructors’ expectations could not only help students better understand the prompt, but could also explain to the instructor how students may be misinterpreting his or her language. The liaison role writing center tutors are able to take on when embedded in classrooms is not unlike the role assumed by the instructors in Georgia State’s pilot initiative; these tutors, also placed in classrooms, sought ways to negotiate the expectations of the university and writing program while also ensuring students could get what they needed out of the course.

Writing Fellows programs may be used in many different contexts within an institution, including within Writing in the Disciplines and Writing Across the Curriculum programs, graduate departments (Hallman 2014), and most popular, the first-year writing course (DeLoach et. al 2014). Trained in writing center pedagogy, WFs have the potential to ensure that in various spaces outside of the writing center, representatives of the university are considering students’ agendas as they continue navigating the institution in pursuit of their degree. In a time when institutions are employing several practices between students’ first and final semesters in order to increase retention rates, it is imperative that writing programs work to ensure these practices respect students’ agency; when they do not, the institution, and therefore also the writing program, risks marginalizing student populations who cannot graduate on an institutionally-preferred timeline.
Supporting WFs programs and any other ways to bring writing center pedagogy to alternative spaces on campus is just one suggestion for how writing programs can consider advocating for and enacting facilitative student support methods at their institutions. More research must be done to consider how writing programs can draw on the strengths of existing facilitative initiatives, such as freshman learning communities, in order to continue serving students both within their departments and within their university community.
CONCLUSION

This project was borne from a composition instructor’s desire to understand the purpose of first-year composition, a debate that has existed for a long time, but not necessarily with consideration to the number of students who are projected to drop out following their first year of college. As political and economic pressures mount, however, for institutions to take more responsibility for the students who leave, writing programs and composition instructors are more likely to experience in some capacity the impact of retention initiatives on the work they do. Whether composition instructors note the intersections of retention and first-year writing as they walk through a hallway, inquiring about why their students want to protest their first-year seminar course, or they are asked to teach a book selected by their institution’s Student Success Center, the question of how students who drop out of school impact the purpose of first-year writing is becoming much more difficult to avoid. But, how do we respond?

First, it is important to understand the role writing programs and composition scholars play in the conversation of student persistence. Understandably, WPA scholars have sought ways to support their institution’s goals for graduating more students, whether by improving student support by offering composition courses with lab components (Brunk-Chavez & Fredericksen) or ensuring assessment strategies allow for interventions with students before they get off course (Moxley). Other scholars in writing program administration and composition question the implications for helping institutions enact strategies to increase retention rates (Benz et. al; McCurrie; Reichert Powell), arguing that following the institution’s lead could further communicate to students that only students who continue until graduation can be deemed successful. Based upon the historical and document analyses in Chapter 2 and student data provided in Chapter 3, I argue that students do want and need more support from their
institutions. However, much of the current support offered by institutions to promote success is problematic because it favors a single pathway through college, rather than pathways demanded by many student populations, including commuters, non-traditional students, and students from low-income households. Writing programs should support students’ success, but they also need to ensure the way they support students is facilitative, allowing students the flexibility to utilize resources in the way they feel best suits their college trajectory.

This argument for what role I think writing programs should assume in the era of institutional retention efforts stems from taking a deeper look into how success is valued in US culture and how it is valued in higher education. For most people, including our students, success is the individual achievement of middle-class status. It is the recognition that people have established themselves monetarily and socially. Higher education has historically served to support Americans’ pursuit of success. People would enroll; they would specialize; and they would graduate with a job they felt capitalized on their skills and served their community (Bledstein). Our students come into our classrooms with this narrative of success internalized. However, the reality is that while this narrative promises equal opportunity for all those who seek success, systemic inequalities make it more difficult for some people than others. As scholars devoted to ensuring all of our students achieve success, then, we have a responsibility to our students to research and understand what obstacles may stand in their way, even if one of those obstacles is the institution of higher education itself.

While higher education has long served as the vehicle students drove toward their goals for success, the last 30 years have seen institutions embrace priorities linked more closely with serving the economy, a shift that has impacted the very nature of higher education and its relationship to success. With pressure to participate in the market, due to policies that take
funding away from colleges and universities, many schools, like Georgia State University, have had to seek funding elsewhere. This has ultimately motivated universities to compete for students from all over the globe and perform research worthy of recognition from external funding agencies. These market-based priorities have also positioned institutions of higher education to become more accountable to the economy, and thus more responsible for delivering graduates prepared to support the US economy to compete globally. Because of this market-driven shift, or what some scholars may consider the corporatization of higher education, universities have increased their focus on graduating more students, but they have specifically focused their efforts on graduating students in a way that is most cost efficient. According to organizations like Complete College America, a funding organization that promotes some of the most notable retention initiatives that I have written about in previous chapters, the most cost efficient way for students to pursue graduation is by living on campus and attending school full-time, which is considered taking 15 credits per semester. However, while this specific college lifestyle may prove efficient and thus beneficial for many students from low-income, historically marginalized backgrounds, it is not necessarily achievable for all student populations. It is important, therefore, to not only acknowledge what is working, or what has led to the increase of Georgia State’s retention initiatives over the past 10 years, but to also ask questions that may result in answers counter to the priorities of efficiency.

The impact of higher education prioritizing students to achieve success efficiently is that the initiatives universities put forth to support students’ success will likely also prioritize supporting students to graduate efficiently. Georgia State’s GPS advising system, for example, aims to support students’ achievement of success, but does so by ensuring students do not take courses outside of their major and guiding students, through predictive analytics and a substantial
alert system, to graduate “on time” (Renick, 2016). First-year seminar courses, fixed schedules, and the outside-of-class requirements of summer bridge programs, likewise, seek to streamline students’ pursuit of graduation by ensuring students do not get overwhelmed with too many credits their first year, and in turn fail or drop out, and are informed of various strategies that will ideally support their success. My data has found, however, that these intrusive tactics, which make students’ schedules for them, dictate how many credits students can and cannot take, and take time away from students’ lives for “Student Success Workshops” that do not offer students credit or opportunity to engage with those who lecture at the workshops, present greater challenges for students whose lifestyles and circumstances do not necessarily allow for navigating college efficiently.

Initiatives that do work to support students’ success, especially students who require more control over their pathways through higher education, are those that are facilitative, and thus cultivate students’ strengths and ingenuity to utilize university resources in ways that best suit their needs. Freshman learning communities and supplemental instruction, for example, put students in positions to capitalize on resources, but do not dictate for students how they should use these resources. Rather, it is left up to the students themselves to decide whether they want to take advantage of a cohort dynamic or an opportunity to ask questions with someone familiar with the material in their class. Facilitative initiatives, in other words, give students an advantage to succeed, but they also support students’ agency to determine for themselves how best to move forward.

So, I return to the question I posed in the beginning of this conclusion: what is the purpose of first-year composition when we consider how many of our students will drop out? I argue that our purpose is to indeed work to ensure students succeed in higher education to the
best of our ability, but that to do so means questioning the kinds of support services employed on campus to promote efficiency. By appealing to the inclusive pedagogies we value, like writing center pedagogy, we can ensure that the kinds of programs our institutions and our departments implement are facilitative, and thus work toward preserving students’ agency over how they choose to pursue success. Promoting facilitative methods of support ensures that writing programs are supporting students’ success rather than an institutions’ retention goals.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Focus Group Questions

General Questions

1. Why did you choose to attend college?
2. What were your expectations of first-year composition?
3. How did your expectations compare to your experiences in first-year composition?
4. If you didn’t do as well as you hoped on particular assignments, what do you think contributed to that outcome?
5. If you did do well on particular assignments, what do you think contributed to that outcome?

Retention Questions

6. Tell me about your experience participating in Success Academy/PEP/FLC.
   a. Key words to prompt discussion
      i. Community
      ii. Scheduling
      iii. Requirements (coaching/tutoring/workshops, etc.)
7. What is your opinion of the first-year book program?
8. Do you think your experience with composition may have been different had you not participated in SA/PEP/FLC and/or the first-year book program? Why or why not?
9. Do you think being involved in SA/PEP/FLC impacted your learning in 1101/1102?
10. How might you use what you’ve learned from 1101/1102 now or in the future?
Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. What is your major?
2. Why have you chosen that degree program?
3. What responsibilities do you balance with college, if any?
4. Do you participate or want to participate in writing outside of the college setting? If so, what kind of writing outside of college interests you?
5. Is there a particular assignment that stands out to you from your composition courses? Why/why not?
6. What were your favorite and not-so-favorite experiences in first-year composition?
7. Can you elaborate on your experience participating in Success Academy/PEP/FLC?
8. Has the program impacted your experience with composition? If so, how?
   a. Key words to prompt discussion
      i. Scheduling
      ii. Community
      iii. Weekly tutoring
      iv. Monitored studying
      v. Mentors
9. Is there anything you would like to add about composition or the program you were involved in?