Basic Writing and the Process of Engagement: Student and Faculty Perceptions from a Multi-Campus Community College District

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Basic Writing and the Process of Engagement: Student and Faculty Perceptions from a
Multi-Campus Community College District

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Abstract

This grounded theory study sought to explore student and faculty perceptions of their experiences as participants in a basic writing program offered by a large, multi-campus community college district. Of particular interest was how institutional culture on each of the campuses may have shaded participant perceptions of teaching and learning in the context of a basic writing program. Thirty-three student and faculty interviews, in conjunction with an analysis of the course outline of record for the course one level below transfer, yielded the finding that engagement between faculty and student, student and institution, and faculty and institution is a continuous process. The theory that resulted from this study can be expressed thusly: Engagement doesn’t exist in isolated pockets of institutional culture (e.g. student advising or curriculum committees). Engagement is a continuously occurring process (rather than a product) that ushers students and faculty toward intended outcomes; it affects students, faculty, and institution differently, but simultaneously. It is incumbent upon the colleges therefore, to maintain campus cultures that foster the process of engagement and facilitate student success, whether that success is defined by the student as transfer to a four-year institution or becoming certificated for the workplace. Cooperative or collaborative inquiry groups consisting of instructional and student services faculty are recommended to assist in the creation or sustaining of campus cultures that support the process of engaging participants in basic writing programs in the district studied.
Acknowledgements

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Many observers today would agree that the community college has reached a new period of transition. The dawn of the twenty-first century has seen new national attention focused on community colleges, from the place they shall occupy as leaders in the development of new, “green” technology to their being the “situation” in a nationally televised situation comedy. In fact, one could argue that the community college has come full circle, that the “community college movement” stands poised to reassert itself in new and exciting ways. Gleazer (1968) wrote that “the community college is a social invention designed to play its part within the nation’s whole program of education” (p. 61). In the context of this study, these words achieve a particular resonance with regard to students who come to the community college with skills at a level inconsistent with their goals. Learners at the basic skills level must necessarily be exposed to curriculum, methods of assessment, and teaching strategies that validate not only the learning process itself, but also the students and the society that comprise the *raison d’être* for the process.

Community colleges are truly democratic institutions, fraught with both contradictions and achievements. Curriculum, student ability, and institutional culture are irrevocably linked, and, as such, they have a major impact on the community college experience for students matriculating with academic skills below the college level. Investigating this link may prove to be the impetus that helps to guide the community college into its next level of development. New and emerging technologies – and, yes, even situation comedies – need to have confident and competent writers and thinkers to take on the careers and positions they will demand.
Title law in California sets the tone for much of the mission and eventual culture that emerges from higher education, and the statute that establishes the context for the basic skills phenomena the state now faces is a reliable starting point to assist in clarifying some background to this study.

Title 5 of the California Code of Regulations ensures that students enrolled in community colleges will have matriculation services concomitant with their educational goals. In particular, Section 55520 of the code has, under “required services,” the provision that students will have services referring them to “specialized curriculum offerings including, but not limited to pre-collegiate basic skills courses.” Elsewhere, the groundbreaking legislation passed in California in 1988, Assembly Bill 1725 (Vasconcellos), presciently noted the implications of the growing need for basic skills coursework by observing that

there is a massive and growing demand in this state for remedial education, resulting from a decline in high school academic standards, the increasing dropout rate, restrictions on funding of adult education programs in the public schools, and the growing number of adults seeking basic skills, language, and literacy training. This need exists in all ethnic groups, and affects students from all socioeconomic backgrounds, whether or not high school graduates.

In the same section, the bill also goes on to two more fundamental assertions: “the provision of remedial education is an essential and important mission of the community college” (emphasis in original), and “the success of the assessment, counseling, and placement system in the community colleges depends upon the ability of community
college districts to provide a full range of courses of remedial instruction and related support services” (§2, para. i & j).

Legislation in 1996 saw the addition of another core function of the California community colleges with the passage of Senate Bill 1809 (Polanco), which recognized that “the California community college system […] is a primary provider in meeting the educational and training needs of California business and industry” (§1, para. (a)1). Passage of SB1809 mandated the following change to the California Education Code section 66010.4 (“Mission and functions of public and independent institutions of higher education”): “A primary mission of the California Community Colleges is to advance California’s economic growth and global competitiveness through education, training, and services that contribute to continuous workforce improvement” (§66010.4.3).

While these legislative mandates certainly provided a strong context for the provision of basic skills instruction, the actual number of students requiring this coursework has surpassed most expectations. Therefore, the alarming rise in the number of students who enter California’s community colleges needing remediation is worthy of scrutiny. For example, one recent report indicates that over half of the system’s 2.6 million students require basic skills coursework (Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 2003).

When one considers the ambition of the charge given the community colleges as economic engines and then contextualizes this within the burgeoning basic skills phenomena, it becomes clear that community colleges will play a vital role in the development not just of the California economy, but the civic engagement that is invariably attendant upon such development. Civic engagement demands competencies in
reading and writing; this begs the question: how can community colleges, through their missions, institutional cultures, and curriculum, assist students in achieving – and surpassing – the optimism granted them by state law?

The basic skills curriculum seems tailor made to address concerns made public about high-school students’ lack of preparation for college-level work, and this leaves room for a discussion about the literacy skill sets that have been historically expected of students as they move from secondary to higher education. While dynamism is expected from the mission statement of an institution with regard to basic skills curriculum, it can be argued as well that the area of the underprepared student is that which has promoted – perhaps paradoxically – both the most “missionary inertia” and “mission comprehensiveness,” since the basic skills student is poised at the center of this debate. Literacy is tied in with civic engagement, and what are now known as basic skills were once the price of admission for being a civically engaged member of society. Examining the process by which literacy is converted into curriculum at various stages of the developmental or learning process – and how institutional mission and culture come to reflect this conversion – reveals that the curriculum called basic skills has perpetually occupied a central role in the function of higher education. In the spring of 2002, the Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates of the California Community Colleges, the California State University, and the University of California (ICAS) published a report entitled *Academic Literacy: A Statement of Competencies Expected of Students Entering California’s Public Colleges and Universities*. At once optimistic and practical, the report remains the closest thing to a blueprint for future forays into the reconciliation of student preparation in the realm of basic skills and their practical
application to mission statements. Some of the key questions that the ICAS researchers asked interviewees were items such as, “What do they expect of their students’ reading, writing, and critical thinking?,” “How well are their students prepared for those expectations, and why or why not?,” “How do they expect their students to acquire these skills, experiences, or competencies that they are missing at matriculation?,” and “What attitudes or predispositions – ‘habits of mind’ – facilitate student learning?” (p. 1-2).

The conclusions that the ICAS reached read like a template for the development and evolution of a curriculum that can address both institutional needs and those of basic skills students without compromising either. These conclusions represent philosophical principles that are comprehensive and student/learner-centered, and are aware that while most students enter higher education with some goal in mind, not all of them enter completely prepared to pursue these goals successfully. In particular, the link between civic engagement and literacy is underscored: “We affirm the role of California schools in enhancing democracy, and we believe that literacy skills serve as the foundation for greater equity” (ICAS 2002, p.2); “Self-advocacy is a valuable practice that emerges from the recognition that education is a partnership” (p.3); “Successful students understand that reading and writing are the lifeblood of educated people” (p. 3). Moreover, the ICAS report makes some promising recommendations with regard to the relationship between the secondary and postsecondary levels. For example, the report asserts that “we applaud recent efforts toward collaboration and articulation between high schools and colleges and urge that these efforts be continued and expanded” (p. 3). Also, in order to prepare students adequately for college-level work, “in the last two years of high school, students need to be given instruction in writing in every course …” (p. 5).
Negotiating such collaboration has not always been easy, as responsibility for student preparation has proved to be a contested site in the discourse of basic skills students and their immediate needs. Central to much of this discussion is the community college mission and the culture it engenders on any given campus. How mission and curriculum coalesce to create a culture of engagement that may reconcile the study skills and habits basic skills students lack as they enter college with instruction that may prepare them to become an integral part of the larger societal conversation is the challenge of the contemporary community college in California.

Over time, the designation of the curriculum currently known as “basic skills” has taken on many nomenclatures. In the middle of the twentieth century, underprepared students were said to have educational “gaps” or “deficiencies” that could be remedied through refresher courses. Later, these students were seen as needing “development” (Roueche & Roueche, 1993, pp. 49-51). However, terms such as “remedial” and “developmental” have become pejorative. In the current educational and political arena, we say that these students lack the basic skills to thrive or otherwise succeed in the higher education environment or the workplace. Lacking these skills, students are perceived as being potentially unable to access the social capital needed to live a life in the middle classes. It was from this general climate that scrutiny from bodies outside of the institution began to accrue. In California, the development, delivery, and assessment of basic skills curriculum has been vouchsafed by law to faculty in that subject area. In addition, guidelines from professional organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English acted to provide faculty with the impetus to maintain internally-developed standards. These internal standards are found, in California, in the official
course outline of record. It is the responsibility of faculty to develop and monitor outcomes for the coursework undertaken by their students. However, as more and more students began to be perceived as lacking the basic skills for success in the larger society, what was once the sole provenance of the subject area experts – curriculum development and assessment – began to be attended to more and more by concerned employers, community members, and legislators. Concerns that had largely been confined to the subject area experts was now becoming part of a larger public discourse. The basic skills phenomenon, as it has come to be called in California, has asked of the colleges whether or not they have the capability to be flexible in the face of both internal and external pressures. Calls for accountability in conjunction with growing numbers of underprepared students place California’s community college in a unique position. A dynamic and flexible institution that can assert best practices in developing basic skills curriculum and teaching will have a clear edge in assisting citizens of the twenty-first century to achieve their goals beyond the point of contact with the institution at the basic skills level (Carnegie Foundation 2008b pp. 3-17). This flexibility and dynamism will shape a campus’s culture. The question is, will this new imperative allow the colleges to, in the words of Margaret Wheatley, “connect it to more of itself,” in order to create a mutually engaging experience for all stakeholders, both internal and external? The problem under examination in this study is how the interplay between basic skills writing students and their instructors influences – and is influenced by – institutional culture at the macro (mission) and micro (curriculum) levels.
Significance of the Study

Community colleges in California have traditionally been the first best choice for many students who otherwise might have had the doors to higher educational opportunity closed to them. While open enrollment has assisted these students, the majority of them will enroll in basic skills courses, a curriculum that could represent as much as two additional years to their careers in higher education. Specific elements need to be considered within the context of what have come to be known simply as “basic skills,” things that affect both the student and the institution. For example, the curriculum as it is manifested on course outlines and how these outlines reflect institutional expectations and culture and its relation to the achievement of specific student goals warrants scrutiny. Likewise, how students and instructors perceive their respective roles in the basic skills phenomena may yield insights into future curricular development and classroom practice. Recent and consistent scrutiny on the basic skills phenomenon suggests that there is more to the growing problem than student preparation itself. How basic skills curriculum engages student, faculty and institution needs to be reconsidered.

The primary missions of the community college designated by AB1725 and SB1809 – the transfer and career/technological functions – have the potential to be compromised in the absence of consistent numbers of students matriculating who have college-level skills. It is incumbent upon the community colleges who serve them, therefore, to reconcile these students with a campus culture and curriculum that can assist them in moving on to transfer or career/technical educational pathways.

A large, multi-campus community college district offering developmental coursework will form the basis of study. This district, with three separate campuses, has
been selected for its diversity and sheer number of potential samples available. By conducting focus group and individual interviews, in addition to analyzing the course outline of record for a basic skills writing course, I hope to uncover, however fragmentary, a portrait of how institution, student, and instructor meet at the “contact zone” of the basic skills writing classroom. Such a portrait may serve as a model for other studies.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to show how student and faculty perceptions about the process of being engaged with teaching and learning in a basic skills composition course one level below transfer (CB21-A) affect – and are affected by – the larger institutional culture.

Research Questions

The following research questions have been developed for this study. They emerged from careful consideration of factors involved in the process of addressing the needs of basic skills students, faculty, and their institutions:

What perceptions do students enrolled in a basic skills writing course one level below transfer have about their preparedness for college-level writing?

What perceptions do basic skills writing faculty have about student preparation for writing at the college level?

How does institutional culture contribute to shaping those perceptions?

Definitions

Assessment: The practice of administering a competency test to students upon their matriculation at a community college. Test results are used to determine the
appropriate placement of the student in coursework consistent with the student’s skills and abilities as measured by the assessment instrument. The California state chancellor’s office authorizes the use of a variety of assessment instruments, and local control by district and campus determines implementation of any specific test.

Basic Skills: Defined by the California Community College State Chancellor’s Office Basic Skills Initiative (2006) as “those foundation skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and English as a Second Language, as well as learning skills and study skills, which are necessary for students to succeed in college-level work”

College Level: Known variously as “Freshman Composition,” “Transfer Level,” “English 1A,” “English 100,” or “English 101,” this is the course that stands as the benchmark for rhetorical competency at the university level. It is imperative that the course directly preceding this course supplies adequate instruction for success at the college level.

Course Outline of Record (COR): Defined in the California Code of Regulations Title V (§ 55002) thusly:

The course outline of record shall specify the unit value, the expected number of contact hours for the course as a whole, the prerequisites, corequisites or advisories on recommended preparation (if any) for the course, the catalog description, objectives, and content in terms of a specific body of knowledge. The course outline shall also specify types or provide examples of required reading and writing assignments, other outside-of-class assignments, instructional methodology, and methods of
evaluation for determining whether the stated objectives have been met by students.

Engagement: Defined in Schuetz (2008, p. 18) as “a state of interest, mindfulness, cognitive effort and deep processing of new information that partially mediates the gap between what learners can do and what they actually do.” For the purposes of this study, “learners” includes not only students, but faculty and institutions, as well.

Level Coding (CB21): Coding system used by the California state chancellor’s office to designate course levels in composition, reading, ESL, and mathematics. For example, in a composition sequence, CB21/A is one level below the transfer level; CB21/B is two levels below the transfer level; CB21/C is three levels below the transfer level; CB21/Y is more than three levels below transfer. Each of these coding levels has corresponding competencies. These competencies are articulated on many course outlines of record as either “course objectives” or, more recently, “student learning outcomes.” Level coding is also used to establish pre- and co-requisites.

Matriculation: Defined in California Education Code section 78212 as “a process that brings a college and a student who enrolls for credit into an agreement for the purpose of realizing the student’s educational objectives. The agreement involves the responsibilities of both parties to attain those objectives through the college’s established programs, policies, and requirements.”

Placement: Recommended class level for enrollment, based on the results of an assessment test taken by student. Part of the state-mandated matriculation process that includes assessment.
Student Learning Outcomes: Alternately called “objectives” or “competencies,” these are observable and measurable behaviors demonstrated by students upon completion of a course of study. A student’s ability to establish and develop a thesis statement across disciplines may be one observable and measurable behavior after the successful completion of a basic skills composition course, for example. Student learning outcomes have become a central point of discussion among practitioners and stakeholders in community colleges; they appear on most course outlines of record.

Limitations

Because different types of students enroll at different times (e.g. older, fully employed students tend to enroll in afternoon or evening sections), the study may not be able to account for all types of student perceptions of preparation for college-level coursework or instructor methods of presenting basic skills curriculum.

Both adjunct and contract instructors were selected for in-depth interviews. While equally qualified under California state law to instruct the courses, each faculty group has myriad concerns related solely to their status on campus. For example, while committee work on efforts such as curriculum alignment or basic skills professional development activities are required of contract faculty, adjunct faculty are under no such obligation. Even though participation in such activities is welcome and even encouraged on some campuses, it is acted upon by a minority of adjunct faculty. Thus, in-depth knowledge about curriculum development, for example, may elude the adjunct faculty member and affect responses to interview questions. It should nevertheless be acknowledged that adjunct faculty teach a preponderance of basic skills writing classes; thus their participation is necessary to this study.
While participation is expected from all three colleges that comprise the district under study, it may be difficult to ensure full participation from students and faculty.

Delimitations

Only those students who have placed into the English course one level below transfer (CB21/A) via an assessment exam administered either on the campus of enrollment or at one of the district’s feeder high schools were selected for focus groups. As the assessment and placement process is consistent with California Education Code concerning matriculation, it informs an aspect of the college’s mission, which, consistent with the literature reviewed in Chapter Two, has been demonstrated to directly affect curriculum development and alignment.

While all of the colleges in the multi-campus district region have two levels of composition instruction below the transfer level, only the course one level below the transfer level (CB21/A) will be studied here.

Only those students classified as “traditional age” – 18 - 24 years (Adelman 2005, p. xiv) – were selected for this study. This may narrow the range of the focus group responses, as things such as life experience and perceptions of themselves as students may not get thorough articulation.

Assumption

I conducted research for this study under the assumption that the faculty subjects were cognizant at some level of the district’s mission statement, as well as those missions specific to individual campuses.
Role of the Researcher

I am a practitioner in the field of composition studies. For the past decade or more I have taught basic skills composition students at one or two levels below the transfer level. I have spent countless hours developing curriculum, studying trends, reading and rereading primary and secondary texts, and most importantly, perhaps, listening to and reading my students. For the past five years I have served as the chairperson of my department, one of the largest in our region. In this role I have negotiated with students over grades received, placement scores attained, and other victories or challenges large and small. Likewise, I have spent countless hours in discussion with colleagues about the “state of the state” of our students and their capabilities. I am firmly entrenched in the “contact zone”: that place where an instructor’s training and worldview interact, in sometimes surprising and unexpected ways, with the world(s) of his or her students. It is a delicate balance between imposition on behalf of the teacher and reception on behalf of the student. Sometimes the roles are reversed, with imposition and reception taking on rich new meanings. How to maintain the type of distance and rigor demanded by an exercise such as this? My general approach branches between two areas: the micro (curriculum and classroom practices) and the macro (institutional culture). Two theorists have provided me with a frame of reference.

One way to look at the micro aspect is from the perspective of the cultural anthropologist Victor Turner (1974), whose conception of liminality informs my basic perception of the problem under examination in this proposal. Even though Turner wrote describing the terms of ritual behavior, it isn’t too much of a stretch to consider the acquisition of a degree or other types of knowledge as ritualistic: in fact, California state
law vis-à-vis the community college almost ensures the authorization of this status upon the achievement recognized by attaining diplomas and certificates. The matriculation process, described above, leading to placement and instruction at the basic skills level with the promise of future promotion to college level coursework, corresponds to Turner’s three stages of the newcomer or acolyte joining a larger community. Without going into too much detail, it will suffice for the purposes of this study to note that Turner’s “separation,” “margin,” and “reaggregation” (1974, pp. 231-232) correspond with current practices in the community college. Separation denotes the status of being placed in coursework not associated with the usual progress toward the skills and values that college-level coursework confers (curriculum). The margin is the place occupied both mentally and institutionally by the basic skills student (student self-perception/faculty perception of basic skills students). Reaggregation refers to the basic skills student being made once again a part of the larger community of transfer or career oriented students (current best practices and alignment of curriculum with outcomes).

The concept of liminality suggests motion from one state to another, and this motion leads to the macro aspects that will be studied here. Of course, such fluidity has, implied beneath its surface, a concept that all parties are engaged with the process of learning. Another theorist whose work undergirds my basic perception of organizational dynamics is Margaret Wheatley, whose conception of institutions like colleges as living and dynamic entities provides a powerful lens for observation. The sheer volume of basic skills students has strained the day-to-day matter of college life – curriculum balance, budgeting and planning, scheduling classes, and so on – to a straining point across
California. New energies are being marshaled as all elements of a campus negotiate to accommodate these students. Wheatley observes that

“once it was noted that systems were capable of exchanging energy, trading usable energy for entropy, scientists realized that deterioration was not inevitable. Disturbances could create disequilibrium, but disequilibrium could lead to growth. If the system had the capacity to react and change, then disturbance was not necessarily a fearsome opponent.”

(1999, p. 79, emphasis in original)

It occurs to me that, in the California community colleges at this juncture we are experiencing exactly what Wheatley is describing. How will we negotiate the disequilibrium? Once again, I feel that it is through the concept of engagement that colleges will indeed be able to use the disequilibrium posed by the basic skills phenomenon in their favor to create the types learners and citizens suggested by documents such as the previously cited Academic Literacy.

As the researcher, I conducted, through a constructivist lens, student focus groups, in-depth faculty interviews and a document analysis in order to determine how the process of engagement in a basic writing program in a multi campus community college district is perceived, articulated, and negotiated.
The current focus of stakeholders both internal and external to the community college on basic skills students, assessment and accountability, and professional development did not emerge from a vacuum. In fact, one could argue the opposite, that, instead, the historical mission of the open-access community college has itself created the phenomenon. Early commentators on the community college such as Clark (1960) and Gleazer (1968) made it clear that the function and position of the community college within higher education would remain a contested site. These scholars present what may appear to be dichotomous approaches to the community college function. Is the community college a place where students can “cool out” on their way toward dreams deferred? Or, is the community college the wellspring of future economic and community development? Dichotomies are misleading, of course, and closer inspection reveals that there is much in common between the two positions. The current attention on basic skills students and their role in California’s future economy bears this out.

A review of the literature informing the relationship between teaching and learning in a basic skills writing course one level below transfer must necessarily fall upon the following areas: 1) the mission of the community college and culture that attends to it; 2) basic skills as institutional function; 3) basic writing and the institutional context; and 4) institutional culture and the cultivation of engagement.

Community College Mission

Discussion of organizational culture or institutional effectiveness at the community college is predicated upon an understanding of the mission of that institution and its subsequent effectiveness. Without this, examinations of basic skills students and
their needs will have little context or value. Discussions of community college mission invariably rehearse and recite the role of that institution’s history and its role in the evolution of today’s multifaceted campus. The community college has historically been able to demystify the higher education process with its open access and varied curriculum (Cohen and Brawer 2003, pp. 27, 29). In addition, the community college has historically represented the only viable higher education option for traditionally underrepresented students.

Early commentators on the community college were able to articulate fundamental questions about mission. Gleazer (1968), musing on how “good” community colleges are, and after explaining how such relative evaluative terms are misleading, offered the following response: “How good is the community college for the job it is designed to do? And this leads to the heart of the matter: What is its job?” (p. 46). Over the years since Gleazer’s work was published, a wealth of scholarship has abounded, intended to offer, if not definitive answers to the question, at least those that would seek to satisfy stakeholders both internal (students) and external (policy-making bodies). Gleazer focused on the development of what has come to be called in contemporary terms “human capital,” revolving around “a common conviction: that all available talent should be nurtured by as much education as is necessary to bring it to flower” (p. 48). The sentiment – if not the tone – has dominated discussion of the community college mission since.

For example, Slutsky (1978) in the midst of the community college’s growing pains of the late seventies and early eighties, during which the colleges’ mission was experiencing tremendous differentiation, asked again Gleazer’s question: “What is a
college for?” (p. 9). Whisnat (1978) framed the dilemma facing the colleges a bit differently, asserting that, among other things, missions, to be valid and valuable to the communities being served, needed to “locate themselves in the present” (p.2). McCarten (1983) identified three specific areas of concern in her examination of mission, and they have proven to be both relevant and prescient. Citing “changes” in students, curriculum, and visibility (pp. 677-679), McCartan insisted upon “the need for reform from within” (p. 687), and called on colleges to create “identified, focused goal[s] in order to perceive themselves – and for others to perceive them – as successful” (p. 688).

In California, the mission of community colleges took formal leaps in 1988 and 1996 with the signing of Assembly Bill 1725, and Senate Bill 1809, respectively. These bills legislated the various and differentiated mission of the community colleges. The historically validated twin functions of transfer and career/technical preparation took pride of place, but new missions, such as basic skills and English as a Second Language took their authorized places at the table, as well. In turn, this legislation affected the discussion of mission and institutional culture in novel ways.

For example, Bergquist (1998) took a novel approach to the issue of mission history and function with the claim that the community college had entered its “postmodern” phase. Using the common (and often accurate) charge that “community colleges in particular” (p. 87) tend to remain isolated from turbulent societal changes in spite of mission differentiation, Bergquist uses these changes as a method to reposition the community college for the twenty-first century. Bergquist’s analysis summarized the community college at its premodern and then modern phases. The premodern phase of the community college existed in a place in time – by admission idealized and nostalgic –
where “strong community college leaders […] could decisively solve straightforward
problems, and of faculty, administrators, and staff who found gratification in the work
they performed and the community they served” (p. 87). While perhaps echoing the
idealism manifested in Gleazer, Bergquist departs from that view in his characterization
of the premodern era as offering a less-than-realistic view of the community college.
Rather, in its focus on local community, the community college itself began its path
toward isolation from occurrences beyond its locality. Nevertheless, the assertion that
“the premodern world can help us set the agenda for our colleges with regard to
reemerging values” (p. 88) may help institutions as they begin to plan around the growing
number of basic skills students.

According to Bergquist (1998), the organizational changes brought about by the
modern phase of the community college build on the traditions of the premodern
institution (p. 89). While ultimately beneficial, these gains in areas such as the
institutional mission have also brought with them mission shift, possibly leading to
confusion of ends. Oriented more toward the “bottom line,” (p. 89), the modernist
community college mission statement does “not provide much clarity or guidance for
those who work in or evaluate these institutions” (p. 89). Thus, the “postmodern”
institution emerges, an artifact of contemporary “fragmentation and complexity” (p. 89).
Applied to the community college, one need only view the various operations that occur
daily on virtually all campuses to see this fragmentation in action. Bergquist noted that
mission at the community college is not keeping pace with the emergent postmodern
mindset (p. 90), and posited “hollow organizations” (colleges working in collaboration
with “carefully crafted cooperative agreements” and “virtual organizations” (colleges
using distance education) (p. 91) as possible postmodern responses to the changes being experienced by the community college. The postmodern community college posits a radical shift in community college operations and culture, for example at the levels of students services and instruction; how a community college situated within a postmodern identity treats its basic skills students at points of contact such as assessment or placement is a strong indicator of how well the college itself can continue to participate in the life of the community.

The issue of accountability in the postmodern community college, and its relationship to mission, is addressed as well by Bergquist. After noting that traditional (or, “modern”) metrics for measuring effectiveness may not be adequate to the task of the postmodern college, a “clear and consistent mission” (p. 93), essential for purposes of transparency, is recommended. Ultimately, Bergquist challenged the current status quo, insisting that the postmodern college, if properly conceived, can keep up with the rapid and dramatic change of pace currently being experienced by those institutions: “In dropping their boundaries, postmodern colleges are likely to be more fully responsive to changing technologies, changing student and community needs, and changing sources of revenue” (p. 94). In other words, boundaries traditionally held by community colleges – both internal (the aforementioned student services and instructional boundaries) and external (collaboration with K-12 and universities to create consistent curriculum) – need to be redrawn to accommodate the changing face of education in the twenty-first century.

Striking a similar note, Abelman and Dalessandro (2008) observed how community college mission is continually being tested by “today’s social, political, economic, and technological revolutions,” of which the basic skills students (and, really
all students) are very much a part, and that, therefore, “successful community college leaders must invest in organizational renewal and in a reinterpretation of the mission, philosophy, functions, and modus operandi of the institutions they serve” (pp. 306-307). Moreover, a mission that cultivates and nurtures a “shared sense of purpose” may be the type of mission that ultimately fuels the success of a postmodern community college and its students, since it would demonstrate the flexibility and far-sightedness recommended by Bergquist. Extending this line of thought, Abelman and Dalessandro made a clear distinction between mission and vision: mission statements reflect the day-to-day operations of the college, and vision statements inform and inspire the college’s operations (p. 308). This seems to strike at the heart of the postmodern impulse while simultaneously adhering to the traditional roles occupied by community colleges as noted by the earlier observers, cited above.

Of particular note in Abelman and Dalessandro’s analysis is the concept of “peripheral” operations of a campus, operations which shape and develop potential vision and mission (p. 309), but which are often not part of an institution’s actual planning processes. These peripheral operations and how they are subtly articulated form the focus of Abelman and Dalessandro’s qualitative analysis. Summarizing the rhetorical ploys of various mission statements provided Abelman and Dalessandro with the evidence to assert “that mission statements tend to be less clear and less compelling than vision statements and that the desired outcomes expressed in mission statements are less pragmatic than those expressed in vision statements” (p. 311). Moreover, their analysis yielded the observation that the visionary aspects attempted by community colleges are not “compelling,” due to an absence of language that could be used to stimulate interest
among the peripheral stakeholders, the hidden shapers of mission (p. 321). It may be interesting to note that many institutional declarations of intent regarding basic skills appear in a college’s mission statement, rather than occupying any space in what a college may envision for itself.

This apparent disjunct between intent and effect is confirmed by Bastedo and Gumport (2003), who characterized effects similar to those found by Abelman and Dalessandro as a “functionalist” approach to mission, one which favors product over process (pp. 343, 344). The functionalist approach lends itself to time-honored institutional responses such as mission differentiation, and basic skills curriculum is among those effects contributing to the differentiation; on the other hand, such responses possibly neglect aspects inherent but not entirely obvious to a college’s presentation of its vision to stakeholders both internal (students, faculty, and staff) and external (community partners, local businesses, regional collaboratives). While acknowledging mission differentiation as a method to balance various demands faced by colleges, Bastedo and Gumport finally conclude that as long as differentiation is informed by state policy rather than the needs of local populations, that access will be compromised (p. 354). As they put it: “Student access to the system as a whole does not mean access to the whole system” (p. 355). Such concerns directly affect the way that basic skills students and their specific needs are represented by a college’s mission and vision. In this way, basic skills curriculum and learning outcomes can be exposed to assessments and metrics that reconcile the needs of a local community with the demands of policymakers and other similar stakeholders.
Questions of relevance and historical positioning (pre- and postmodern, for example) with regard to community college mission come full circle with Dougherty and Townsend (2006), whose critique of the debates that emerge from discussions of mission is based on the premise that the questions that comprise the discussions “are framed in overly strong dualisms” (p. 5), and that such “either/or” conceptions of the community college mission may prevent any real progress toward what McCartan (1983) advocated: “community colleges would be well served by helping design their own futures” (p. 690). Basic skills students and instruction have recently begun to gather more gravity in a college’s culture than in previous eras, and they will certainly participate in the design of most, if not all, futures envisioned by the colleges; a review of their status as an institutional function now follows.

Basic Skills as Institutional Function

As noted in chapter one, California state law recognizes basic skills curriculum and instruction as “essential and important” functions of the community college. However, even though basic skills students and curriculum have existed within the inherent structure of the open-access community college, the relationship has not always been pacific. For every early advocate of the community college’s potential, there was certainly another voice with a conflicting view. This relationship carries through to this very day. Clark (1960) was one of the first scholars to call into question the nature of the open-access institution, writing that “the conflict between open-door admissions and performance of high quality often means a wide discrepancy between the hopes of entering students and the means of their realization” (p. 571). The result of this discrepancy is Clark’s famous formulation of the “cooling out” effect of community
colleges, and the characterization that “remedial courses” constitute “a subcollege” (p. 572) on the community college campus. Even though Clark later stated that he had been “looking for connections among the parts of the organization in order to characterize it as a whole” (1980, p. 15), the image of the community college as a place where student dreams met deferral was one from which colleges have found it difficult to separate themselves. As long as there were underprepared students – for whatever reason – there would be developmental or remedial education. Thus, the tension would seem to be built into the structure of the colleges. The mission of the college acknowledges this. How this relationship, however accommodating or symbiotic it may be, plays itself out among observers both internal and external to the community college has remained problematic.

Levin (2007), for example, proposed an evaluation model for “remedial education programs” that would concisely combine best practices and qualitative research designs (p. 2). Touching on the nature of developmental education that is not mandatory in many community colleges, Levin noted that remediation, while an essential ingredient for the success of some students, may be subverted by some institutional practices (p. 3). Levin’s critique also touches on specific pedagogical issues, such as method of content delivery, and those types of instruction that may not have an effect on the basic skills student due to their previous experiences with such instructional styles (2007, p. 5). Levin made further recommendations for adapting traditional instructional approaches; these and others will be discussed, below. Finally, tying basic skills instruction back to institutional mission and effectiveness, Levin recommended that community colleges embrace a spirit of “experimentalism,” and to use such a spirit to “build ‘local’ knowledge which they can
use for policy decisions” (2007, p. 22). One can see here an attempt to reconcile the
mission and vision of an institution to the realities of its underprepared student body.

Other observers of the basic skills phenomena assert that, as a natural function of
the open access institution, basic skills coursework has minimal or no effect on student
progress toward educational goal; some have isolated other factors as impinging upon
enrollment and success in basic skills coursework. Using a database derived from the
National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS:88), Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and
Levey (2006) created a logistical regression model and concluded that basic skills
coursework had a “positive influence” on students enrolled in basic skills writing courses
and that, “overall … there is evidence among two year college entrants that students who
passed remedial courses had better educational outcomes” than students who did not
enroll in basic skills coursework (p. 912). Goldrick-Rab (2007) likewise conceded to
Attewell et al’s (2006) evidence, adding that the type of coursework undertaken by basic
skills students may have an impact on student progress toward an academic goal (p. 12).
Elsewhere, Moore and Shulock (2007) in what has certainly been the most dramatic
example of an external body shading policy and public perceptions of the community
colleges have acknowledged that assessment and placement practices in California may
bear some responsibility for the high number of students needing basic skills coursework
but nevertheless recognize its importance (pp. vi-vii). Regardless of orientation toward
the basic skills phenomenon, most researchers can agree that it remains a problem rooted
in systemic configurations such as a college’s mission and vision.

Roueche and Roueche (1993) have observed that missionary flux contributed to
institutional changes in perception with regard to the place basic skills coursework would
occupy. They note that trends in assessment and accountability “began to challenge the earlier, more simplistic notions that single, usually disjointed remedial courses designed to improve specific basic skills were the best approaches to addressing at-risk students’ academic problems” (p. 49). It is at this point that the intersection of mission and basic skills comes to the foreground. Perin (2005) concluded that basic skills had become such an essential function of the community college that access to higher education at large would be severely hampered without them. Organization of basic skills within the continuum of course offerings also occupies a place of importance, with camps espousing both the isolation of basic skills coursework (akin to Clark’s earlier “subcollege” characterization) or the complete integration of basic skills coursework with traditional college level coursework, for example in linked courses or learning communities.

Basic Writing and the Institutional Context

Moving from the larger concerns of the institution and the integrity of its mission in relation to the underprepared students it serves, the discussion turns to the more specific aspects of the basic skills composition classroom. Most, if not all, discussions of basic skills writers and their curriculum begin with the body of work produced by Mina Shaughnessy, whose contributions to the City University of New York as both a writing instructor and then later administrator of that institution’s basic writing program set the stage for much of the ensuing dialog over the decades regarding basic skills writers and their curriculum. Since this study is more concerned with the institutional responses to basic writers and their curriculum, the finer points of areas such as syntax, rhetoric, or vocabulary will be diminished in favor of examinations of that curriculum as it is related to community college mission.
Acknowledging the complex interplay between “basic writers” (a term coined by Shaughnessy) and the institutions that serve them, Shaughnessy noted (1977) that “colleges must be prepared to make more than a graceless and begrudging accommodation to” the underprepared students then becoming a common sight on the college campuses (p. 293). Other commentators have asserted that the basic skills phenomena may indeed be placed at the feet of the open-admissions institutions themselves (Roueche & Roueche 1993; Soliday 2002), while others have warned that basic skills curriculum itself merely perpetuates Clark’s (1960) “cooling out” of otherwise willing students (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum 2002). Soliday’s (2002) observation that institutions have politicized remediation as a way of “negotiat[ing] management crises” (p. 62) strikes squarely at the intersection between specific curricular needs and institutional demands, and it warrants careful consideration. How colleges are able to navigate and eventually reconcile these two positions – in the face of an ever-changing student population – may constitute new ways to shape the emerging dialogue between curriculum and mission.

Striking a similar note, Patthey-Chavez, Dillon, and Thomas-Spiegel (2005) have come to the conclusion that basic writing programs, “by developing and delivering developmental coursework to meet the needs of the diverse students entering college upon the implementation of open admissions policies, […] figure prominently in institutional gatekeeping” (p. 261). There is a growing body of research that arrives at similar conclusions. Other factors also play prominent roles in the development and maintenance of basic writing programs that fit institutional and local needs.
A separate but related issue comes to the fore when definitions of “college level” writing are attempted. Sullivan (2003) has urged practitioners in the field of basic writing to consider that, in an effort to standardize such definitions, they may “ignore or disregard the very powerful political and social realities that shape students’ lives on individual campuses and in particular communities” (p. 375). From this point, Sullivan’s summary of Clark (1960) is appropriate and leads into what is perhaps the heart of the matter under discussion in this study. Sullivan argues that the basic skills writers encountered at the community college perceive those institutions as transformative agents (p. 381). And, while abstract, the manifestation of these student aspirations often comes via basic skills coursework as an entryway to higher education for more and more students. Patthey-Chavez, Dillon, and Thomas-Spiegel (2005) put it succinctly by asserting a correlation between lack of preparation at the high school level with lack of progress through basic skills at the college level (p. 262). Part of the problem lies in what Bueschel and Venezia (2006) have characterized as a lack of communication between the community colleges and the high schools they serve, so that curricular expectations at the college level are in direct conflict with the actual abilities students bring with them to institutes of higher education (p. 29), and that many students are frankly “surprised – usually upon receiving placement test results – by the academic standards they encounter at the community college” (p. 30). This confusion and surprise is confirmed by research conducted by Hayes (2001), who attempted to track student attitudes toward basic skills placement. While hardly conclusive or generalizable, Hayes’s finding “that about one-third of students initially feel a stigma associated with being placed into” a basic writing class (p. 404), offers opportunities for further qualitative studies along the lines of
Sternglass (1997) to use student attitudes as potential barometers of institutional effectiveness.

Institutional mission and the culture it inspires inevitably contact the lives of the students for whom they exist. A report from the Carnegie Foundation, “Basic Skills for Complex Lives,” reiterates the work of Hayes (2001) and Sternglass (1997), in its observation that “developmental students often do not think of themselves as ‘college material.’ Though they bring powerful life experiences to their work as learners, they often need help seeing those experiences as assets in an academic setting” (2008, p. 10). Community colleges appear poised as the ideal environments in which basic skills writers may leverage their life experiences into positive and productive learning environments.

Institutional Culture and the Cultivation of Engagement

Navigating the complex world of basic skills demands a comprehension of the overall context and a familiarity with certain specific aspects of basic skills curriculum and the subculture it reveals. One method to achieve this comprehension is to analyze the various cultural elements that participate in the creation of a larger whole: the college itself. At the heart of any attempt to cultivate engagement on a college campus is a comprehension of the culture of that campus. Kuh and Whitt (1988) wrote that

“institutional culture is both a process and a product. As a process, culture shapes, and is shaped by, the ongoing interaction of people on and off the campus. As a product, culture reflects interactions among history, traditions, organizational structures, and the behavior of current students, faculty, and staff” (iv).
Kuh and Whitt later identify campus mission statements and the “core beliefs” they inspire as tangible manifestations of institutional culture (1988, p. iv). An overview of dynamics found in most college departmental environments reveals potential avenues for the presentation of best practices in the development of not just basic skills curriculum, but those who create and deliver such curriculum: the professoriate. The power of disciplinary subcultures has been documented by Kuh and Whitt (1988), who asserted that “the culture of the discipline is the primary source of faculty identity […]” (p. 77). Instructors of basic skills students occupy a particularly sensitive role on a community college campus. It is thus incumbent upon those campuses to review and enhance the interactions of the faculty and their respective departments and campus cultures in order that engagement learning in the classroom is maximized. Van Ast (1999) expressed it thusly: “At the heart of the open door college are the faculty and the students. These two essential ingredients form a relationship that ultimately determines to what extent the college is able to accomplish its mission” (p. 561). The mission statements and legislative mandates that inform much campus culture have ensured, in California, that curriculum development, assessment of student learning, and institutional effectiveness are inextricably linked. Examining the nuances of this relationship may yield a better understanding of how exactly they complement one another. To better understand this relationship, details of each will be discussed, and then their relationship to one another will be explained.

Claxton (2007) proposed that “as members of the institution change their assumptions, the culture of the community college begins to shift” (p. 218). Claxton’s recommendation that faculty engage in self-reflective practices that require them to
assess or reevaluate their most closely held beliefs (2007, p. 219) may be one key to assisting basic skills faculty in seeing their departmental and campus roles from new perspectives. More daring still is Claxton’s recommendation that, after faculty have become reasonably experienced at locating and adjusting closely-held beliefs, they participate in a faculty dialogue at the program or department level, the “only purpose” of which “is to help the members become more skillful at suspending their assumptions” (2007, p. 223). One can see immediately the types of dramatic change this approach could have on practices such as curriculum development and assessment of student learning. Claxton’s research works well with that of Snowden and Boone (2007), who varied the focus when they cautioned that faculty and others are themselves “susceptible to entrained thinking, a conditioned response that occurs when people are blinded to new ways of thinking” due to past experiences (p. 70). In other words, melding college, curriculum, and instruction with the best interest of basic writing students in mind requires a sensitivity to various campus subcultures.

Locke and Guglielmino (2006), citing “unrelenting forces of change” (p. 108) currently accosting community colleges, observed “that strong subcultures have the potential, and often the capability, to generate resistance that can derail a change initiative; conversely, subcultures can facilitate change by injecting diverse perspectives and innovative ideas into the organization” (p. 109). More than ever, basic skills writers require a type of unprecedented innovation and flexibility from those who develop and maintain their classroom experiences: professors. Their qualitative research allowed Locke and Guglielmino to draw the conclusion that existing subcultures had unique characteristics that made each one respond to organizational change after its own fashion
In California, the basic skills phenomenon has gradually become one of the dominant subcultures on many campuses. Ayers (2005) asserted that in organizations such as community colleges, the subcultures themselves may become the proprietary entities of campus subcultures (p. 3), thus further contributing to the dichotomous “us/them” mentality that has detrimental effects on effective curriculum development or other activities undertaken by faculty. A possible rejoinder to such potentially balkanizing influences comes from Cohen and Brawer (2003), who once cannily asserted that

as arbiters of the curriculum, the faculty transmit concepts and ideas, decide on course content and level, select textbooks, prepare and evaluate examinations, and generally structure learning conditions for the students. In common with nearly all other teachers, they are not independent practitioners. They work in institutions and are subject to the rules thereof; the workplace shapes their behavior. At the same time, they communicate with their colleagues and take on the mores of the profession (p. 73).

Cain (1999) observed that community colleges, like all systems, “create themselves in response to the challenges of the environment” (p. 18). In that context, colleges “manifest irreducible characteristics of [their] own,” and “meaning comes from the interactive relationships between those characteristics” (p. 13). A central characteristic of college culture is curriculum. How curriculum is developed and converted into artifacts such as a course outline of record is worthy of review.

Posner (1998), in an historical overview of curriculum planning, noted that three major questions should be addressed in the process of curriculum development: the
procedural question (articulating the basic steps in curriculum planning), the descriptive
question (how do instructors plan curricula), and the conceptual question (how curricular
elements can be related to one another conceptually) (p. 80). Posner cited the work of
Tyler (1949) and its model of curriculum development as the dominant force behind the
majority of curriculum planning that occurs across the country today (p. 81). Indeed,
much of the language that is currently used in discussions of curriculum – from
standpoints pedagogical to political – is inhabited by terms made familiar by Tyler’s
work. In terminology immediately recognizable to contemporary community college
faculty, administrators and, possibly, students, Posner summarized Tyler’s influence, in
part, this way: “Students are termed learners; objectives are conceived in terms of
desirable learning” (p. 81, emphasis in original), and, further, “curriculum planning is
assumed to be an enterprise in which the planner objectively and, if possible,
scientifically develops the means necessary to produce the desired learning outcomes” (p.
82. emphasis added).

The resilience of Tylerian curriculum development flies in the face of much
scholarship about the nature of the community college’s mission. Wattenbarger and
Scaggs (1979) wrote, in relation to curricular adaptation, that “educational institutions are
not immune to the effects of change in the larger society” (p. 1), and that the community
college is “the institution that seems most likely to be predisposed to curricular change,
and to therefore have mechanisms for handling” curricular changes (p. 3). The focal point
of Wattenbarger and Scaggs’s argument is concerned with what they regarded as the
inability of the college as an organization to implement new curriculum once developed:
“the curriculum experts concentrate on curriculum, the organization experts concentrate
on changes in the organization and there appears to be little exchange of information
between the two” (pp. 2-3). This observation raises an issue maintaining its relevance
today in the form of the ostensible disjunct between functions at the community college
and their perceived irreconcilability. In effect, the flexibility and adaptability of the
community college’s mission and function may become mired in the finer points of a
monolithic curriculum planning model. The particular needs of basic skills students in
general – and basic writers in particular – suggests that other models of curriculum
development and assessment may be able to affect the interaction between institutions,
students, and faculty. In a discussion of formative assessment, Wiliam (2009) observed
that “there is a developing consensus that [formative assessment] involves clarity over
three processes: where learners are in their learning, where they are going, and the steps
needed to get there. In addition, we need to keep in mind that within these processes there
are different roles for teachers, learners, and their peers” (p. 11).

Speaking directly to how curriculum development and institutional culture impinge
upon one another, California, Assembly Bill 1725 (Vasconcellos) (1988) vouchsafed the
development and implementation of curriculum to the faculty. Section 4, paragraph “i”
stipulates, in part, that

the recruitment of faculty into the community colleges, and the
maintaining of morale and enthusiasm among the faculty depends in large
part upon the intellectual and personal environment within which faculty
work. Much of that environment is created by their own authority over the
substantive direction of the programs and courses in which they work,
through the quality of their relationship with the college administration,
and in the quality of their interactions with the communities of students they teach. At the same time, it is apparent that faculty morale comes from their engagement in the development of new and innovative programs, from their engagement in professional and discipline-based associations, and from an active, intellectual life as scholars and teachers (Section 4, para. i).

One way that the needs of the institution can mesh with the professional activities of the instructional staff in the service of student learning is through what Hintze, Christ, and Methe (2006) call “curriculum-based assessment,” in particular, the model of “CBA-ID,” or “curriculum-based assessment for instructional design” (p. 45). CBA-ID has four basic tenets, each of which has as its outcome improved teaching and learning (p. 48). For the purposes of this study, CBA-ID may prove to be most effective in its desire to “align assessment practices with what is actually taught in the classroom” (p. 46), or, in other words, matching the curriculum on the course outline of record as it presented in the learning environment. This approach is consistent with that espoused by Wiggins and McTighe (1998), who wrote that “student interests, developmental levels, and previous achievements influence our [curricular] designs” (p. 8). And, while scholars of curriculum characterize faculty with valorizing metaphors such as “designers” or “architects” (Wiggins & McTighe 1998, pp. 7-8), much difficult work must be done in the crucible of the classroom to validate such designation.

Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, and Hoy (1998) examined the concept of teacher efficacy as it grew to encompass ideas associated with Albert Bandura’s work with self-efficacy, which they summarize as “a cognitive process in which people construct beliefs
about their capacity to perform at a given level of attainment” (p. 203). These researchers also point out that the concept of self-efficacy is task specific; that is, teacher efficacy would be isolated to the particular experience of teaching (p. 211). Further, their study hearkens back to Claxton and Ayers (op. cit.) in their questioning of the extent to which “the structure of the school would play any role in teachers’ sense of efficacy” (p. 221), and go on to note that teacher efficacy can be linked to student “achievement,” “motivation,” and “efficacy” (p. 222), and that “teachers with a strong sense of efficacy are open to new ideas and more willing to experiment with new methods to better meet the needs of their students” (p. 223). In other words, faculty with a strong sense of engagement with and commitment to their campus cultures may be more likely to innovate in ways that serve to assist basic skills students in achieving their academic goals.

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, in its report *Basic Skills for Complex Lives* (2008), made the assertion that “changes at the classroom level – to make basic skills instruction more structured, challenging, intensely engaging, intentional, and inquiry-based – are the bedrock of improvement; if changes don’t happen ‘on the ground,’ where teachers and students meet, no real gains can be made” (p. 26). Later in the same report, a cautionary note is struck: “there are many promising pockets of innovation, but they often remain disconnected from one another and do not add up to larger patterns of improvement” (p. 33). Crucial to the success of innovative curriculum development and the teacher/learner interface is an institutional culture that is able to not only encourage innovation, but to also make such innovation an authentic institutional value.
Such a culture may be characterized by the process by which it engages the faculty and students. The body of literature on student engagement is growing; much of it has been centered on outcomes or behaviors (DiMaria 2006; McClenney 2004) manifested through surveys such as the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), which defines engagement as “the amount of time and energy that students invest in meaningful educational practices” (McClenney 2004, p. 18) that lead to improved retention and success. Other scholars have created similar operational definitions of engagement. For example, Harper and Quay (2009) define engagement as “participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes” (pp. 2-3). Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2007) have extended the definition by asserting that engagement has two aspects essential to framing it within a larger institutional culture. The first aspect reiterates the principles articulated by McClenney and Harper and Quay; the second aspect deals with institutional effectiveness, “how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum, other learning opportunities, and support services to induce students to participate in activities that lead to the experiences and desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning, and graduation” (p. 44).

Kuh’s enumeration leads to other potential interpretations of engagement. With regard to Kuh’s assertion that “satisfaction” and “learning” may indicate student engagement, Schlossberg’s concept of “involvement” (1989, p. 5) bears scrutiny: “Involvement creates connections between students, faculty, and staff that allow individuals to believe in their own personal worth.” Schlossberg then posits a closely-related concept, that of “mattering”: “mattering refers to our belief, whether right or
wrong, that we matter to someone else. This belief acts as a motivator” (p. 9). Such motivation in turn can be characterized as affective engagement, or “the level of students’ investment in, and their emotional reactions to, the learning tasks (e.g., high levels of interest or positive attitudes towards the learning tasks)” (Chapman 2003, para. 5).

Engaging students affectively has become part of the larger agenda for faculty charged with teaching in the basic skills classroom.

The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, in its report, *A Survey of Effective Practices in Basic Skills* (2003), asserted that “successful developmental education programs make staff development a priority[…]” (p. 8), and that such development leads to instructional practices that are constructivist and learner-centered at their core (pp. 8-9). Characteristics sought in basic skills instructors include such criteria as “chooses to teach underprepared students”; “demonstrates a passion for working with underprepared students”; “enjoys and respects students”; and “sees the whole student” (p. 9). Among the key activities to be undertaken by such faculty is “curriculum development” (p. 9). In spite of these recommendations, much of the literature dealing with such faculty development opportunities for basic skills instructors recognize shifting student populations (Sperling 2003) without specific direction; others (Illowski 2008) directly acknowledge the need for professional development in the context of basic skills but likewise fail to note current best practices. Other commentators (Kraft 2000; Claxton 2007 *op cit.*) approach the need for cultural change from a faculty-centric perspective, showing promise, but without specific focus on the engagement of basic skills students. In their comprehensive summary and discussion of professional development at the community college, Townsend and Twombly (2007) argued that “given the institution’s
reliance on professional development, it is disturbing to find that much of the literature about professional development programs portrays them as *ad hoc* and uncoordinated” (p. 42).

The basic skills student presents an opportunity for the simultaneous development of both curriculum and best practices in the profession. To reach these students in a way that encourages their growth and ability to progress toward their educational goals, it is necessary to examine what conditions and contexts contribute to this development. Bandura (1995) argued that “people strive to exercise control over the events that affect their lives,” and that such control creates a context of predictability, which, in turn, “fosters adoptive preparedness” (1). In other words, creating a sense of oneself that has consistency in relation to an academic task allows for individuals to lay the groundwork for their further forays into coursework beyond that associated with basic skills. Some aspects of the literature (Attewell 2006; Goldrick-Rab 2007; Patthey-Chavez, Dillon, & Thomas-Spiegel 2005) suggest that successful completion of coursework at the basic skills level leads to further academic successes. This identity is further encouraged when “effective modes of behavior that change threatening environments into safe ones” are supported (Bandura 1995, p.9). Those charged with such transformative experiences, basic skills instructors, need to be supported in their academic environments in order to assure facilitation of authentic learning experiences. Juchniewicz, Dagostino and Carfino (2007) have observed that “a student’s goals, abilities, beliefs, and life situations are all relevant” in the creation of a learning environment (p. 206), and that “a variety of people have an interest in the workings and outcomes of the community college” (p. 212). Campus culture plays a large role in ensuring that interests internal and external to the
college are made transparent. An opportunity therefore exists for all of these concerns to coalesce in a meaningful and consistent approach that serves mission, students, and the faculty serving both. Thus, the point at which the institution – via its mission and culture, the basic skills writer, and the instructor of basic skills coursework converge will provide the focus for the grounded theory to be described in chapter three of this study.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Research Design

As noted in chapter one, the rise in the number of students requiring remedial or developmental coursework in college presents a significant challenge to practitioners and stakeholders in California’s community colleges. Chapter two described the conditions that affect both basic skills students and the institutions serving them. The interplay between student and institution thus suggests a dynamic and organic relationship, one that while bound by operational consistencies such as mission statements, must nevertheless be attentive to perpetual and equally consistent shifts in the student population. Not to be neglected, either, are the faculty members who teach these students and their perceptions of their charge. The current climate on many community college campuses suggests that relying solely on quantitative statistics may not reveal the nuance and specific need experienced by these students and their instructors as they work toward the concept of engagement as learning process. Thus, qualitative alternatives are appropriate. In this chapter, a method for developing a grounded theory describing this interplay will be offered.

Grounded Theory

Descriptive data showing enrollment trends and student persistence from composition courses one level below the transfer level to a transfer-level composition course often provide researchers with lively starting points for discussions of student preparedness for college level writing instruction. Oftentimes, though, these data provide only a part of the entire story. Qualitative methodologies offer researchers opportunities to delve into the “how” and “why” of phenomena merely described by strictly
quantitative means. Thus, the process espoused by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Charmaz (2006) of developing a grounded theory will supply the methodological framework of this study.

Charmaz’s succinct and useful summary of the history of grounded theory notes how it emerged from two ostensibly disparate schools of thought: positivism and pragmatism. In spite of the competing nature of these philosophical outlooks, grounded theory’s populizers, Glaser and Strauss, were able to combine the two to create a unique approach to inquiry in the social sciences. The fundamentally constructivist nature of Strauss’s pragmatism, when combined with Glaser’s empirical rationality, helped to usher in a new perspective on studying human institutions and interactions (2006, pp 6-7). As grounded theory gained traction as a legitimate approach in the realm of qualitative research, its practitioners were better able to define its basic tenets within that larger context.

Strauss and Corbin (1994) observed that many of grounded theory’s hallmarks were shared by other qualitative methods: “interviews and field observations, as well as documents of all kinds…” are employed, and there are opportunities for the use of quantitative data, as well as mixed-methods approaches to sampling (p. 274). Strauss and Corbin (1994) also asserted that grounded theory presented significant differences from other qualitative methods, most notably in its privileging of “theory development” that is ongoing and accentuates the interplay between concepts as they are developed; this interplay in turn demands the “verification of its resulting hypothesis” (p. 274).

Strauss and Corbin (1998) succinctly defined methodology as “a way of thinking about and studying social reality” (p. 3). Basic skills curriculum and its attendant
expected learning outcomes, as well as instructor perception of both student and
curriculum, provide strong determiners in the community college of a specific form of
reality. It is important to keep in mind, when considering this reality, that “composition
instruction cannot be seen in a vacuum” (Sternglass 1997, p. 141), and that the
experiences of basic skills writers may be best expressed via a method such as grounded
theory promises.

Charmaz (2006) provided a cogent approach to those situations particularly
attuned to the social reality of basic skills students in her recommendation for researchers
to “consider how participants invoke ideas, practices, and accounts from both the larger
and local cultures of which they are a part” (p. 40). The ways that basic skills students
perceive themselves as agents in their own education, and how they participate in
curricular decisions made by their instructors – who, in their turn, respond as well to
institutional demands as manifested by course outlines – point to the efficacy of
establishing a grounded theory. Strauss and Corbin (1994), after summarizing the
flexibility of developing grounded theory in the context of social situations such as
learning environments, conclude that “knowledge is, after all, linked closely with time
and place” (p. 276). It can no longer be denied that “basic skills” occupy a central time
and place in the lives of a preponderance of students entering postsecondary education.
Moreover, Strauss and Corbin (1994) cannily predicted the currency grounded theory
would eventually earn when they wrote that it could be applied to situations exploring
“an increasing interest in and the presumed necessity for social research within various
professions and their subunits, and directed toward an increasing or at least changing set
of issues” (p. 282).
As a conceptual framework for the type of research being presented in this study, constructivist models seem particularly attuned to the needs of basic skills writers, their teachers, and the institutions both groups inhabit. Fosnot (1989), rejecting the “implicit assumption that permeates the thinking of educational institutions as well as mainstream society … that more knowledge changes behavior, and that people need facts and information in order to think” (p. 4) instead posits the constructivist model, which has four core values, namely that knowledge consists of past constructions; constructions come about through assimilation and accommodation; learning is an organic process of invention, rather than a mechanical process of accumulation; meaningful learning occurs through reflection and resolution of cognitive conflict and thus serves to negate earlier, incomplete levels of understanding (pp. 19-20).

This view confirms Yilmaz’s assertion that constructivism emerged “from dissatisfaction with traditional Western theories of knowledge” (2008, p. 161). Yilmaz further divided the constructivist philosophy into four discrete approaches; all of them are valid, but only one of them needs to be reviewed here, as it may have a particular application to the community college and the diverse population it serves. Yilmaz defines social constructivism (emphasis added) as an aspect of this conceptual framework that takes into consideration things such as race, class, and socioeconomic status (2008, p. 163). Citing Fosnot, Yilmaz (2008) observes that “dialogue within a community engenders further thinking” (p. 168). This can be contextualized within Charmaz’s analysis (2006) of constructivist research models, in that they allow researchers to discover “how, when, and to what extent the studied experience is embedded in larger and, often, hidden positions, networks, situations, and relationships” (p.130). Further
resonance is found in Fosnot’s comment that “we do not act alone; humans are social beings” (1996, p. 29). Schram (2006) claimed in constructivist models of qualitative research, specifically grounded theory, that “a theory is not the formulation of some discovered aspect of reality that already exists ‘out there.’ Rather, theories are provisional and fallible interpretations, limited in time (historically embedded) and constantly in need of qualification” (p. 102). Thus, a grounded theory of how institution, student, and instructor interact with one another is completely appropriate to the parameters of this study.

Research Questions

The following research questions emerged from a review of the literature germane to the topic under study:

What perceptions do students enrolled in a basic skills writing course one level below transfer have about their preparedness for college-level writing?

What perceptions do basic skills writing faculty have about student preparation for writing at the college level?

How does institutional culture contribute to shaping those perceptions?

Sampling Strategy and Description of Sample

The multi-campus California community college district conveniently selected for this study has three main credit campuses and a continuing education program. All of the credit campuses offer multiple sections of the course that is one level below transfer, English 49. Each of the campuses has its own mission statement and culture. The three campuses are large, with a combined FTES of 31,000 during the fall 2009 semester. The colleges are fairly typical of California with regard to demographics: American Indians
make up 1% of the student population, Asian/Pacific Islanders 13%, Filipino 6%, African American 8%, White 37%, Latino 23%. In the category of age, 2% of the students are under 18 years of age, 53% are 18-24 years old, 18% are 25-29 years old, 9% are 30-34 years old, 5% are 35-39, 8% are 40-49, and 5% are over 50 years of age. A recent data set provided by the district under study noted that, “on average, 59% of incoming students who took an English placement test placed into a Basic Skills level English course” (p. 5). No descriptive data were gathered from student subjects, although it was evident to the researcher that they represented accurately the district’s overall demographic composition. Students were recruited remotely via flier inviting participation (Appendix A), through third-party announcement for participation via course instructors, and by personal visits made to class after instruction had ceased for the day.

At College “X”, nine faculty members (52% of the sample) were interviewed; at College “Y,” four faculty members (24% of the sample) were interviewed; at College “Z,” four faculty members (24% of the sample) were interviewed. Faculty members were recruited from both the contract and adjunct ranks; contract faculty made up 59% of the sample (10 interviewees), while adjunct faculty made up 41% of the sample (7 interviewees). At College “X,” six contract faculty members were interviewed (67% of that campus’s sample) and 3 adjunct faculty were interviewed (33% of that campus’s sample). At College “Z,” two contract (50% of the campus sample) and two adjunct faculty (50% of the campus sample) were interviewed. At College “Y,” two contract faculty (50% of the campus sample) were interviewed and two adjunct faculty (50% of the campus sample) were interviewed.
All faculty subjects had assignments teaching English during the fall 2009 semester. This faculty group had an average of 15 years of composition instruction, with four subjects having 20 or more years in the composition classroom (“Over thirty years in the SDCCD – all devoted to basic skills writers!”), and five having taught composition less than five years in the SDCCD (“This is only my third semester teaching basic skills here”). Faculty participants were recruited directly at department meetings and via flier (Appendix B) placed into faculty mailboxes and sent electronically to faculty email accounts by the researcher during August and September of 2009 on the campuses of the multi-college district.

For this study, focused as it is on the basic writing course one level below transfer, only faculty members (both full- and part-time) teaching at least one section of this course were recruited. Likewise, only students over the age of eighteen who were currently enrolled in a section of the course being studied during the fall 2009 semester were recruited for participation in the study. The document being analyzed for this study was the official course outline of record, common to all three credit campuses in the district under study.

Data Collection Strategies

The data collection methods for this study – interviews and document analysis – have been derived from my experience as a practitioner in the field of composition studies. Maxwell (2005) noted that “the relationships you create with participants in your study […] are an essential part of your methods, and how you initiate and negotiate those relationships is a key design decision” (p. 83). It seemed in keeping with my practice as an instructor of basic writing courses to locate three areas for the collection of data: basic
skills students, basic skills instructors, and the course outline of record for the class one level below transfer, English 49. Taylor and Bogdan (1998) defined in-depth interviewing as a method conducive to “yield[ing] a picture of a range of settings, situations, or people” (p. 90). Because English faculty contact an average of 75 (for part-time faculty) to 125 (for full-time faculty) students per semester in the multi-campus district that forms the basis of this study, faculty members appear best poised to reveal perceptions about student preparation for coursework at the transfer level or below, how they conceptualize the courses they teach in relation to perceived student ability, and their own perceptions of campus culture that may lead to more effective facilitation of the process of engagement in the basic skills writing classroom.

Thus, the decision to conduct individual and focus group interviews is consistent with the constructivist grounded theory method; that is, in order to analyze faculty and student perceptions about their participation in a basic writing course, having them express those perceptions seemed an appropriate technique. As an added measure, the course outline of record for the course one level below transfer was selected as a type of mediator between faculty and student perspectives.

The interview and focus group questions were drawn from careful consideration of current community college practices and issues I have observed, such as assessment and placement and curriculum development. The literature reviewed for this study also contributed to the development of the interview and focus group questions.

Student focus groups and faculty interviews were conducted on all three credit campuses of the district being studied. The course outline of record was accessed through
CurricuNet, a service website maintained by the district being studied. The course outline of record is a public document; accessing it through CurricuNet required no permissions.

During September, October, and November of 2009, faculty interviews were conducted. There was a secure level of confidentiality in the faculty interviews. Interviews took place on the campus of the faculty member’s choice, in a location determined in agreement with the faculty member and the researcher. The interview protocol was consistent for 13 of the faculty interviews. Upon the suggestion of one interviewee, the order of the protocol questions was varied. The interview questions themselves, however, remained the same for each interviewee. It was not readily apparent to the researcher whether or not this alteration affected interviewee responses. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriber. Data files of interviews and their corresponding transcripts, kept on compact disc and flash drive, were stored in a secure area.

There are many advantages to using student focus groups, but because they provide “the opportunity to observe a large amount of interaction on a topic in a limited period of time” (Morgan 1997, p.8), focus groups with basic skills students across the community college district in this study provide it with a reliable framework. As Latess (2008) put it, “social abstractions, like education, are best understood through the experiences of those individuals who are the stakeholders” (p. 3). I worked during the fall 2009 semester with four groups of students, with between two and nine students per group. Attempts were made to retain representation from all three campuses of the multi-campus district. The focus group procedure was selected due to its potential ability to
“give voice” (Latess p. 133) to a class of students whose voices have only recently begun to draw national attention, if only through statistics or other quantifiable data.

The researcher worked during November 2009 with four groups of students, with between two and nine students per group. Attempts were made to retain representation from all three campuses of the multi-campus district. Fifteen students participated in focus group interviews – numbering between two and nine participants per group – and one student participated in an individual interview; all student subjects were enrolled in a section of English 49 (Basic Composition) during the Fall 2009 semester. Focus groups took place during November 2009. Student interviews were conducted in conference rooms and classrooms across the district; these interviews were likewise recorded with a digital voice recorder. Digital recordings were then transferred to the researcher’s personal computer as audio files. The original digital recordings were then deleted from the voice recorder. Digital recordings were backed up onto two additional media: compact disc and “thumb” drive. Both the compact disc and the thumb drive were stored securely in the researcher’s home.

Both the focus groups and the interviews were conducted until a level of saturation – defined by Strauss and Corbin as the point at which “no new properties, dimensions, conditions, actions/interactions, or consequences are seen in the data” (1998 p. 136) – had been achieved. For the purposes of transcription of all interviews, a professional transcriber was contracted. In October and December of 2009, the transcriber had brief access to the researcher’s thumb drive in order to transfer files. The transcriber assured the researcher that all files would be destroyed after the transcription process was completed.
Toward the end of identifying how the “larger culture” mentioned by Charmaz participates in the construction of the reality of basic skills students, a document analysis of the course outline of record for English 49 (Basic Composition) – the district’s composition course one level below the transfer level – was conducted. Course outlines of record in the district under study are integrated; that is, all three campuses in the district use a single, standard course outline for English 49. The course outline of record is a public document; it was accessed through CurricuNET, an electronic archive of such documents. (Please see Appendix C for a copy of the course outline of record for English 49.)

Taylor and Bogdan (1998) have noted that public documents “lend insights into the perspectives, assumptions, concerns, and activities of those who produce them” (p. 129). Course outlines are no exception to this observation; as a reflection of the mission and culture of their respective colleges (and the result of careful faculty deliberation), they are particularly germane to this study. Because of the deeply contested nature of what constitutes the definition of “college level” or “transfer level,” only the course outline of record for coursework one level below the transfer level was analyzed. It cannot be overemphasized the extent to which the course one level below the transfer level has become a contested site for a variety of stakeholders and policymakers.

The course outline of record for English 49, Basic Composition – common to all three campuses in the district being studied – was analyzed in three specific areas related to the questions asked of focus group and interview participants: the student learning outcomes, the methods of instruction laid out in the outline, and the methods of assessment. Because the course outline of record is not only a binding document, but also
a guideline for faculty innovation in the classroom, it provided me with a benchmark for coding and deriving themes from interview and focus group responses.

Instrument Design

The fact that the basic skills phenomenon is a growing one across California is borne out in the district under study. In the fall 2009 semester, for example, the district offered sixty-six sections of the course under study, English 49 (Basic Composition). This represents a sizable representation of district resources dedicated to basic skills students. Of course, where there are students, there must also be instruction and other support services. My interview questions – as extensions of the larger research questions forming the basis of the study – were designed with such a dynamic relationship in mind. (See Appendix D for the student focus group interview protocol and Appendix E for the faculty interview protocol.)

The protocols developed for this study – a series of questions intended to cull from its subjects their perceptions about a phenomena ranging from preparation for writing in college (students) to how they felt supported by the institution to develop curriculum (faculty) – was the result of careful examination of the literature reviewed in chapter two of this study in conjunction with the researcher’s proximity to the topic being studied. Fontana and Frey (1994, p. 361) have claimed that “interviewing is one of the most common and most powerful ways we use to try to understand our fellow human beings.” Indeed, interviewing subjects to glean their perceptions about their experiences as either basic skills students or basic skills instructors appeared to be the most appropriate route by which to develop the grounded theory that emerged from the research conducted for this project.
Data Analysis Strategies

As data were collected, the constant comparison method essential to the development of grounded theory provided, at first, open coding, characterized by Strauss and Corbin (1998) as impressionistic (p. 224). As themes emerged from open coding and were compared against one another, a context began to emerge; this context is where axial coding is sited (Strauss & Corbin 1998; Charmaz 2006), and where sub themes began to emerge. As the themes and sub themes developed through open and axial coding are analyzed through further constant comparison, selective coding can begin. Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggested that selective coding “denotes the final step in the analysis – the integration of concepts around a core category and the filling in of categories in need of further development and refinement” (pp. 236-237). This method led to the emergence of the main theme and sub themes for this study.

The constructivist framework being applied to this study informed the development of the focus group and individual interview questions. The current landscape of basic skills students and their success rests much upon the way that instructors and institutions can meet them at the level of individual need. With respect to this, the crucial assertion made by Fosnot and Perry (2005) bears citation: “Implied [in constructivism] is the position that we as human beings have no access to an objective reality since we are constructing our version of it, while at the same time transforming it and ourselves” (pp. 27-28). Contributing to this concept is an axiom common to qualitative methodology and grounded theory in particular: the researcher is the instrument. Further, Charmaz (2006) has argued that “constructivists study how – and
sometimes *why* – participants construct meanings and actions in specific situations” (p. 130).

Therefore, in order to conduct an analysis consistent with the tenets of grounded theory, I proceeded in the following fashion. Audio files from both the student focus groups and the faculty interviews were transcribed through a third party service onto Microsoft Word, resulting in over six-hundred pages of transcripts. I read the transcripts individually to check for accuracy, and occasionally found it necessary to refer to the voice recordings stored on my computer for clarification. After an initial reading of the transcripts, I began to make marginal notations. At this point, I also began noting in vivo codes, incidents of striking language that seemed to cut to the character of the data. Comparing the data – faculty to faculty, student to student, and faculty to student – led to further refinement of the language and the emergence of initial codes.

At this point, I fed the interview transcripts into AtlasTi software to sort initial codes and emerging themes. Using the software helped greatly in following the next steps in developing a grounded theory: the widely accepted sequential practice of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Charmaz 2006; Strauss & Corbin 1998) as the sampling gains depth and breadth. Following such protocol allows for the development of another cornerstone of grounded theory: the conditional matrix, which “helps toward specifying conditions and consequences, at every level of scale from the most ‘macro’ to the ‘micro,’ and integrating them into the resulting theory” (Strauss and Corbin 1994; see Appendix F for the conditional coding matrix derived from this study). Examining such “conditions and consequences” is necessary for applying the experiences of basic skills students into the larger arena of community college institutional effectiveness.
Pilot Study Results

I conducted pilot interviews and focus groups at a community college in the same region as those under scrutiny in this study. Student demographics are roughly approximate, and the cognate course at the pilot campus corresponds to the course being studied in this proposal. Likewise, faculty members interviewed for the pilot study appear to share many of the characteristics of their colleagues in the multi-campus district that forms the focus of this study. The pilot interviews generated a range of responses from the participants, and I was able to judge from some responses that the relationship between the students, their teachers, and the institution – the essence of this study – is one of gravity.

Interaction between student focus group participants, while a little stiff at first, became more relaxed as they found areas of similar experience to comment upon. Ever candid, the students I interviewed seemed particularly attuned to the gap between their preparation in high school English classes and the expectations of their college-level writing instructors. As a result of the pilot, I added more specificity to the focus group question concerning high school preparation. In addition, consultation with my committee led to a revision of the question about how students are challenged or not challenged on their writing classes led to a revision of another focus group question. The faculty likewise voiced similar concerns. For example, of particular note were the questions that asked respondents to consider their teaching philosophy for basic skills writers, and how the course outline of record was implemented in the development of curriculum.
Interestingly, the focus group question concerning the student perception of how well the activities and teaching in the classroom matched the syllabus (which is based on the course outline of record), was answered with much more alacrity and deliberation by the students than was the question about the role of the course outline of record in curriculum development by faculty members in their interviews. This line of thought indeed proved to be consistent as I gathered data in the district under study, the results of which can be seen in the next chapter.
Chapter 4: Summary of Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how student and faculty perceptions of learning in a basic writing program are affected by institutional culture at a multi campus community college district. The study used faculty and student interviews in conjunction with a document analysis of the course outline of record for the composition course one level below transfer to generate its data. The data analysis strategies described in chapter three yielded an overarching theme of “engagement as process,” around which a grounded theory can cohere. The type of engagement being described here (focused solely on basic skills writing) resides in a place somewhere between student preparation and institutional expectation. That is, the best practices in both student advising and instruction that seem to indicate and measure engagement, while valid, are deferred here in favor of what students and faculty perceive to be the outcome of their mutual efforts: a promise made to underprepared students that, even though their writing skills may not have yet arrived at a level traditionally and historically reserved for those entering the larger societal conversation authorized by a college education, the curriculum, faculty, and institutions are prepared to serve them. When expectations are clear, the process of becoming engaged – whether student to institution, faculty to institution, faculty to student, or institution to both – can be seen as beneficial to all stakeholders.

Crucial to the emergent concept of engagement as process were three ancillary themes, largely derived from the interview protocols: “preparation for college level writing,” “curriculum development,” and “institutional culture.” In conjunction with one another, the main theme and ancillary themes produced the following theory: engagement
doesn’t exist in isolated pockets of institutional culture (e.g. student advising or curriculum committees). Engagement is a continuously occurring process (rather than a product) that ushers students and faculty toward intended outcomes; it affects students, faculty, and institution differently, but simultaneously. So, for example, students can be engaged with the institution, but disengaged from the curriculum; or, faculty can be engaged with the classroom but not with the curriculum development process. As such, the conditions for engagement occur when the learner and the subject are bound by a common force, in this case a college’s mission statement. An appropriate metaphor, as illustrated by Figure 1, would be to consider the phenomenon of engagement as process as it is presented in this study in terms of a solar system. The main theme of engagement as learning process stands at the center of this system; campus mission is the gravitational belt that holds the ancillary themes in its orbit. Like gravity, the campus’s mission is a largely unseen – but nevertheless irresistible – force. As in all such systems, there will be times when one satellite orbits closer to the system’s center; at other times it will be further away from the center. For the time and place during which this study took place, the fall 2009 semester at one multiple-campus community college district, a snapshot of this system would show preparation for college level writing at the far end of the orbit, farthest from engagement as process, while curriculum development and institutional culture are more in alignment with the center.
Figure 1. The orbit of influences on engagement as a process in a basic skills writing course.
Figure one, in addition to the central theme and the ancillary themes, was developed with the assistance of a conditional coding matrix (Appendix F) and a reflective coding guide (see Appendix G for the reflective coding matrix). The coding matrices, in turn, were developed as a result of the constant comparison of interview data that had been processed through ATLAS.ti software. The following paragraph will present the process by which the grounded theory of engagement as learning process was developed.

As is common in grounded theory development (Wasserman, Clair, & Wilson 2009), the ancillary themes derived from selective coding that undergird the central theme were essential to the emergence of the central theme of engagement. These ancillary themes were “preparation for college level writing,” “curriculum development and delivery,” and “institutional culture.” In turn, each of these ancillary themes could be further subcategorized by type via open coding, both by hand and with the assistance of the computer program. Thus, the ancillary theme of “preparation for college level writing” emerged as a result of constantly comparing interview data against occurrences in the software of open codes corresponding to the faculty and student interview protocols. Similarly, the ancillary theme of “curriculum development and delivery” was compared to open codes that were generated by the faculty interviews; the ancillary theme of “institutional culture” was compared against the open codes fed into the software and which corresponded to the faculty interview protocol.

The interview transcripts identified as “High School Experiences” and “Preparation” (student interviews) and “Skills Lacking” and “BS Writers’ Strengths” (faculty interviews) provided the ancillary theme of “preparation for college level
writing” with its data. As with other interview transcripts, these transcripts were first read and open coded by hand. The transcripts were then parlayed into ATLAS.ti for open, axial, and selective coding. The code “writing” appeared fifty one times in faculty interviews concerned with the skills faculty felt students lacked upon matriculation to the community college; the same code appeared forty-seven times in the aforementioned student interview transcripts.

Key components from three areas of the course outline of record under examination (student learning outcomes, methods of instruction, and methods of assessment) contributed to the ancillary themes of “preparation for college writing” and “curriculum development.” Emergent codes were matched against faculty and student responses using ATLAS.ti software. In the student interviews, transcribed as “High School Experiences,” “High School Preparation,” “Feelings About Placement Level,” “Student Perceptions of Curriculum,” “Student Perceptions of Course Syllabus,” and “Student Changes to Curriculum,” the following codes germane to this section of the analysis were generated: “reading,” “writing,” and “learning.” The code “reading” occurred sixty times in student interviews; the code “writing” occurred forty-seven times, and the code “learning” occurred one hundred-six times. A code later deemed complementary to those previously mentioned, “assessment,” occurred a total of fifty-five times in student discussions of curriculum. The code “outcomes” occurred a total of twenty-one times in student interviews. Key words in this code that the software was commanded to identify were: “analyze,” “process,” “revise,” “in-class,” “edit,” “draft,” “grammar,” and “critical thinking”; the language of the course outline of record, in essence. The same code yielded eighty-one occurrences in the faculty interviews,
transcribed as “Composition Philosophy,” “Perceived Lack of Skills in Basic Writers,”
“Perceived Strengths of Basic Writers,” “Role of the Course Outline of Record,”
“Professional Development,” and “Institutional Support.”

In the development of the third ancillary theme, “institutional culture,” faculty
transcripts titled “Composition Philosophy,” “Course Outline,” and “Support,” informed
the data set. The code “evaluation,” consisting primarily of language from the above-
cited sections of the course outline of record, occurred a total of sixty-nine times in the
transcripts. Interview transcripts designated “Support” and “Professional Development”
for faculty, and “Syllabus” and “Curriculum” for students provided this ancillary theme
with its codes. The code “support” itself appeared sixty times in faculty interviews, while
the code “development” appeared a total of one hundred sixty-six times. The code
“culture” appeared a total of 77 times in the cited interview transcripts.

Thus, the constant comparison of interview data yielded the codes and ancillary
themes that participated in the development of both the conditional and reflective coding
matrices for this study. In turn, these matrices informed the development of the model of
“engagement as process” illustrated by Figure 1. The remainder of this chapter will
present brief summaries of the major findings of the ancillary themes, followed by a
textual analysis of interview data in the context of the study’s main theme, engagement as
process.

Engagement as process appears to be interrupted at the level of the transition from
high school to college from both faculty and student perspectives. However, faculty
perceptions point to a willingness to tap into the energy and enthusiasm basic skills
writers bring to the classroom. For their part, students appear to be willing to engage in
the curriculum offered by their instructors, provided that clear and consistent guidelines are inherent or otherwise embedded in the basic writing curriculum.

The process of engagement in this ancillary theme appears to be most deeply impacted by actual classroom practice, rather than ant institutional mandates; that is, curriculum development combines both formal and informal activities, but does not rely solely upon mandated documents such as the course outline of record. Faculty members are aware of the course outline of record, but its use is perfunctory, and appears to have no influence of teaching philosophy. The faculty perspective suggests that this distance from the course outline does not appear to affect the process of faculty/student engagement. Student perception would appear to support this observation; students appear to be willing to participate in the curricular design offered by their instructors, regardless of its provenance. Engagement as process is sustainable at this level.

The basic premise behind this theme may be summarized thusly: if engagement is a process, a dynamic institutional culture must be in place to accommodate the activities that make the process viable. In the multi campus district under investigation in this study, no institutional barriers appear to exist to prevent the process of becoming engaged between the faculty and their respective campus cultures during the fall 2009 semester in the basic writing program of each respective campus. Even in the perceived absence of institutional support at a macro level, faculty are able to negotiate for themselves suitable alternatives. The process of engagement appears to be divided between formal and informal activities. The informal activities include department meetings in which faculty share best practices or learn new methods of developing or presenting curriculum. Formal activities are those that have been funded through statewide initiatives; as such they carry
with them a sense of urgency that occasionally translates into excitement for faculty. The following analysis will shed light on the ancillary themes as they are related to the main theme.

Ancillary Theme 1: Perceptions of Preparation for College Level Writing

The teaching and learning nexus in relation to the process of engagement finds a powerful voice in faculty and student perceptions of preparedness for college level writing. Hovering around the words of both students and faculty, the general concept of engagement nevertheless inhabits most perceptions of what it means to be prepared to write at the college level. While faculty expressed some concern with the level of preparation on a purely structural level (e.g. those things that are the domain of the course outline of record), most interviewees were laudatory with regard to student willingness to be engaged with the curriculum. For their part, students likewise deferred to descriptions of day-to-day activities in their high school English classes and how these may or may not have prepared them for their community college writing expectations.

Although types of reading assignments were recalled with some fondness by most students, many faculty responses indicated that such fondness may not have translated into reading skills that are necessary at the college level. For example, many student interviewees recalled having read novels such as *Enrique’s Journey* (“That was my favorite one.”), *The Catcher in the Rye* (“My parents took offense at the reading material and so I was pulled out”), or *Like Water for Chocolate* (“That was the last book I read. That is the only thing I remember”), books they enjoyed, books that held for the students “things that we’re interested in.” In contrast, the type of reading material assigned in their basic skills writing courses made one student observe that
“I would say that the reading parts … was kind of difficult for me. I kind of take the stories personal. Like some of the stories actually make me feel uncomfortable reading, like based on what certain things are about, but I guess, you know, I have to do it since it is the assignment. And the writing, it is not much of a challenge, it is just -- I was just trying to put more extra effort into it I guess, and like when I feel like wanting to actually put that effort, you know, I will make the A, but I just kind of end up slacking off. It is kind of like the stories don't really -- some of them do relate with kind of like a theme or a main idea, but the topic of the story is totally different. So like some of them are about hardship and places, somewhere like war and stuff like that, but then some of them are like people's personal experience. Like one lady volunteering at a homeless shelter to find out why people are homeless. And one of them is about people burning down their houses and wiping out the town to rebuild this whole community. So they are totally different. Every week it is just kind of like a different thing. So, it is kind of just like, I am just wondering what the next story is gonna be, if I'm gonna like it or not.”

Another student exchange, centered on the differences between high school and college reading assignments, generated the following dialogue:

“I just noticed that our teacher in the beginning of the semester, you know, she gave us a book. And, you know, she…”

“Told us to read the book.”
“She doesn't really go too much details into the book. She is kind of more like, here is the book, you know, it is self -- you know -- it is all about, how motivated are you to read this book? I can't really tell you. You know, you're in college. Here is the book. Go get the help. I will tell you where to get the help, but, you know, if you don't do it, it is up to you.”

The contrast between expectation and reality for the students is stark; what had engaged them in their high school assignments finds no consistency in their college reading assignments. The process of engagement is interrupted.

Faculty perceptions about student preparation for reading in their basic skills writing courses were equally revealing. Some interviewees recognized in their students a link between reading and writing fluency. For example, one instructor made the following remark:

“I think a lot of it is probably a lack of exposure and a lack of just experience with English. Because I noticed even in my English 51 classes, some of the students that seem to write fluently, that seem to write better, even grammatically and stylistically, when I talk to them one-on-one, I find out they have a joy of reading. They tend to read a lot of novels. Maybe not the things that we would read in college, but I noticed they have read a lot. And I can notice that pretty readily. They might not be the most obedient, they might not follow the structure we're learning in class, but they tend to be much more fluent, the grammar seems to be better. Yeah, I noticed that a lot. ‘You must read a lot, don't you?’ And then they will say, ‘Yeah.’ And they well tell me what they read… A lot of
times students say, ‘Can you recommend something for me to read?’ And I say, ‘Well, what classes are you taking?’ ‘I'm taking history, health.’ I say, ‘Why don't you read those textbooks and then you can be reading and studying for the class?’ ‘Oh, not a bad idea.’”

In this advocacy for reading across the disciplines, and the recognition that students who read more can at times translate the skills necessary for decoding text into their own writing assignments, an attempt to facilitate the process of engagement presents itself.

For some student interviewees, there was surprise at the absence of alignment between their high school and college English classes; others took a more practical approach, seeing their enrollment in a basic skills writing course as a necessary step toward mastery of the subject. Two students, in recalling their individual high school writing experiences, offered the following dialogue:

“For me I don't know -- well, I would say it sort of prepared me, but the thing is since I went to a small school, it was more like we got the teacher's attention. Well, we do get the teacher's attention in my college course, but the writing, it is more harder. You have to put a lot more effort than you used to in high school because in high school I could just write an essay and get an A on it, but over here it is actually hard to obtain that A. I guess my teacher's expectation of college level is more different than how they must have taken it, and so things change, and expectations get higher as you go up into a different level.”
The disjunct between the two systems – K12 and the community college – the distancing of the satellite from the process of engagement, so to speak, is noticeable as well in the following student commentary:

“And I think, too, when you're in high school it is kind of where you're learning the different rules of writing and stuff, and maybe when you get in college the teachers already expect you to know those rules, so when you're making those mistakes you get penalized for them because some of those mistakes you should have already learned in high school.

When questioned further about the apparent curricular misalignment between high school and the community college, some students posited possible explanations, some of which touch – however intuitively – on teaching philosophy. For example, the student who made the following observation may him- or herself be speculating as to the nature of how engagement finds its impetus: what tools it takes to contribute to the larger classroom or institutional conversation.

“I think it kind of maybe just depends on the teacher. I mean, yeah, it is different from high school to college, and everybody has their own stage of where they are at, because some things in English might be easy for me, but hard for another and vice versa. I think sometimes the teacher might have a little more expectations because -- the college teacher might have different expectations because my English class could be totally different from somebody else's English class even though we are at the same level of English”
Other students were blunt in their assessment of the preparation they received in high school, and they made it plain that their engagement with the curriculum and the instructors wasn’t valued, stunting the potential for engagement as process at a crucial moment. With regard to the how he felt that he had been prepared in high school for college-level writing, one focus group interviewee offered “Poorly,” and when prompted, continued in this way:

“Because, well, I don't know like in my high school, it was really ghetto, so I basically got by saying that I would try harder, and I never really did. And now that I'm here, it's like I really have to try. Like I know, like I'm still wondering what I got on the recent essay we just did which is like timed. But I know I can do a great job when I set my mind to it, but like in high school you didn't really have to care because they were just like, you know -- you were there and the teachers would say, we will give you a second chance. If you did poorly on an assignment you could just do it again. But here it is like, one shot and, you know…”

Clearly seeking a way to become engaged with the curriculum, this student instead finds that avenues for such engagement – experiences in the high school writing curriculum as they lead to the college writing classroom – have been difficult to negotiate. Adding resonance to the exchange was the comment made immediately after the previous student finished:

“We got by. And anyways, for me, because I was in special education classes, they kind of shoved me aside. I was the person that couldn't be helped.”
The resiliency of the basic skills student, the willingness to become engaged with the curriculum and the institutional culture in spite of significant setbacks, was reiterated time and again in both student and faculty interviews. In fact, the survival skills implied by the idea of “getting by” proves to be an entrée into what the faculty perceived to be their students’ strengths as basic skills writers, namely resiliency and potential. For example, consider how the following faculty member negotiates the task of bringing the basic skills writing student to the point of engagement with the larger academic world:

“I really, especially below 101, I -- and I want to -- hopefully it doesn't sound terrible … It is almost not the ideas, because there is an aspect of critical thinking. It is: Be clear, have structure and organization. So it is almost like filling in pieces to a puzzle in a way. And the students that are ready, that I see in their writing, that they are ready to push that analysis, and push what they are saying, and get away from over generalizations, and get away from B.S., I'm pushing them. If somebody is not really there yet, and this is where I feel like I'm a little different from other people, I'm not like the -- if you're not ready to talk about the ideas, if you're not really ready to have much to say because you're organization and structure are so far off that nobody can get to your idea, I really am gonna help that person with that, this is where your topic goes, this is what a support is, and this is what detail is. And this is where it goes, and this is where you put your periods.”

This response suggests an awareness of the process of engagement: the faculty member has devised curricular delivery methods that lead the students into the culture of college
writing, with clear goals and outcomes. One can detect both advocacy and assistance in the above remarks, two conditions that appear to be essential to facilitating engagement as process.

Another senior faculty member, whose career has been centered around the instruction of basic skills writers, noted the dynamic relationship between student and instructor in remarks made about strengths basic writers bring to the classroom:

“Well, one of the biggest strengths is the willingness to risk, and that disappears about somewhere between 101 and 205 level, because they will try anything. You know, they have nothing to lose and they're usually pretty open, and I -- the ones I have met are highly motivated. They are like small Wordsworthian creatures, not spoiled yet. And I think that is probably one of their strengths. And, of course, at _____ College they bring a lot of life skills. It is -- I haven't heard for a long, long time students say they have nothing to write about. They have plenty to say. So I think those two things are their strengths…Well, I guess what I'm saying is not -- they have plenty of life experience. What is our average age here at _____? I think it is 27 1/2 or 28…So a lot of them have families already, they have been working, they have other jobs. They have life experiences that they can draw on to write… Sometimes they are not that articulate either verbally or in writing, but they certainly have things to say. They are much more on task. You want them being much more on task. The other thing about the willingness to risk is they're perfectly happy to tell you if you're failing…Yeah, it is helpful if you're
teaching. It is really helpful to hear what works and what doesn't work, 
where as the more conventional student who is more, has bought into the 
system more, will sit there and take it. Not understand anything you're 
trying to do, but just pretend. And that is not how learning happens.”

The above citation reveals a wealth of information about the perceptions experienced 
faculty members in this district have with regard to the potential of the basic writing 
student and the implications for engagement as process: their life situations and ages, for 
example. Of interest, as well, is the perception of the willingness on behalf of the basic 
skills writer to take risks in contrast to students enrolled in transfer level courses, who 
may only “pretend” to be learning. The stark contrast between the perceived authenticity 
of the basic writing student and the inauthentic responses of the transfer-level writing 
student is of particular interest, and may point to how engagement as process can be 
distinguished from traditional conceptions of engagement.

Critical thinking, so frequently cited in expressions of instructor philosophy and 
the strengths of basic skills students in the district under study informs another facet of 
engagement as process. For example, with regard to critical thinking and the basic skills 
writing student, another faculty member noticed that

“When they share their papers and read them out loud, they just throw their whole 

bodies into it. They just really get behind it when they enjoy what they are 
writing, and they will just stand up there so proudly, and sometimes use a 
lot of body language to express themselves. And so that is one of their 

strengths is that many of them really want to share what they write, and 

they feel that it is important. Somewhere along -- somewhere in the
semester that generally happens, that they begin to feel that their writing is important. And they are also very keen observers. The way that they -- the way that they look at the world always astounds me, and experience the world always astounds me. And I don't know what to say about that beyond the fact that they are very keen observers… Once you get them started on the concept of critical thinking they won’t stop. Yeah, once they know that it is okay and it is expected, then it just boils out of them. They love to question authority. That is their favorite thing.”

The same advocacy and willingness to usher the students into the process of becoming engaged members of the larger campus culture can be seen in these remarks. This same faculty member then went on to explain how students respond to being given challenges normally associated with transfer-level writing classes:

“I go beyond what is expected. I go beyond the minimum. Because what I have noticed is that … sometimes students in 49 are chomping at the bit to do some research because they have done that in high school. They have done some kind of Internet research anyway. And they associate that with being a real student. So, I don't know for how long, for maybe the last six or seven years, I've been asking them to do too many research papers. And I teach in them how to summarize, and paraphrase, and how to document. And they just really grab on to that. They love that. And they present their papers to the rest of the class very enthusiastically.”

The potential for engagement is clearly suggested by both faculty and student responses. How this potential can be tapped touches on the next ancillary theme.
Ancillary Theme 2: Perceptions of Curriculum Development and Delivery

The document for analysis in this proposal, the course outline of record for English 49, proved to be the catalyst for the initial exploration of how the central theme and its attendant sub themes interacted and influenced one another. Student and faculty perceptions of the course outline of record and the syllabi it is intended to guide provide the starting point of the discussion.

For the purposes of this study, three components of the official course outline of record for English 49 were examined (see Appendix C for the complete outline). After citing each of these, student and faculty perceptions surrounding each will be detailed.

“Upon successful completion of the course the student will be able to:

1. Read and analyze expository prose as a basis for writing, class discussion, and reading skill enhancement.

2. Use appropriate strategies from the writing process including pre-writing, composing, revising, and editing techniques, considering audience and purpose.

3. Plan, write, and revise essays and other assignments comprising a total of 4,000-5,000 graded words in compositions that are unified, developed, purposeful, and appropriate in tone for the intended audience.

4. Produce in-class essays that demonstrate organizing, composing, revising, editing, and time-management skills.
5. Apply an intermediate knowledge of appropriate mechanical and grammatical structures to support essay development and successful expression of meaning.

6. Apply critical thinking skills to reading, writing and class discussion on academic as well as personal topics.”

The transcription concerned with faculty perceptions of the course outline contributed seven instances of the code “outcomes.” In contrast, the code “syllabus” in the same transcript appeared one hundred forty-nine times.

A possible explanation for this disparity – the syllabus logically follows from the course outline of record, but the course outline of record appears not to figure prominently as faculty consider their syllabi – may be gleaned from faculty perceptions about each of these entities as they inform curriculum development and course conceptualization. Several faculty members, both full- and part-time, recently hired members of their departments and veteran, senior faculty members, expressed ambivalence and occasionally ignorance toward the course outline of record:

“I couldn't tell you what's on the course outline of record. I know I looked at it at one point, but let me tell you this. The only reason that I know that it exists is because for two years I was working with Title Three doing Learning Communities, and I had to learn how to use CuricuNet. And so I'm playing around with CuricuNet and I thought, oh, look at that. There's a course outline… But I came to _____ with five years full-time teaching experience, and I basically just did what I had always done with a new course and said, hey, can I get a couple sample syllabi from people so I
can see what …what is going on here. And then I put together a syllabus
based on what I had done before, and with adjustments based on what it
looked like was a little different here…when I got English 49 -- and I had
already been talking to people quite a bit when I was assigned English 49,
so I felt like it didn't -- my first thought was not to go to the course outline.
So there you are. I'm sure I saw it at some point, but I didn't speak to it.”

Another faculty member remarked in a similar fashion:

“I don't think it has much of a role at all… I know what you need to do,
like the kind of verbs you need to use and stuff. So that was the only time
I ever read it really carefully. Oh, and the 51 one of course. We have
worked with that…But it is not like look at the course outline and go,
okay, what is expected of me? What am I fulfilling in this outline? And
what am I not? I guess because I have taught they way I've taught for a
while, and I figure it is pretty much like what other people do in terms of
how many writing assignments I give and, you know. I figure I give
everybody plenty of what they need. And maybe that is just me ego
tripping…”

One faculty member, after some initial reflection, made the following observations,
which demonstrate how the course outline of record may have a direct impact on
classroom instruction:

“Yeah, I think when I am making my syllabus I do look at the outcomes. It
has been a while since I have to whole re-create my syllabus, so it is a
little hard to say. Boy, you kind of stumped me here. I have to think
about this one … Well, I guess as far as making sure the students understand the basics of writing a solid essay, understanding the meaning of a introduction, a thesis statement, the importance of a topic sentence, you know, the basics we teach in a course like 49….Coherence, support, writing a strong conclusion, those are definitely part of the way I conceive the course because I want to make sure -- those are, getting to back to my analogy, the bricks of which a good essay is made.”

This ambivalence toward the course outline of record would at first appear to represent a point of disengagement with institutional culture; closer examination reveals, however, that the contrary may be true: that the course outline simply monitors the process in a way that allows for freedom to make curricular adjustments that lead to course outcomes. One senior faculty member candidly remarked about the learning outcomes for English 49 that “I should be able to quote them. I almost did there a little while ago.” In most instances, it appears that the learning outcomes on the course outline are deferred in favor of the more practical – and predictable, perhaps – applications that might be better suited to the following component for analysis, methods of instruction.

“Methods of instruction may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- A) Lecture, discussion, and group work related to a topic or theme from course readings that are the basis for written assignments
- B) Lecture, discussion, and group work to present and practice principles of the writing process
- C) Lecture, discussion and group work to evaluate written student work for content, organization, and accuracy
• D) Group work or pair work for peer evaluation and editing practice
• E) Handouts and exercises created by the instructor which focus on the grammatical needs of the class with examples taken from student writing.
• F) Audio-visual aids such as films, videos, music, websites, and interviews
• G) Individual or group work utilizing Writing Centers
• H) Computer-assisted instruction to provide practice with sentence structure, composing techniques, grammar and mechanics
• I) Tours of libraries, Learning Resource Centers and computer labs.”

The above list presents a broad array of delivery methods, many of which anticipate the stated learning outcomes for the course. The following quotations indicate that faculty are aware of the close relationship between their methods of instruction and the desired outcome of their efforts, even when the actual language of the course outline learning outcomes is not present. For example, one faculty member asserted that

“I teach the students that writing is a collaborative activity, that it is something that you're going to need beyond college. One of the things I do around the first week of class is I ask them, why do you think you're in this class? Why do you think you're in this class? And I get answers like, well, to learn to write a good paragraph. I need to learn to write well, you know, something along those lines. And I tell them, okay, well that is true. And I tell them that that may be, but let's look a little bit beyond that. I tell them that before I came to the academia I was in the private sector. I worked in marketing, I worked as a technical writer, website content development, a little bit of journalism, so I did some professional
communications. And I try to impress upon them the importance of communication in the work place, and how this class is not just simply to teach you how to write a better essay, which it will, but more importantly it is a way -- it is a tool for your academic tool chest to help you become a better communicator, a better thinker. What we are really concerned about in the long run is the quality of your thinking, that don't confuse the map with the territory. We are not here to just look at the paper and say, write a good paper. No, the paper is just a path, it is a tool to help you become…to improve the quality of your thinking, become a better thinker, not just to write a good essay. A good essay will reflect the quality of your thinking we hope, but it is not the end product here."

The faculty member clearly perceives that the outcomes are the intended result of instruction, but the detail given to the practical matters of the class – that is, writing paragraphs – occupies a central role, the focal point, of direct classroom instruction. Moreover, it should be noted that learning is perceived as a process by this particular interviewee, reflecting, perhaps, the dominant pedagogical trend in composition to view writing and thinking as discursive and recursive processes. Taking a similar approach to the concept of how teaching and outcomes intersect each other in sometimes subtle ways, another professor put it like this:

“I mean the way that I teach, which I think sometimes is in contrast with, you know, with other philosophies of teaching, is I try to give them a certain amount of latitude in terms of what they are writing about, and what their focus is. Because what I have found over time is that if they are
able to pursue something that interests them within particular parameters, I'm teaching a particular kind of writing. But if they feel some ownership over what they are doing, if they are able to, if somebody is interested in, you know, interested in cars, or interested in psychology, or whatever it is they are able to use that, what I find is that their writing really flourishes when they feel some ownership what they are doing. So I try as often as possible to say this is the kind of writing we are doing right now, but you can write about what you would like, because that way they produce something that they are proud of, they have a lot of information to bear.”

This citation is one of many that touched on the central theme that resonated through both faculty and student interview responses, and which in turn resulted in the grounded theory for this study, that of engagement as process. In fact, faculty perceptions in the district under study during the fall 2009 semester suggest that the process of developing curriculum is ongoing and dynamic. It is worth examining the words of another instructor to observe how the relationship between teaching, outcomes, and engagement as process are perceived philosophically:

“I felt like I was teaching to the test. And I didn't think it was necessarily a terrible test, you know, but I didn't feel like the best thing to do for my students was to teach this one, only this one kind of writing, through the whole semester. And I wanted to give them a little more flexibility, plus they didn't get that ownership I was talking about, because I have always taught that way. I teach that way in English 101 as well, where I want them to be able to use some of their own interests, some of their own
things they feel confident about and use that in their writing, because I felt like that is such a confidence builder for them, and such a motivator for them. I have had students who just would do terribly and all of the sudden they would find a topic that they were just so excited about. And they would blossom, and that just was important to me to include that. So I sort of -- it was good experience, and it is like, okay, I can see the rationale for teaching this way, and they do learn a lot. They learn a lot about how to read critically, how to use information from text. I mean there are a lot of good skills that you learn that way, but it didn't work for me. I mean I think -- I think as teachers we all -- we are not all gonna teach the same, and I don't necessarily think that is a bad with thing. There is such a push toward consistency…you know, there is a push across the board toward consistency, and outcomes, and what have you. And, you know, while I see that there is a value to saying, this is what they should have learned at the end, I don't want to ever be in a place where we are all being told to teach with the exact same syllabus, with the exact same materials, because I think we all have our strengths. And I don't think that is bad for the students. I don't think there is anything wrong.”

The emphasis in this citation on the dynamic and organic emergence of learning to write in a basic skills classroom makes a compelling case for seeing engagement as a process.

At the nexus of instruction and engagement comes the next component, evaluation.
“A student's grade will be based on multiple measures of performance unless the course requires no grade. Multiple measures may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- I. In-class essays evaluated for content, organization, grammar, mechanics, and understanding the reading prompt.
- II. Out-of-class essays evaluated for effectiveness of revision of content and organization as well as editing for grammatical and mechanical issues.
- III. Timed-writing examination holistically graded by the English department.
- IV. Evaluation of written assignments such as answers to comprehension questions, summaries and notes.
- V. Participation in class showing leadership, teamwork, problem solving, analytical and negotiation skills in activities such as collaborative group work, class discussion and oral presentations.
- VI. Observation of preparedness for class (e.g., completing assignments on time and being organized.
- VII. Quizzes and tests.
- VIII. Holistic portfolio evaluation by English Department faculty.”

Due to a recent shift in practice in the college district, much of the faculty discourse around methods of evaluating student work centered on the fundamental differences between using a portfolio of student work versus a holistically-graded in-class timed writing as the most accurate indicator of a student’s preparation for the transfer-level composition course. Moreover, observations made about the differences between
these two evaluative methods revealed faculty perceptions about the character of basic skills writing students and the nature of engaging them. Consider the following quote, from a faculty interview:

“first thing popped in my mind was the book *Errors and Expectations*, Mina Shaughnessy, and how, the book is talking about how the students we're dealing with – and I know at San Diego City College, a lot of the English 49 students are very similar to those students that Shaughnessy is discussing – how they are not students that people or professors are used to seeing in a college level writing class. So, a lot of the theories I maybe learned in graduate school or read about in academic journals, I need to not directly apply those right to the … especially the English 49 classes. For example, I remember one thing Shaughnessy said that really hit me was, a lot of times our students might not feel a great difference between writing in class and writing out of class, where the traditional writing student would fear the in-class, oh, I'm under pressure, where the out-of-class, oh, I can revise and get help. But some of our nontraditional college students maybe feel more comfortable writing in class than having to write at home”

This observation touches on how variations in teaching or evaluation methods can have an effect on student engagement.

At this point in the curricular shift regarding evaluation, students are equivocal about timed and in-class writing. This focus group exchange provides characteristic glimpses into the sentiments:
“I’m challenged by the essays…”

“Yeah: timed essays – like having a certain amount of time that you have to get all of the information that we want on this paper. You want to get everything perfect and you don’t, and then you get a bad grade.”

“I feel rushed, and I don’t like feeling rushed… and I resist it. I would rather have the essay given to us and be able to take it home and work on it rather than in-class writing.”

One student offered a possible solution to the dilemma by observing that

“maybe if there is timed writing, maybe make it more… as it’s your choice. Here is a broad subject and you can choose as to which point of view you want to take. It is your choice as to which way you want to run with it.”

When asked about possible changes to the evaluation process, another student made the following remark about timed and in-class writing, providing another insight as to its possible uses:

“I think to write more often. For example, ‘This is introduction paragraph; let’s work on this.’ And then timed, kind of, twenty minutes, write. And then, you know, what was wrong and then see other people, how they wrote, for example, introduction. We are writing, but we aren’t understanding. Maybe we are not really getting the idea of why we are writing and it doesn’t click.”

In this same focus group, another student chimed in shortly afterward:

“I have a question. In this level… at what level we… you know… they, the teachers, professors expecting us? Because I don’t know, and maybe this is what [they] think we can write.”
These responses from basic skills writing students confirm the dynamic nature of engagement as process. As some faculty interviewees observed, basic skills writing students are inclined toward critical thinking and problem solving. They appear to be inclined toward the model of engagement as process.

Ancillary Theme 3: Perceptions of Institutional Culture

Faculty perceptions surrounding the idea of a supportive institutional culture for faculty efforts in curriculum and professional development appeared to be split between formal and informal activities. Formal activities were those funded from sources outside the institution itself; these funds were infused by the Basic Skills Initiative. Faculty perceptions of this financial support are largely positive. Other, informal, types of professional development were mentioned with some frequency, as well, with the department meeting being one of the more fertile areas for the exchange of ideas. Faculty perceptions of support are articulated almost contradictorily; that is, while support for macro professional development activities such as participation in regional basic skills initiative meetings is acknowledged, the more rewarding exchanges seem to come at the micro, informal level. The engagement as process theory appears to be split between two levels of faculty activity; the process model allows for the existence of these side by side as they complement each other and branch off into areas of curricular development or practical application in the classroom.

For example, when asked to what extent they feel supported by their institution to participate in curricular or professional development activities, one senior faculty member observed that
“You know, I think we are pretty well supported here. There is a lot of little hiccups that are irritating in a day like, you know, room screw-ups and minor things like that. But I think we are blessed that for the most part administration stays out of our way and allows us to -- or the complete academic freedom we need to do what we anticipate will work. And to try new things. I mean this whole English 49 shift portfolio needs a lot of work. It is really not working well yet. But I think as a group, faculty will get together, compare notes, do some revisions, and we will work it out. And I feel like we are supported to make those efforts. No one is saying, whoa, you're test scores are blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. It could be a real nightmare.”

Another senior faculty member demonstrated some ambivalence when the topic of institutional support came up, but nevertheless mentions in passing the influence of an aspect of campus culture – the faculty meeting – as a source of potential engagement:

“I don't know what I can compare it to. If there was another institution, but yeah I think I do feel supported. What I hear at the faculty meetings, yeah. They have got an ear to hear what I have to say, and often some advice… Yeah, I do feel supported…And how would one feel otherwise? If I didn't feel supported, what would that individual feel like? Supported in terms of what?”

Another faculty member was able to articulate more precisely the nature of negotiating institutional culture in order to set a process for engagement in motion:
“… a couple of years ago I started teaching the class before 49, English 43. And I got really interested in that class because I was teaching 49 and I had taught 49 repeatedly, and I kept noticing there was a vast difference between the people who tested in versus the people who came in from the lower level course. And so I started thinking, well, there seems to be something wrong quote-un-quote with the teachers in 43, so I'm gonna go fix that. So I suggested that I and some other full-time faculty teach 43, which was crazy talk at first because no one had been doing that, it was all adjunct … I think it was almost, it had to be almost all adjunct. Let me see if there was anyone who taught it. I think randomly or periodically a full-time faculty member had taught it, but it was vastly, the majority was taught by adjunct … because when I presented the idea of, hey, not only should I but other people from research saying, hey, full-time faculty members seem to have an impact on basic skills students. I was met with apprehension … by the full-time faculty. Like, you know, ‘I taught that class before,’ and like again where I wasn't saying it was never but it was random, it wasn't a majority of people. And just people not wanting to be there because they were afraid of the students it sounded like to me, didn't know how to teach it, what to do. And so when I started investigating what different adjuncts and even full-time faculty members who had taught it, like how did you teach the class? What did you do? I found there was no consistency whatsoever. It was basically throw some *** on the wall and see what worked. And so I said, that didn't seem appropriate.
And so I went in and the first thing I did was, I did a couple things: We had to have meetings, we had to talk to each other, so -- I know, crazy talk, right? So we had a pre-semester, mid-semester and end of semester meeting that I set up with all the faculty members that taught the class, adjunct and full-time. I set up a rubric, set up a similar readings and topics for the midterm and the final. We were all kind of grading the same, and eventually we all used the same book for the class.”

This citation demonstrates how engagement as process occurs: an aspect of the larger institutional culture is seen to have shortcomings, and steps are taken to see that new methods of approaching the basic writing phenomenon on that particular campus are integrated into the larger culture.

Adjunct faculty members, too, offered their perceptions of support as it relates to the process of engagement. One senior adjunct instructor made the following observations about the role of institutional support in creating a sense of how faculty engagement is a process:

“I feel like basic skills is where all the support is. I mean I am blown away by how much is available for basic skills. I mean really, you know, if you compare, if I teach an English 101 class it is like, hey, teach it, which is fine with me. I don't feel like I desperately need the support. But if you teach a basic skills class there is a whole structure. You're meeting regularly. You have got the cohorts. I have an IA, I mean that is not available in anything other than basic skills. So I feel like there is a lot of support at the basic skills level. Yeah, and it is great. Like I said, the way
I feel about it right now is just amazement that there is that much when there seems like there is nothing anywhere else. And I understand, I mean I think that makes sense. I mean, look, what is it? More than 50 percent of the students coming in place at basic skills level, and we are gonna lose those students. So I think it makes a lot of sense to do that. You know what? I think it is funny because we are talking about how good it is for the students, but I think, I feel like for me, and I know not everybody teaches basic skills so this can't be affecting everybody, but I know that it just is, to have that kind of professional cohesion is really good I think for the faculty, really, really good. So it is almost as though it could have happened through any venue. It happens that it is coming through basic skills, but it wouldn't necessarily had to have been. But because there is this basic skills money, I feel like there is greater cohesion among the faculty, more interaction. Otherwise, especially if you're an adjunct it is like half the time -- I mean I probably have been a little more involved, and know more people perhaps than a lot of the adjuncts because I did learning communities work and stuff. But I think a lot of times it just feels like everybody is off in their own little world, and it is nice to have that sense of, you know, that sense of cohesion and interaction among the faculty.”

The faculty member’s observation that the support could have been coming from anywhere belies an understanding that engagement is an ongoing and continuous activity. While state funding is a boon, it is understood that such funding may not always be
available. As such, the larger institutional culture – manifested in this response by committee structure – appears able to maintain the process of engagement sought out by faculty members. The sense of urgency that manifests itself at the point of interaction between institutional support and the sheer number of basic skills students was relayed as well in the following faculty comments about being supported:

“Yeah, I think -- well, on the college-wide level it seems like people have an understanding of how many basic skills students are on this campus. Maybe not instructors, but like I guess counseling, and like the work with the learning communities we do, where we are linking basic skills courses. I think with a lot of people there is an awareness to basic skills students and to kind of finding ways to reach them. The transfer-level courses, that is kind of like, I don't know where they are with that. It has been a while since those meetings. I bet if we met with them again we would maybe be a little happier. And I think, that you know, we have a Basic Skills Committee, which I mean, I think that that is a nice awareness. And just the fact that we are trying to come up with or thinking about having things like a basic skills mission, you know.”

Noteworthy in this response is the assertion that the basic skills phenomena is not proprietary to the English department on this particular campus, but rather is the responsibility of the entire campus. This lends insight to the grounded theory of engagement as learning process: all facets of the campus culture are needed to facilitate the success of basic skills writing students. Another faculty member framed experiences with the concept of support this way:
“Yeah. Well, I guess the one way they have been supportive is they let me teach the way I want to teach. You know, there is no one who has said, you shouldn't be doing this. They do give me some feedback saying, oh, we really like the way you do this. And I say, okay, fine, I will stew about it and think about it. But I have never felt that, at least in the [time] that I have been here, that have hindered me or that they're holding me back. I like the feeling that I feel that I can be trusted with the material. And I feel like I have really developed good rapport with the higher up tiers. But like the dean, the chairs, you know, I feel like I have a good professional, personal relationship with them.”

The topic of faculty perceptions of support for professional development activities revealed varied perceptions of institutional culture and how it impacts engagement as process. Many faculty members were quick to point out the efficacy of the Basic Skills Initiative and the financial structure it has brought to many staff development activities; others maintained that it was the informal encounters that kept their interest in activities such as curriculum development. Compare the following comments on professional development, all from senior faculty:

“Formal professional development meetings or offerings, zero. The department meetings are helpful sometimes, but we don't even have many professional development offerings that specific, you know, designed for composition teachers. There is a free exchange of ideas in the hallways and at the department meetings. We had a very good department meetings last month. In which we got together in groups of basic skills, ESOL,
transfer, and then I think even a 205 one. And we shared something in particular that we do in the classroom that works. And next time we are gonna do one, we are gonna talk about something that is a consistent problem in our classes and how we overcome that problem.”

Again, the temptation to cite a mood of disengagement from the larger institutional culture may be misinformed. Close inspection reveals that plenty of culture work is occurring at the departmental, or micro, level. Another faculty member recalled an activity that was meaningful to her practice:

“The most beneficial one was when I first started as a full-time contract professor. It was in August of 1990. And I don't remember the instructor's name or anything like that, but it was about teaching and helping to create community in your classroom. And the specific things I learned were to: On the first few days especially to come early, to mingle with the students, to spend the whole first day in the semester as a warm up creating – helping the students to facilitate a sense of community. Instead of just going over the syllabus, do something like create a quiz for it that they could work out together. And to make that one of your chief aims in the classes, to have a relationship with your students, to mentor them, and to facilitate community among them so they could establish study groups and informal things outside of class.”

This quote demonstrates how support at the departmental level is then leveraged into classroom practices that foster the process of engaging students with curriculum and campus culture. Another faculty member cited involvement with a statewide initiative as
providing the impetus for facilitating the engagement process with the larger campus and
district culture:

“I think when I was the Basic Skills Coordinator, actually being involved
with basic skills was really helpful. And when I had like the meetings
with ___ and ___, I loved those meetings. I liked meeting with those guys
and hearing about what they did. I liked going to _____ College and
hearing about their portfolio presentation. I think that has been really
helpful. Like when we heard __ and __ talk about what they did, oh yeah,
I really admired what they did, and how well they presented it, and how
they just pulled that whole thing through, you know. And I learned a lot
from that. And I really liked being on the same page with the other
colleges. And not like we were forced to be on the same page, but we
wanted to know what everybody was doing. That was a good committee.
I like that sense of order and agreement, and I think it is healthy, and I
think it is healthy for our students. But then there is a point at which, you
know, there is an opposite side where we butt heads with the other
colleges because we can't agree on something and things get held up. But
it is also an opportunity to be able to really share stuff with other faculty.
And ultimately it is best for the students because they have -- there's like
institutional agreement across the board for them, and there is no
confusion.”

The range of response covers a variety of topics vis-à-vis engagement as process.
For some faculty members in the district under study, having interactions with colleagues
across the district was enough to initiate the process of being engaged; for others such activities held no interest. As a reflection of institutional culture and its impact on engagement as a process, these three observations appear to be representative of most faculty respondents in this particular community college district.

The main theme produced by this study, “engagement as process,” as well as the ancillary themes of “preparation for college level writing,” “curriculum development,” and “institutional culture” produced a model of viewing these phenomena within the context of a basic skills writing course at a multiple campus community college district. The data have produced a theory that attempts to capture the dynamic and reciprocal nature of teaching and learning in a basic skills writing course. This theory posits that viewing engagement as a process is central to comprehending how those participating in the basic skills writing course make sense of their involvement with the curriculum, their instructors, their students, and the institutions that support them all. This model was developed using the method of constantly comparing data gathered for this study and compiling this data into conditional and reflective coding matrices. A conceptual model was then developed (Figure 1), which attempts to graphically demonstrate the main features of the data analysis: the ancillary themes of “preparation for college level writing,” “curriculum development,” and “institutional culture.” In their turn, these three ancillary themes informed the development of this study’s main theme: engagement as learning process. The orbital model presented in figure one was influenced by a consistent pattern of response from both faculty and student interview respondents. For example, faculty interviewees were able to list deliberately list the shortcomings they felt their students had with regard to preparation for writing at the college level;
unfortunately, many of these criticisms depended upon assessments of the quality of pre-college instruction for their impetus. When students themselves during interviews made similar comments, it became clear that preparation for college level writing was the satellite farthest from the process of engagement. Mission, the gravitational pull in the model, has structures in place to draw this particular satellite closer. The second ancillary theme, curriculum development, represents another satellite in orbit around engagement as process. Similarly, interviews with faculty and students led to the conclusion that this satellite is remains closer to the center. Student interviewees consistently commented that the curriculum for their basic writing courses was challenging and at times frustrating. This result is in keeping with faculty attempts to alter curriculum as necessary to match student need or ability. Not surprisingly, the third ancillary theme, institutional culture, hovers most closely to engagement. In conjunction with mission, campus culture is consistent and supportive. Faculty interviewees noted this time and again. Students were able, in their interviews to articulate what they felt to be blind spots in institutional culture in their identification of a lack of communication between the K12 system and the community college district under study here. Enrollment in a basic writing class, while perhaps perceived as a setback, was understood nevertheless to be a part of a process that would further engage them with campus culture. Viewing the process of engagement in this fashion allows for a discussion of conclusions and recommendations, to be found in the next chapter.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

This qualitative study sought to gauge student and faculty perceptions of their experiences as participants in a basic writing program offered by a large, multi-campus community college district during the fall 2009 semester. Of particular interest was how institutional culture on each of the campuses may have shaded participant perceptions of teaching and learning in the basic skills writing course attended or taught.

The significance of this study touches on the nature of engagement as a continuous process; how, indeed, engagement must be perpetually monitored and altered in order to ensure that the needs of the basic skills writing student are being met. The onslaught of basic skills students in English departments across the state has the potential to alter institutional culture. It is incumbent upon the colleges therefore, to create campus cultures that are engaging and which facilitate student success, whether that success is defined by the student as transfer to a four-year institution or becoming certificated for the workplace. Central to this effort is the concept of engagement as process.

The purpose of this qualitative study – to explore how student and faculty perceptions of learning in a basic writing program are affected by institutional culture at a multi-campus community college district – led to the following research questions:

• What perceptions do students enrolled in a basic skills writing course one level below transfer have about their preparedness for college-level writing?

• What perceptions do basic skills writing faculty have about student preparation for writing at the college level?

• How does institutional culture contribute to shaping those perceptions?
The main theme of engagement as process, along with the ancillary themes of "preparation for college level writing," "curriculum development," and "institutional culture," was the direct result of data gathered from the study’s research questions and the subsequent interview protocols engendered by both the research questions and the literature reviewed in chapter two of this study. In fact, it may be said that each ancillary theme is a direct response to its corresponding research question. Thus, ancillary theme 1, "preparation for college level writing" corresponds to research question 1; ancillary theme 2, "curriculum development" with research question 2; and ancillary theme 3 "institutional culture" with research question 3.

The research method employed in this study followed the model offered by grounded theory. Using a constructivist lens to view the phenomenon of the basic writing classroom and the institution surrounding it, faculty and student perspectives on the phenomena were gathered. In addition to interviewing student (n=16) and faculty (n=17) participants in the district’s basic writing program, the course outline of record for the class one level below transfer, English 49, was subjected to a document analysis. Interviews were recorded digitally and then transcribed. The transcriptions were first coded by hand for open coding; transcriptions were then fed into the computer program AtlasTi for further coding and constant comparison. This conflation led to axial and then selective codes.

One main theme and three ancillary themes resulted from this process. Constantly comparing data from interview transcripts, both by hand and with the assistance of computer software led to the development of conditional and reflective coding matrices. These matrices, in turn led to the development of the ancillary themes. The main theme
that emerged was “engagement as process.” The three ancillary themes – “preparation for college level writing”, “curriculum development,” and “institutional culture” – in conjunction with the main theme, contributed to the theory that engagement is a continuous process, rather than a product that is the result of any single activity on a college campus.

This theory is consistent with much of the literature reviewed for this study. The main theme finds consistency with the theories of engagement developed or presented by Kuh (2007), Harper and Quaye (2009), Schlossberg (1989), and Chavez (2006), the gist of which suggest that a “dual responsibility” for engagement exists: a reciprocal relationship between the student and the institution serving her or him (Harper & Quay, 2009, p. 6). The variation offered in this study is to view engagement as a process rather than a discrete product offered by separately operating institutional principles (e.g. matriculation counseling or curriculum development). As this engagement as process takes place, the larger institutional culture is in turn affected, which likewise contributes to the cycle or process of engagement.

For example, the major finding of ancillary theme one (preparation for college level writing), that there is a perception shared by both basic writing students and their instructors that a significant gap between high school preparation and college level expectation, is borne out by Patthey-Chavez, Dillon, and Thomas-Spiegel (2005) and Bueschel and Venezia (2006). Of particular note is the idea that a lack of communication between these two educational sectors may inevitably compromise a student’s ability to engage with college curriculum and culture. For example, the student interviewees who expressed disbelief about having placed into a basic skills writing course (“You're gonna
be placed in these classes. I'm like, are you serious? You didn't tell us this before? Because I didn't even know what kind of test it was because I took it at the beginning of my junior year of high school’) aligns remarkably well with Bueschel and Venezia’s observation that “it is not surprising that [high school] students are not aware of what they will have to know and be able to do in college” (2006, p. 30).

Faculty interviewees, in responding to how they perceived their students’ preparation for college level writing were also confirmed through the literature. The instructor who enumerated “reading, using sources, developing their ideas, beyond… developing their ideas beyond just the simple” as being some of the key abilities absent from the basic skills writers on his campus is, however inadvertently, confirming Patthey-Chavez, Dillon, and Thomas-Spiegel’s assertion that “the first [composition] course functions more as a hurdle than an opening into higher education” (2005, p. 268).

Faculty and student willingness to become engaged with the curriculum, another major finding of ancillary theme one, is attested to by research conducted by the Carnegie Foundation (2008), Sternglass (1997), and Hayes (2003), particularly the Carnegie Foundation’s finding that, in spite of self-perceived shortcomings, basic skills students bring significant life and coping skills to the classroom that they can leverage into engagement with campus and curriculum. The student who remarked that “I like to learn. Hopefully it sinks in and stays there” stands as an eloquent reminder of student willingness to engage in the learning process. Another student put it this way: “I always thought it was interesting to tell about myself to my teachers so they could know who I am. Not just like, you know how they ask for an introduction about who you are, but an in-depth story about who you are.” This finds resonance in Sterngalss’s observation that
“we need to consider how academic preparation, personal life factors […], and the nature of instructional tasks interact as students respond to the writing demands placed upon them” (1999, p. 27).

One of the major findings of ancillary theme two, curriculum development, holds that the course outline of record has little or no effect on teaching philosophy in the basic skills classroom. In other words, rather than formalized methods of shaping teaching philosophy, smaller pockets of influence such as department meetings or other departmental functions devoted to discussion of current pedagogical issues had a larger impact on how curriculum is developed and delivered in the community college district being studied here. This is consistent with the grounded theory developed for this study, e.g. that engagement is a process, rather than a product. The informal, internal nature of faculty development of best practices is similar to the findings of researchers such as Locke and Guglielmino (2006) and Claxton (2007), both of which noted the power and influence of campus subcultures in the development of an overall campus culture. For example, Locke and Guglielmino noting that “subcultures can facilitate change by interjecting diverse perspectives and innovative ideas into the organization” (p. 109), can be borne out in the faculty member whose recollection, cited in chapter 4, of generating buy-in for a major curricular change in his department was perceived as a minor victory within his specific departmental subculture.

While the course outline of record may have no direct influence on teaching philosophy, the existence of these departmental subcultures seem to suggest that the course outline is alive and well in basic features of department life, however vestigially. As some faculty interviews revealed, there are pockets of the “us/them” mentality cited
by Ayers (2005) in a discussion of the potential power of campus and departmental subcultures. Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, and Hoy’s concept of teacher efficacy as being an effect of a faculty engaged with student and curriculum as contributing to shaping an institution’s overall culture (1998) is given witness by faculty perceptions in areas such as student preparation and curriculum development. As Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, and Hoy put it:

“Only in a situation of actual teaching can an individual assess the capabilities he or she brings to the task and experience the consequence of those capabilities. In situations of actual teaching, teachers gain information about how their strengths and weaknesses play out in managing, instructing, and evaluating a group of students.” (1998, p. 229)

In turn, this contributes to an overall macro culture on campus. Consider the following citation from a faculty interviewee, which skillfully demonstrates how classroom practice has simultaneous effects on instructor, student, and institution:

“We are not here just to learn about the way the family has changed or any kind of social issues [in a basic writing class]. Those are just ways of thinking and improving our ability to think critically, and to improve and, you know, which will serve you in any class, not just in English class. You have to look at how English connects to subjects like history, sociology, even math. I mean students say, I'm never gonna use math. And then I say, well, math is a way of thinking logically through a process. Writing is in a sense the same thing”
This suggests an awareness of how efficacious teaching experiences can be leveraged into the larger campus culture.

This concept was reinforced several times in faculty interviews, when, for example, faculty asserted that they wanted their basic writing students to be critical thinkers or active participants in society at large. In fact, Schlossberg’s concept of “mattering” (1989) found simultaneous resonance in student and faculty interviews.

Ancillary theme three, institutional culture, resonates with previous scholarship, particularly that of McCarten (1983) and Bergquist (1998) both of whom promoted the idea that community college mission must necessarily be flexible in order to accommodate cultural changes. McCarten’s observation that changes in community college “students, curriculum, and visibility” (pp. 677-679) seems particularly attuned to the current mood occupying a number of community college districts across the state, in addition to the one that formed the basis for this study. Further, McCarten’s insistence that community colleges continue to build upon “collaborative relationships” in order to “develop a ‘community of learners’” (pp. 683-684) is echoed by the faculty members who reminisced fondly about working from campus to campus within the district under study to collaborate on common curricular goals.

The major finding of this ancillary theme that no significant barriers exist to prevent faculty from developing best practices that later reflect on the campus’s larger culture is borne out by the numerous faculty respondents who claimed to feel supported on their campus, particularly at the level of the department or in collaboration with other English departments on the campus. This once again speaks to the power of specific campus subcultures in influencing the larger entity, cited above.
It was with these subcultures in mind that the idea of viewing engagement as a process that holds all the major ancillary themes in an orbital relationship to the main theme occurred to me. Interview after interview – with both students and faculty alike – demonstrated that the willingness to be a member of the academic community regardless of placement or perceived ability, the willingness to innovate in both favorable and reluctant campus cultures, were processes that move in cycles. For the point in time when this study was conducted, the literature reviewed and the data developed confirmed that preparation for college level writing was the farthest point from the process of engagement. Curriculum development occupies a position of more security in relation to the process of engagement. Institutional culture, for the time period studied, is most closely poised in relation to the process of engagement. Viewing the results of the research in this fashion, comprehending as they do a wide range of thematic concerns within the orbit of engagement as process, led to the development of the following recommendations.

Recommendations for Future Practice

In its 2009 report, “Re-imagining Community Colleges in the 21st Century: A Student-Centered Approach to Higher Education,” the Center for American Progress exhorted the community colleges across the country with the following assertion:

“practitioners are not likely to improve practice or alter fundamental structures without aligning the purposes of community colleges with the realities of their students’ lives, aspirations, and potentials. And policymakers can do little to alter the trajectory of the institution without matching accurate definitions and conceptions of students to expectations for community colleges” (p.14).
I am fairly certain that anyone who has read this study up to this point is aware of the severity of what is now called “the basic skills phenomenon” in the state of California. More than a curricular or institutional crisis, this phenomenon has the potential to reshape not just the landscape of community colleges, but the state itself. Of the seventy-four percent of all students matriculating into a California community college needing to enroll in a basic skills writing course, fully thirty-three percent of these students need to enroll in the basic skills writing course one level below transfer (Accountability Reporting for the Community Colleges, 2009). Long-term practitioners and stakeholders in the California community colleges once talked about “Tidal Wave I,” the anticipated influx of students in the 1980’s and 1990’s. In California, the high school graduating class of 2010 is expected to be the largest one in the state’s history; community college practitioners know that the majority of these students will attend a community college. How will we engage these students in meaningful ways, ways that allow for faculty and campus culture to be simultaneously renewed and maintained?

The theory derived from the data gathered for this project ultimately resides in the concept of engagement as process. As noted in the data analysis in Chapter 4, the process of engagement requires a dynamic institutional culture to make it meaningful for students and faculty. The data suggested that there is no lack of will on behalf of either the students or the faculty in the multi campus district studied to pursue engagement in ways that accommodate rapidly changing conditions both in society and college. Likewise, the institutional culture, while perhaps apparently preoccupied with keeping its mission intact in the face of ever-increasing pressure from fiscal and other social realities, also displays a willingness to provide the type of environment that can, indeed, bring community
colleges into the twenty-first century. The organic way that the themes presented themselves as offshoots of the research questions developed for this study provided an organizing context for the presentation of the following recommendations for practice. Thus, each recommendation will correspond to one of the study’s ancillary themes.

Because it is a process rather than a product, it is perhaps useful to review the model (or metaphor) suggested for engagement in Figure 1. For the time period of this study, high school preparation seems to be the satellite farthest from the central force that is the community college’s mission. As such, it receives the least amount of the mission’s energy, in spite of more and more resources being devoted to bringing high school preparation in alignment with the expectations of college culture.

Data gathered for this study that led to the emergence of this theme – from both students and faculty – suggest that the most pressing issue here is the alignment of curriculum. Time and time again, basic skills writing students in the district studied second-guessed their preparation for college level work as it was presented to them at the high school level. Faculty interviewees likewise expressed doubts about how well their charges were being prepared. As community college practitioners, we are committed to meet our students where they are, and they are in our classrooms. Like the faculty interview respondent who, when a curricular problem was detected, sought out the counsel of his colleagues to change the process of engagement for the basic writing students, practitioners at both the high school and community colleges should gather together in order to collaborate on projects that could guide the principles of engagement as process as they have been articulated in the ancillary themes of this study.
The organizational theorist Etienne Wenger, along with his colleagues Richard McDermott and William Snyder, has developed a concept now commonly known as communities of practice, “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (2002, p. 4). Communities of practice should not be associated with the traditional committee structure found in most educational environments. Instead, these are informal groups that come together to share, develop, and manage knowledge germane to the concern that binds them (2002, p. 5). Therefore, faculty from both student services and instruction may consider the development of such communities of practice.

A logical starting point for the development of such a community of practice would be on those community college campuses in California that already house high schools, the “middle colleges” that seek to shore the skill gap that is the topic of this study. The district under examination in this study has two such high school campuses. Another possible outlet is the local high schools that feed into the community colleges that make up the district under study.

Aligning of standards through the community of practice model may lead to improved assessment and placement practices on the community college campus, practices which occasionally mystified the student interviewees for this study; such improvement may in turn lead to the continuous process of engaging students in ability-level appropriate curriculum.

When educators gather together to discuss not just their concerns and worries, but also their best practices and triumphs, new knowledge about who we are and what we do
in relation to our students begins to emerge. New knowledge yields opportunities for innovation; innovation may yield to a renewed sense of engagement on behalf of students and faculty. When all stakeholders are on the same page, so to speak, hierarchical gamesmanship is diminished. Curricular alignment achieved through the communities of practice model is a promising way to smooth the pathway from high school to college.

The satellite of curriculum development is closer to the central theme of the process of engagement. Faculty respondents understand that the curriculum review process is a state-mandated occurrence; this awareness, however, did not seem to particularly goad them. Rather, the dynamics of their relationship to campus culture at the micro level (e.g. departmental collaboration for curricular innovation) seemed to be the guiding force driving such innovation. Such innovation occurs on occasion with some spontaneity, and may be likened to a gestalt, if you will, in the campus culture that transcends mandate. The current curriculum review process is too long. State law requires that course outlines of record be reviewed and revised (when necessary) every six years. Data collected for this study suggested that there is a remoteness on behalf of faculty in this essential process. My suggestion is that at least part of this disengagement is due to the length of time required by law to review and revise course outlines.

Course outlines of record for basic skills classes should be reviewed every other year. The literature suggests, and the data collected for this study confirm, that our students are changing quickly; our classroom practices are, indeed, attempting to keep up with the students. Somehow, though, the classroom practice and the student expectation are not consistently reflected in the course outline. Course outlines need to go through an onerous and lengthy review process whenever a major change is proposed to the outline.
Because of this, I would argue that the type of curricular innovation that engages both basic skills writing faculty and their students instead suffers from a form of benign neglect. In keeping with the suggestion made above with regard to curricular alignment between the secondary schools and the community colleges, the same community of practice charged with alignment could be the same body charged with the currency of that curriculum.

Curriculum development is the heart and soul of teaching; it is the center of the engagement process for both faculty and students, and therefore essential to the overall campus culture.

Data gathered for this study indicate that this is the satellite closest to the study’s central theme, engagement as process. For faculty interviews, institutional culture was simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, simultaneously vague and specific. It was in the language of the respondent who personalized culture when, in a discussion of support, referred to the campus culture as “they.” Campus culture is present in the faculty member who responded to feeling supported on the campus with a mysterious, “What would it feel like to not be supported?” Campus culture looms over the faculty respondent who observed that “change is really... just really slow and difficult.” Campus culture is there in the student who said “at least give us a shot. It is our responsibility. We will do it.” What is it that is so powerful about a campus culture that campus community members feel its presence almost instinctively? The study presented by Kuh and Whitt (1989) holds part of the answer: that campus culture has manifestations on virtually every aspect of campus life. This further begs the question about the separation of campus services. The assertion being made in this study is that such a pervasive influence can only foster
engagement as a process. When student services faculty see matriculation as a product, or instructional faculty see the curriculum committee as a venue for delivering a product, opportunities for looking at the larger process of engagement may be missed.

Therefore, one more recommendation for practice is the integration of student services and instruction for the assessment and placement of students into writing courses. Following the community of practice model would allow faculty from both counseling and instruction to come to the table as having an equal stake, rather than as representatives from “both sides of the house,” with traditional views of their own – and each other’s – roles. Students placed in such a fashion may see that the curriculum is a better match for their skills and abilities. In other words, a sense of engagement and possible self-efficacy will be reciprocal: students satisfied with placement and faculty satisfied that curriculum and student match one another. In turn, engagement as process may contribute to a holistic campus culture.

Classroom and counseling faculty should continue their informal information gathering. Faculty interviews suggest that this appears to be one of the quickest and best ways to make tacit practices explicit. As the faculty interviews that comprised the data for this study attest, department meetings are ideal places to work beyond committees or other perceived obligations. As educational theorist Dylan Wiliam has noted, “it is generally easier to get people to act their way into a new way of thinking than it is to get them to think their way into a new way of acting” (2009, pp. 28-29, emphasis in original).

In summary, the recommendations for practice being offered here represent an opportunity to re-imagine how campus culture interacts with students preparation and curriculum development. Communities of practice have the potential to facilitate the
process of engagement while simultaneously impacting campus policy and practice decisions. With this potential in mind, the following research possibilities are presented.

**Recommendations for Research**

While the process of engagement is continuous and involves a variety of campus participants, it will nevertheless produce measurable artifacts that can stand as benchmarks for its effectiveness. For example, testing the efficacy and effectiveness of the communities of practice can be done in a variety of ways. The most obvious one is to track student placement and success in basic skills writing courses pre- and post-the creation of the specific community of practice. Similarly, longitudinal data gathered from students as they move from high school to the community college would reveal the effect of the communities of practice model on student perceptions of their preparation for college level writing. The student perspective, after all, is the one of the primary reasons for the community of practice to exist.

Longitudinal data gathered from student work as the students move from basic skills to transfer level writing courses is essential in order to determine whether or not revised placement practices or innovative teaching techniques gleaned from department meetings actually works. A device that can straddle the fence between research and practice is the portfolio. Although still under some doubt in the district under study, the portfolio is a reliable indicator of student preparedness for a number of writing tasks. Assessing the quality of the portfolios, in conjunction with focus group type interviews with students pre- and post their basic writing courses would complete a cycle begun by the community of practice that convenes to gather and store knowledge about basic writers. Information becomes an intrinsic and natural part of the institutional culture,
binding mission and function; it is simply expected that such a cycle has its logical place within the process of engagement.

Gathering more longitudinal data from a variety of sources, in other words, may provide a reliable indicator of campus culture and the twin functions of student preparation and curriculum development, addressing micro and macro level concerns about institutional culture.

Concluding Remarks

Engagement is an elusive but absolutely essential element in the continued success of basic skills writing students – as well as the success of the institutions and instructors serving those students. It is my contention that a culture of engagement is by its nature a culture of inquiry. Developing this culture is a time-consuming process. However, there are simple and practical ways to give impetus to the initiative. Again, the community of practice concept comes to the fore in that it is broad and far reaching. We would do well, also, to keep in mind Margaret Wheatley’s axiomatic observation that “People only support what they create.” The mystery of buy-in remains just that: a mystery. It is difficult to determine at any given time in the life of an institution what will motivate the people inhabiting it to do “culture work.” Going back to the review of the literature, one considers the charge made by community college visionaries such as Gleazer (1968, 1980), the canny predictions made by theorists like Bergquist (1998), and the innovative methods of digging into the character of departments or divisions – or even schools themselves – proposed by Claxton (2007). Each of these people saw ways to create engaged and engaging learning environments. The culture we build and sustain for our basic skills students, through not only our curriculum, but in the way we show
that curriculum and the learning environment it promises, will take them to their next stages of development as human beings. Yes, it is that crucial and important. Basic skills students do not simply occupy the largest demographic on community college campuses; they are also the most vulnerable students. Interviews revealed that faculty have a tremendous amount of faith in the potential of these students. These students are creative, they are innovative; they are unspoiled, so to speak. This isn’t, of course, to suggest that they exist in some sort of Platonic world, each of them a tabla rasa to be cultivated and revealed. They are real people with real lives and concerns. They are people, for the most part, who are struggling with what sociologist Robert Kegan calls the “curriculum of modern life” (1994, p. 5). As bearers of a significant portion of that curriculum, community colleges have the remarkable opportunity to move these students away from the margin and into the lives they have imagined for themselves.
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APPENDICES
Appendix A: Recruitment Flier (Student)

**Participants Wanted for Research Study**

*The Place Between: Interactions Among Basic Skills Students, Faculty, and Curriculum*

- Are you at least 18 years old?
- Are you a student in the San Diego Community College District (City College, Miramar College, Mesa College) currently enrolled in English 49?
- Are you willing to share your thoughts – in a focus group setting – on learning about writing?

If you answer yes to these questions, then you may be eligible to participate in a confidential research study on what it means to learn how to become a college level writer.

The study will take place on the campuses of the San Diego Community College District (City College, Miramar College, Mesa College) during the fall semester of 2009.

**If you wish to participate, please contact the researcher:**

Chris Sullivan, Professor, English Department, Mesa College
*Email: csullivan@sdccd.edu*
*Telephone: 619 558 2510*
*Office: GS36*
Appendix B: Recruitment Flier (Faculty)

Participants Wanted for Research Study

The Place Between: Interactions Among Basic Skills Students, Faculty, and Curriculum

- Are you currently teaching one or more sections of English 49 (Basic Composition) in the San Diego Community College District?
- Are you willing to share your thoughts about teaching basic writing in an individual interview setting?

If you answer yes to these questions, then you may be eligible to participate in a confidential research study on what it means to teach developmental writers.

The study will take place on the campuses of the San Diego Community College District (City College, Miramar College, Mesa College) during the fall semester of 2009.

If you wish to participate, please contact the researcher:

Chris Sullivan, Professor, English Department, Mesa College
Email: csulliva@sdccd.edu
Telephone: 619 388 2510
Office: G356
Appendix C: Multi-Campus District Course Outline – English 49

ENGL 051

SAN DIEGO COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT
CITY, MESA, AND MIRAMAR COLLEGES
ASSOCIATE DEGREE COURSE OUTLINE

SECTION 1

SUBJECT AREA AND COURSE NUMBER: English 051

COURSE TITLE: Basic Composition

Units: 3
Letter Grade or Credit/No Credit Option

CATALOG COURSE DESCRIPTION:
This course is designed to prepare students to write successfully at the transfer level. In this course students practice the writing process in the production and editing of essays. Students also review grammatical and mechanical structures as needed to support the successful expression of meaning. In addition, students read and think critically using a variety of texts which are the basis for writing and class discussion. A District-wide, timed-writing examination, holistically graded by English instructors, is part of the final course grade. Designated sections of this course may be taught from a specific cultural perspective and are cross-listed under Black Studies and Chicano Studies in the class schedule.

REQUISITES:

Prerequisite:
ESOL 040 with a grade of "C" or better, or equivalent
or
ENGL 043 with a grade of "C" or better, or equivalent or Assessment Skill Level W4

FIELD TRIP REQUIREMENTS: May be required

TRANSFER APPLICABILITY: Not applicable to the Associate Degree

CAN DATA:

TOTAL LECTURE HOURS: 48 - 54

TOTAL LAB HOURS:

STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES:
Upon successful completion of the course the student will be able to:

1. Read and analyze expository prose as a basis for writing, class discussion, and reading skill enhancement.
2. Use appropriate strategies from the writing process including pre-writing, composing, revising, and editing techniques, considering audience and purpose.
3. Plan, write, and revise essays and other assignments comprising a total of 4,000-5,000 graded words in compositions that are unified, developed, purposeful, and appropriate in tone for the intended audience.
4. Produce in-class essays that demonstrate organizing, composing, revising, editing, and time-management skills.
5. Apply an intermediate knowledge of appropriate mechanical and grammatical structures to support essay development and successful expression of meaning.
6. Apply critical thinking skills to reading, writing and class discussion on academic as well as personal topics.

SECTION II

1. COURSE OUTLINE AND SCOPE:

A. Outline Of Topics:
The following topics are included in the framework of the course but are not intended as limits on content. The order of presentation and relative emphasis will vary with each instructor.

I. Reading texts written at the college level for writing and class discussion
   A. Practice with the reading process
      1. pre-reading strategies such as skimming and scanning
      2. reading strategies such as monitoring for comprehension and guessing vocabulary in context
      3. post-reading strategies such as asking and answering questions about the reading and summarizing important ideas in the reading
   B. Practice with using ideas from a reading as a basis for written response and class discussion
      1. identify and respond to the main arguments in a reading
      2. identify and respond to the author's point of view
      3. Practice with making connections between information in a reading and previous knowledge about the subject in writing and discussion identify, articulate and write about one's own experiences, knowledge, or examples related to the reading
      4. identify, articulate and write about the relationship between the information and points of view expressed on a topic from two or more written texts.

II. Applying appropriate strategies from the writing process
   A. Practice with choosing pre-writing strategies appropriate to the assignment such as brainstorming, journal writing, discussing the topic, outlining, and free writing.
   B. Practice with composing strategies.
      1. staying on topic
      2. including relevant details
      3. checking for use of standard, written English (as opposed to non-standard or spoken English) and of appropriate tone
      4. limiting and narrowing scope of writing
      5. checking for unity within and across paragraphs
   C. Introduction to and practice with revision strategies.
      1. analyze own paper for organization, relevance, purpose and accuracy
      2. make relevant comments on classmates' papers and incorporate peer feedback in one's own work
      3. incorporate instructor feedback
   D. Practice with editing for grammatical and mechanical issues as well as for spelling errors.

III. Writing and revising essays and other assignments
   A. Review as necessary with writing complete sentences
   B. Review of and practice with writing unified paragraphs
      1. paragraph format
      2. topic sentences
      3. major and minor supporting details
      4. transitional words, phrases and sentences
      5. clear organizational sequences
   C. Review of and practice with writing essays
      1. purpose and audience
      2. introduction paragraphs
      3. thesis statements
      4. supporting paragraphs with major and minor details
      5. conclusion paragraphs
      6. transitional words, phrases and sentences
      7. clear organizational sequences
      8. use of outside sources
IV. Producing in-class writings
   A. Introduction to and practice with time-management strategies
   B. Practice with generating ideas, planning, writing, and revising under time pressure
   C. Practice with effective editing strategies for in-class writings
   D. Applying intermediate knowledge of appropriate mechanical and grammatical structures
   E. Practice with the following:
      1. avoiding run-ons and fragments
      2. using coordination and subordination
      3. avoiding the use of double negatives
      4. subject-verb agreement
      5. verb tense consistency
      6. pronoun reference
      7. punctuation
      8. capitalization
   F. Introduction to the following:
      1. creating parallelism
      2. avoiding mixed constructions
      3. avoiding dangling modifiers
      4. avoiding shifts in point of view

V. Practicing critical thinking in reading, writing and class discussion
   A. Practice with arguing believable in support of a particular point of view
   B. Development of ability to read and write about unfamiliar, non-personal and abstract ideas
   C. Introduction to and practice with differentiating facts from opinions
   D. Development of critical analysis of one's own writing in terms of form and content
   E. Incorporation of focused feedback from peer evaluation as well as course instructor in writing assignments

B. Writing Assignments:
   Writing assignments are required and may include, but are not limited to, the following:
   I. Writing, revising and editing essays for a total of 4,000-5,000 words in graded assignments
   II. In-class essays
   III. Preparing answers to homework questions
   IV. Journal entries and/or responses to class readings and class discussion
   V. Evaluations of one's own and others' work in workshopping and peer-editing activities
   VI. Class notes
   VII. Paraphrases and summaries of class readings
   VIII. Reflections based on readings and on students' development as writers

C. Appropriate Outside Assignments:
   Outside assignments may include, but are not limited to, the following:
   I. Preparing essays assigned for homework
      1. Revising and editing essays with attention to organization, development, clarity, and purpose as well as grammatical and mechanical accuracy
   II. Preparing summaries, journal entries, notes, and outlines
   III. Reading texts and preparing for writing and discussion on related topics
   IV. Working on assignments in Computer Labs, Writing Centers and/or Tutorial Centers
   V. Preparing individual grammar journals based on focused feedback from instructors

D. Appropriate Assignments that Demonstrate Critical Thinking:
   Critical thinking assignments are required and may include, but are not limited to, the following:
   I. Analyze one's own and others' written work for content, organization, support and development
   II. Formulate non-personal and abstract topics
   III. Analyze and evaluate one’s own ideas and experiences in light of a reading or writing assignment
   IV. Integrate previous knowledge and information in a reading
   V. Evaluate personal progress in reflective compositions
   VI. Evaluate peers' writing for coherence and clarity
E. Reading Assignments:
Reading assignments are required and may include but, are not limited to, the following:

I. Readings in the assigned textbooks
II. Theme-based packets and/or texts
III. Texts written at the college level
IV. Articles from newspapers, magazines and periodicals Selected books of fiction and non-fiction
V. Internet readings

2. METHODS OF EVALUATION:
A student's grade will be based on multiple measures of performance unless the course requires no grade. Multiple measures may include, but are not limited to, the following:

I. In-class essays evaluated for content, organization, grammar, mechanics, and understanding the reading prompt.
II. Out-of-class essays evaluated for effectiveness of revision of content and organization as well as editing for grammatical and mechanical issues.
III. Timed-writing examination holistically graded by the English department.
IV. Evaluation of written assignments such as answers to comprehension questions, summaries and notes.
V. Participation in class showing leadership, teamwork, problem solving, analytical and negotiation skills in activities such as collaborative group work, class discussion and oral presentations.
VI. Observation of preparedness for class (e.g., completing assignments on time and being organized).
VII. Quizzes and tests.
VIII. Holistic portfolio evaluation by English Department faculty.

3. METHODS OF INSTRUCTION:
Methods of instruction may include, but are not limited to, the following:

* Distance Education
* Other (Specify)
* A) Lecture, discussion, and group work related to a topic or theme from course readings that are the basis for written assignments
* B) Lecture, discussion, and group work to present and practice principles of the writing process
* C) Lecture, discussion and group work to evaluate written student work for content, organization, and accuracy
* D) Group work or pair work for peer evaluation and editing practice
* E) Handouts and exercises created by the instructor which focus on the grammatical needs of the class with examples taken from student writing.
* F) Audio-visual aids such as films, videos, music, websites, and interviews
* G) Individual or group work utilizing Writing Centers
* H) Computer-assisted instruction to provide practice with sentence structure, composing techniques, grammar and mechanics
* I) Tours of libraries, Learning Resource Centers and computer labs

4. REQUIRED TEXTS AND SUPPLIES:
Textbooks may include, but are not limited to:

**TEXTBOOKS:**

**MANUALS:**

**PERIODICALS:**

**SOFTWARE:**

**SUPPLIES:**

**ORIGINATOR:** Jan Lombardi

**DATE:** 04/29/2008
Appendix D: Focus Group Protocol

Pre-Interview (5 minutes)

1) Give informed consent and discuss
2) Start recording

Interview (45-60 minutes)

1) Ask focus group questions:

   • Please describe your high school English classes (the content, the types of writing assignments, how they were assessed, etc.).

   • Tell me how you think your high school English classes prepared you for college.

   • Can you describe for me your feelings when you learned that you had placed into a basic skills English course in college?

   • In what ways do you feel either challenged or not challenged by the reading and writing assignments offered in your English class on this campus?

   • If you could change anything about this course, what would it be?

   • Tell me about how the material covered in the class matches the syllabus your instructor gave you at the beginning of the semester.

2) Stop recording

Post-Interview (5 minutes)

1) Express thanks
Appendix E: Faculty Interview Protocol

Pre-Interview (5 minutes)

1) Give informed consent and discuss

2) Start recording

Interview (45-60 minutes)

1) Ask interview questions:
   
   • Describe, please, what skills you feel basic writers lack, and speculate as to what may be the cause.
   
   • Please describe the strengths you feel basic writers bring to the classroom.
   
   • Tell me about your philosophy of composition in general, and how basic writing fits into this philosophy.
   
   • Describe, please, the role of the course outline of record in your course conceptualization as you prepare your syllabi.
   
   • To what extent do you feel supported by the department or the college in your efforts to improve student success in basic skills writing courses?
   
   • Please describe the professional development activities on this campus you have found to be most beneficial to your practice as a basic writing instructor.

2) Stop recording

Post-Interview (5 minutes)

Express thanks
## Appendix F: Conditional Coding Guide for Developing a Theory of Engagement as Process in a Basic Skills Writing Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>What</th>
<th>When</th>
<th>Where</th>
<th>Why</th>
<th>How</th>
<th>Consequence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Preparation for College-Level Writing | Ability of students to adapt to college expectations  
Faculty perceptions of student ability | During final year or two of high school and at point of matriculation at a community college  
During initial class sessions, when first assignments are given and assessed | In students perceptions of ability prior to enrollment in a basic skills writing course  
In faculty assessment of assignment s and curricular adjustments | Lack of communicati on between educational sectors (K-12 to community college) | Willingness to learn (students) and teach (faculty)  
Risk taking (faculty perception of students)  
Give clear guidelines | Disappointment  
Resignation  
Resentment  
Faith in the System |
| Curriculum Development           | Faculty engagement with revision or creation of new pedagogical means of addressing the needs of basic skills writers  
Informal is ongoing | Seems to occur formally only as mandated  
Informal is ongoing | Individual campus locations, then vetted across district  
Pedagogical and professional renewal | To better meet student needs  
Through informal and formal collegial interactions | Sense of purpose  
Student needs met  
Advocacy for student potential |
| Institutional Culture            | Ability of institution to integrate student and faculty concerns into everyday operations | Ongoing  
Attempted in all facets of the organization | Individual campus locations  
Coherence with regard to individual campus missions | Through: curriculum development (faculty)  
student enrollment in and acculturation with college norms and expectations | Engagement |
Appendix G: Reflective Coding Matrix for Developing a Theory of Engagement in a Basic Skills Writing Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Category</th>
<th>Engagement as Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Properties</td>
<td>Preparation for College Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>Experience/Expectation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimensions</td>
<td>Difficulty in transferring high school curriculum to the college environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of academic experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wide array of life experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Basic skills writers bring inherent strengths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perception that expectations would be the same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No control over academic destiny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Willingness to engage with college curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contexts</td>
<td>Reconciliation of experience and expectation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>