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# "A Long Row To Hoe: Life And Learning For First-Generation College Students In The 21st Century Rural South

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“A LONG ROW TO HOE”: LIFE AND LEARNING FOR FIRST-  
GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY RURAL  
SOUTH

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Ellen Hudgins Hendrix

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

May 2009

Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
The School of Graduate Studies and Research  
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Title: "A Long Row To Hoe": Life And Learning For First-Generation College Students In The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Rural South

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This study examines the lives of first-generation college students from rural, working-class families in Southeast Georgia. Through their stories, readers understand first-generation students' passage into higher education, both how they have prepared and the challenges they face once they enroll. Research questions focus on the role learning plays in students' lives; the impact attending college has on their professions or jobs; the advantages and/or disadvantages of attending college; and how teachers might help more first-generation students succeed.

Part of the literature reviews the history of southern culture, including mores and traditions, especially as they relate to education. The study itself is qualitative, a combination of interviews and field observations. To show how changes in the South over the past thirty years have impacted first-generation students, the participants range in age from 22 to 54. Analysis of the interviews and participant observations reveal three key findings about first-generation students' experiences: First, attitudes toward education have changed significantly in recent years. Education has grown from something that people from rural communities did to something that they value, so today more first-generation students are encouraged to work hard and do well in school so that they can go to college. Second, once first-generation students enter college, they face unique challenges even though they are academically prepared. Learning how to

navigate within the higher education system is critical to their success. Third, even though parents act as sponsors before students enter the university, they often contribute to students' uncertainty when students begin to question cultural beliefs and values.

For many first-generation students, education is a means of moving out of the working class. In the process, however, first-generation students often find themselves in limbo between what they have always known and what they believe they can become. The study's participants are still in transition, pursuing educations that may help them in their quest for middle class and all that the class may signify. Although none have graduated, they continue to make progress or plan to return. Understanding their lives and their needs will help those who teach first-generation students from working-class families help them succeed.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### “A SIGHT FOR SORE EYES”: OVERVIEW, RATIONALE, PURPOSE, THEME & CONNECTIONS

#### Overview

As I work with first-generation students from rural areas in southeast Georgia throughout their first year of college, I am reminded that Georgia Southern University fits Conser's and Payne's (2008) definition of a crossroads, a place “of power and transformation,” a place where a “traveler [. . .] may suddenly change directions or transgress established boundaries; at the crossroads, different worlds come into contact, and perhaps conflict with one another” (p. 1). This is particularly true for many first-generation students because they come from working-class families, and the crossroads found in college classrooms can lead to a particularly bewildering experience, one that calls more than their ability to learn into question. In this study, I allow first-generation students to talk about their lives leading up to college and their experiences once in college. Hearing their stories will help those who teach first-year writing better understand the students' moments at the “crossroads” and how we can help them find their way. I acknowledge that each student's situation is unique and that one first-generation student's account may vary from another's, but I also believe that each story is worth hearing and that by hearing individual stories we will be better able to understand a significant moment in our first-generation students' lives.

Conversations about what factors influence literacy have been carried out in composition studies for years, but class, according to Lubrano, “has [often] been obscured and overlooked” as race and gender have taken center stage (p. 4). In recent

years, however, compositionists have begun to recognize that class shapes students' learning in significant ways. This study adds to the conversation by identifying factors that impact the success of first-generation students from working class backgrounds when they enter the academy. According to Tokarczyk and Fay (1993), middle-class families have learned how to work and succeed within America's class structure, including the schools, largely because their parents and siblings have paved the way for their success. However, "the working class, in contrast, often have no academic role models in their backgrounds. To have to invent an idea of one's self [ . . . ] is a difficult task that can prove insurmountable" (p. 9). And even though a working class exists in all areas of the United States, the South is distinct. Beginning with "the people themselves," descendents of the English, Scots, and Scotch-Irish who "brought their [ . . . ] attitudes and values" to the southern United States, the agrarian history of the South has contributed to its distinctiveness as "a land of farms, large and small, whose people [have] lived close to the earth, dependent on the soil and the elements" (J. Best, 1999, p. 5). And while other areas of the country may also lay claim to an agrarian existence, the South's history is unique, particularly in its struggle between blacks and whites to gain and/or maintain status and power, both within society and among each other:

The caste division of blacks and whites, with the enshrined principle of white supremacy, based on violence and the fear of violence, oppressive to both the powerless as well as those in power, created the ground for the hierarchical, paternalistic organization of society. Yet, despite the threat of violence, or perhaps because of it, southern society was one in which codes of behavior

became enormously important, with attention to manners in almost courtly style within and between castes; respect for authority and for social class position, white and black; pride in family and loyalty to kinsman, and, above all, loyalty and honor [. . .] (J. Best, 1999, p. 5)

Even though slavery ended over a century ago, the caste division of the South continued well into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some argue that it remains today, despite its legal end following the Civil Rights Movement, but others acknowledge that the 1970s and 1980s were decades of real change in the South, a period during which many whites reluctantly acknowledged that skin color did not confirm superiority.

Although few would argue that inequality no longer exists in the South today, most would agree with Best's argument that "the inequities have tended to shift from the single racial focus of the past to discrimination along lines of social class, gender, ethnicity [etc.]" (p. 15), and many first-generation students see education as their key to change, the key to their moving from the working class into the middle class. Yet within education, more problems exist, as Shirley Brice Heath documented in her 1983 ethnography, where the differences among Heath's Roadville, Trackton and Townspeople clearly attested to the advantage of class in education. Tokarczyk and Fay (1993) contended that "classrooms and faculty meetings resound with middle-class ideologies that work to cover up, even as they produce, the tensions that undermine [. . .] vocational efficacy" (p. 15), for middle-class implies a sense of autonomy or control that first-generation students have not experienced. Could middle-class ideologies contribute to many first-generation college students from working-class families' struggle toward

completing their degrees? Or do other factors play a larger role in these students' efforts to succeed? A careful study of selected first-generation students from working-class southern families offers insight to the many unknowns.

By choosing a qualitative approach for my study, I have accepted social constructivist theories that social phenomena develop in societal contexts. Given that I am the daughter of first-generation college graduates from working-class backgrounds, I have personal experiences that relate closely to my first-generation students' stories. However, my status as a second-generation college graduate separates me in significant ways. Nevertheless, my study is ethnographic as I have interviewed and observed my participants where they live, work and learn. However, my role as ethnographer is unusual in that I live and work in the same culture. When I leave Georgia Southern at the end of the day, I go home to my working-class husband and neighbors. There, I not only interact with the group I am studying; I become one of them in a way that someone not of our culture never could. My connection to the culture has allowed me to go beyond what I thought I knew or what I thought was generally understood; simultaneously, I have found significance in the circumstances of those I have interviewed and observed and implications beyond what I thought I knew or have experienced myself.

My study's framework developed from my own relativistic belief that I could better understand and evaluate people from backgrounds much like my own by looking through a historical and cultural lens. So I began my research by reviewing the history of southern culture, including mores and traditions, especially as they related to education. I then prepared a list of characteristics related to those traditions in order to identify the

key characteristics of my research participants. In order to understand better how today's first-generation students are affected by their culture and first-generation status, I opted to make my study qualitative, a combination of interviews and field observations. Interviews would allow me to learn more about the attitudes and beliefs of today's first-generation students and to examine those attitudes and beliefs through their historical context. Field observations would allow me to learn more about first-generation students as they attended classes, interacted with their families, and carried on their everyday lives. Hearing their voices recount their personal experiences and observing different aspects of their lives as students, parents, and employees would enable me to better understand how growing up and living as working class in the rural South today affects students who have attained admission to the university but have not yet successfully completed their degrees.

#### Rationale

The reason for this study is to understand first-generation students' passage into higher education, both how these students and their families have prepared for higher education and the challenges first-generation students face once they enroll. Rural southeast Georgia has undergone many changes in recent years, including a decline in the number of family farms and a significant decrease in manufacturing jobs which depended largely on unskilled labor. To that end, students graduating from rural high schools in the area have far fewer options available to them than in past decades. Today, more graduating seniors than ever from the rural, working-class families in Georgia are taking advantage of a state lottery funded scholarship program and becoming the first generation



of their families to enter Georgia Southern University. Some are graduating; many are not.

A focused look at first-generation students from working-class families in the rural American South is warranted given that these students “are among the classes [. . .] who [have] lacked the power to define and shape cultural norms” (J. Beech, 2004, p. 172). Their entrance into the academy, therein, becomes more than a simple step toward attaining an education; it becomes a move to attain power and effect change in their rapidly changing world. But how does attending college affect who they are and how they view themselves? Stuckey (1991) and Collins and Blot (2003) have supported Heath’s assertion of the school’s role in shaping identity:

The school is not a neutral objective arena; it is an institution which has the goal of changing people’s values, skills, and knowledge bases [. . .] Their socially determined habits and values have created for them an ideology in which all that they do makes sense of their current identity and their preparation for the achievements which will frame their future. (Heath, 1983, pp. 367-368)

Today, the term “school” must embrace post-secondary institutions given that a bachelor’s degree is required for more entry-level positions. My study contributes to compositionists’ understanding of how attending college impacts first-generation students from working-class backgrounds and offers ideas for further conversations about how social class plays into the lives our students live both in and out of the college classroom, particularly in the rural South.

Even though a high school diploma is today the minimum requirement for most adults entering the workforce, many middle-class entry-level jobs now require a bachelor's degree. In the rural South, like most areas of the country, life has changed to reflect the need for higher education. Mechanization has led to a decrease in the demand for farm and factory laborers; moreover, increased technological advancements mean that even entry level jobs are requiring a greater level of knowledge. In rural southeast Georgia, a few entry-level jobs may require only a high school diploma, but those jobs do little more than guarantee workers' status as casual laborers. To have any opportunity for moving up, citizens must now go beyond high school. In many cases, they become the first in their families to do so.

Georgia Southern is the largest and most comprehensive university in the southern half of Georgia, serving nearly 17,000 students (Georgia Southern University Fact Book 2006-2007 p.9). The University began in 1906 as a district agricultural school, primarily to serve southeast Georgia students whose families were involved in farming. From that time, Georgia Southern grew into a teachers' college, a senior college, and finally a university. Each year, Georgia Southern attracts a large freshman class and works hard to retain these students. According to the Georgia Southern University Fact Book 2006-2007, Georgia Southern served 2,306 beginning freshmen in 2006. These freshmen had an average GPA of 3.14 and an average SAT score of 1104. The retention rate of freshmen entering in Fall 2005 was 76%. However, the six-year graduation rate for first-time, full time, degree seeking-freshmen who entered in Fall 2000 and completing a bachelor's degree before Fall 2006 was only 43%. In fact,

Georgia Southern's six-year graduation rates have hovered between 34% and 43% for the past six years (Georgia Southern University Fact Book 2006-2007).

Approximately 94% of Georgia Southern's students are from within the state. Appendix C illustrates Georgia Southern's enrollment by county during the fall of 2006. The largest number of students outside of Bulloch (Georgia Southern's home) and Chatham (Georgia Southern's urban neighbor) counties come from the metro Atlanta counties of Cobb, Gwinnett, Dekalb, and Fulton. These six counties each brought 600 to 1172 students to Georgia Southern in 2006. Bulloch County also brought 600 to 1172 students to Georgia Southern. Among the counties bringing the next largest number of students (100-600) to Georgia Southern in 2006 were Bulloch's neighboring rural counties, including Screven, Effingham, Emanuel, Toombs, Bryan, Liberty, Appling, Tattnall, and Evans.

Having worked with freshmen for the past fifteen years, I have taught many from the rural areas surrounding Bulloch County. These students are fully academically prepared for college-level work, and they meet all of the admission requirements of their urban counterparts. In fact, for several years, I was the Distance Learning teacher for my department, which resulted in my being the first teacher to work with many of these students and allowed me to experience their academic preparedness first hand as I taught high school seniors from rural high schools who qualified for early admission. However, many of these students from Bulloch and its neighboring counties do not graduate, especially within the four-to-six year period following initial enrollment. I have often been surprised when I see former students and learn that they are no longer in school and

have not graduated, even though they were academically prepared and were passing their classes. They are among the 57% of the students who have attended Georgia Southern but not earned a bachelor's degree within six years of first enrolling. In order to learn more about their experiences, I selected and interviewed a group of first-generation students for this study to find out firsthand about their lives before coming to and while attending Georgia Southern.

A thorough study of first-generation college students who have attended Georgia Southern but have not graduated within the expected period of time will help teachers of these students better understand this select group – first-generation students from rural areas, who come to the University with the ability but without the capacity to sustain their momentum. While this study may not offer solutions to the problems that emerge, it will help those of us who work with first-generation students during their first years so that we can ensure that they benefit from their time in our classes. In her 1999 award-winning dissertation, Katherine Sohn argued that such studies “may [ . . . ] fill a need for connecting academic and practical literacy,” and that the literature seems to favor one or the other and does not treat them as integral parts of a person's ability. While Sohn's dissertation focused on Appalachian women who completed their college degrees, she later suggested that interviewing women who had not graduated would also be interesting (Sohn, 2003, p. 428).

Stuckey (1991) added that such studies impact what we do in the classroom and can lead to a better understanding of “the interrelationships of English teaching to American work” (p. 12). An ethnographic study of first-generation students who have

attended Georgia Southern should lead to a better understanding of these students and how first-year writing teachers may help them further their educational goals. Stuckey agreed that such study is not only necessary but inevitable: “That [English teachers] will be forced to do something along these lines is a sure thing. That is because the change in work is literacy. The change, in fact, is a change *in* literacy” (p. 12). Because I have known so many first-generation students who have not graduated, they will be the focus of my study as I seek answers to my research questions, which have arisen as a result of teaching so many bright and eager first-generation students.

My research has emerged from my own experience as the daughter of first-generation college-educated parents and my family’s own academic successes and failures. Our stories, my parents and mine, include periods of struggle in our pursuit of college degrees. In fact, neither my father, my mother, nor I graduated within six years of first enrolling in college. Our pursuits took much longer and included periods during which we left college to reflect on what we wanted to do with our lives. As I have continued to live in rural southeast Georgia and teach first-generation college students, I have come to realize that my family is not unique in our experience. Many of the students who come to Georgia Southern as first-generation students follow a similar route, one which may eventually lead to a diploma but also poses many difficulties along the way.

### Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand first-generation students’ passage into higher education, both how these students and their families have prepared for higher

education and the challenges first-generation students face once they enroll. My personal experience persuades my purpose. As I recall my parents' working toward their college degrees, I do not recall their planning for college as a given part of my or my sisters' futures. Perhaps their first-generation status prevented them from thinking that far ahead. After all, they were enmeshed in their own complicated climb up the academic and socio-economic ladder to middle-class. Yet my seeing them take classes and work toward a larger goal had a significant impact on me, including my attitude toward learning and my desire to do well in school. When my senior year of high school came, my positive attitude led me to take the next big step—to enroll in college. Perhaps my own experience led me to question the attitudes of so many of the students I taught in the rural high school for two years. Why were so many of them unwilling to take that next big step even though they seemed to possess many of the same feelings and attitudes that I had had years before? The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine the attitudes toward learning and education of first-generation college students from rural, working-class families in Georgia today. Specifically, I want to discover

- What role does learning play in the lives of first-generation Georgia Southern students from rural, working class communities in southeast Georgia, including home, school, work and community?
- What impact does having attended Georgia Southern have on first-generation students' professions or jobs?

- What advantages and/or disadvantages do first-generation college students recognize as a result of attending Georgia Southern, and how might teachers of first-year composition build upon them?

My study's focus was to seek answers to these research questions. I incorporate narrative to tell their stories in order to better understand what their stories reveal about their learning at home, school, work, and in the community in the rural South today. To better understand Southern life today, however, readers must also understand the South's recent past. In the 1960s, Southern writer Flannery O'Connor lamented that "the South [. . .] [is] getting more and more like the rest of the country" (O'Connor, 1962, "The fiction writer and his country," p. 29) and used fictionalized accounts from her own life to acknowledge changes that were taking place in the South. Set primarily in rural Georgia, many of O'Connor's short stories depict conflicts between literate and non-literate characters, and her characters are often influenced or challenged by other members of the family or the community. When I read her stories, I relate to the characters because of similar encounters between my marginally middle-class parents and their working-class relatives. Even though 50 years have passed since O'Connor wrote, the lives of so many of my current students reflect the lives of O'Connor's characters, so I will also use O'Connor's letters, essays, and stories to help make connections as I lead into my participants' stories.

In her 2003 dissertation, Geraldine Mendoza Gutwein studied Lakota Indian women's lives and concluded that educators should be "sensitive to the complex relationships students have with literacy and their educational experiences" as a result of

knowing their life stories (p. 25). Literacy researchers (Rose, 1990; Williams, 1991; Evans, 1993, and Soliday, 1994) have studied narrative as a means of understanding students' literacy from a socio-cultural perspective by working within an educational context. Research has also shown that literacy can empower (Rockhill, 1993) or silence (Fine, 1992). In south Georgia, when first generation college students from rural, working-class families struggle while working toward college degrees, how does the value of the learning that gained them entrance change? As they work toward their degrees, how do their positions in the home, in their jobs, and in their communities change? What role does family play in first-generation students' life stories about learning, both before and during their college experience? Learning more about the lives and literacies of first-generation college students from rural, working-class families will likewise inform educators serving large numbers of first-generation students and perhaps better help educators help more of these students complete their degrees.

### My Connections

Having taught in rural southeast Georgia for the past twenty years, I have had the opportunity to teach many students from working-class families in the rural areas surrounding Bulloch County, Georgia, the place that I have called home for the past thirty-five years. During my teaching career, I have become increasingly interested in the attitudes toward learning and education of first-generation college students from rural, working-class families in Georgia. My curiosity began in 1986 when I first began teaching. At that time, I taught in a small high school in the heart of sweet onion country. Most of my students lived outside of town, and many worked on local onion



farms during the planting and harvesting seasons. Very few planned on attending college even though a major university was only 35 miles away. After graduation, most students planned to seek jobs at one of the two industries in town or, if they were really lucky, they would “get on with” the state prison system, which had a large facility in the county. During my two years at the rural high school, I taught many bright, young students, so I was curious about why they were not looking toward college after high school. I ultimately had to accept that their socio-economic status simply did not open that door of opportunity for them at that time.

However, much has changed in this area of the country since the 1980s, changes that have made college not only a possibility but also a necessity. Today, I teach first-year writing at a regional university where only about 40% of students graduate within six years. While many of our students come from metro-Atlanta and other urban areas of the state, a proportionate number come from the rural areas surrounding Statesboro, which offers me the opportunity to study first-generation college students from rural, working-class families. Given that I am only one generation removed from these students and vividly recall my parents’ struggle to earn college degrees as first-generation students in the 1960s and 1970s, I find myself connected to these students in significant ways.

### *Personal*

Since moving to Bulloch County, Georgia in 1974, I have become completely immersed in the geographical, cultural, and academic impulses of a community in the rural South. I have lived in various locations throughout the county, including nineteen

years on my husband's family's farm in the community of Nevils. When I first began teaching in 1986, I spent two years in a small, rural high school in a neighboring county known for its sweet onions. During those two years, most of my students spent their afternoons and summer vacations working in the onion fields or grading warehouses. After two years of teaching high school, I returned to college for a master's degree and eventually a position teaching post-secondary education. For the past twenty years, I have lived among and taught the students interviewed for this study.

Although I spent the first fifteen years of my life in an urban environment, I am only one generation removed from the lives of many of the students I teach today. My mother's parents were sharecroppers for many years and working-class for all of their lives. When they became unable to farm because of failing health, my grandfather found work as a handyman or carpenter; my grandmother found work in a sewing factory. While my grandparents' lives seem far removed from my life today, I fondly recall the many days I spent in their rural home on weekends and summer vacations. On those visits, I would happily follow my grandparents around, gathering eggs from the hen house, slopping hogs with buckets of scraps from the previous days' meals, shucking ears of sweet corn for canning, or picking figs or berries for preserves. After my visits, I would return to my urban home and reflect on the good times I had shared with them. But my good times were just regular occurrences in the everyday drudgery of their working-class lives. Likewise, for many people in rural southeast Georgia, their working-class way of life has continued. Attending college, for many, has remained an enigma, something that they cannot quite understand.

## *Historical*

When my grandparents were young and starting their married lives together, only 24% of Georgia's population 25 and over had completed high school. Therefore, when they needed work away from the farm, my grandparents were just as competitive in the workforce as most of the people around them; as a result, they were able to get work and provide for their family throughout their lives. In recent years, however, the education levels of United States citizens have increased significantly. Census 2000 reported that education levels of the United States population toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had reached an all-time high, but the change has been less dramatic in the rural South. Like most Americans, the majority of rural southerners today do earn a high school diploma, proving that "high school has gone from being the mark of the educated minority of the population to the minimum education level for 4 out of 5 adults" (Education Attainment: 2000 p.2). But while in the United States at large "almost 1 adult in 4 had attained [a bachelor's degree] in 2000," residents in the rural South lagged far behind. The state of Georgia as a whole is only slightly behind the national average in education attainment: 80.4% of the nation's population 25 or over has a high school diploma; 78.6% of Georgia's residents 25 or over do. Nationally, 24.4% of the population has attained a bachelor's degree; in Georgia, 24.3% has (Census 2000). But Georgia's statistics are strongly influenced by residents in the Metro-Atlanta area and other urban areas of the state where the largest number of Georgia residents live. Georgia's rural counties tell quite a different story. For example, in Burke County, the county where my grandmother was born and raised, only 64.9% of the population 25 or over has a high school diploma;

only 9.5% of the population has earned a bachelor's degree. Counties adjoining Burke do not fair any better: 62.0% of Jenkins County residents 25 or older have a high school diploma; 10.8% have earned bachelor's degrees. In Screven County, 66.9% of the residents have earned a high school diploma; 10.2% have earned bachelor's degrees.

Statesboro, the county seat of Bulloch, is the home of Georgia Southern University. Although the county's statistics more closely reflect the national averages-- 77.9% of Bulloch residents have high school diplomas, and 25.4% of Bulloch residents have bachelor's degrees—these numbers reflect the education attained by the large number of people who have moved to the county to teach and work at the University. Census 2000 data reveals that concentrations of highly educated people most often occur in communities housing colleges or universities. However, Bulloch County communities outside of Statesboro tend to fall more in line with the other rural areas of the state. The other Georgia counties with greater than 18.3% of the population over 25 having a bachelor's degree are located in the urban areas of Macon (where I-16 and I-75 merge), Augusta (where I-20 crosses the river into South Carolina) and Atlanta (where all of the interstates converge). The rural counties, particularly those lying in the southern part of the state, are statistically among the lowest in the nation for people holding bachelor's degrees. Therefore, my concern lies with residents of Georgia living in the rural areas outside of Statesboro and the urban areas of the state, particularly the counties surrounding Statesboro and Georgia Southern University.

## *Teaching*

During my twenty years of teaching here, I have worked with hundreds of students from rural areas throughout southeast Georgia. My first two years teaching in a high school were perhaps the most eye opening. Most of my students were involved in farm work in some way for at least part of the year, especially during the onion harvest in early spring. Their lives revolved around onions, and the success of the crop played a significant role in their status of living for any given year. Other than the onion fields, the only major employers in the area were a manufacturing corporation, a textile mill, and a state prison. High school students were most likely to find temporary work in the onion industry. In the two years that I taught in the small town, I worked with some of the brightest young people I had ever met. They were hard working and personable, but they were not particularly optimistic, especially when it came to their futures. Few were planning to attend college even though a university thrived only thirty-five miles away. Most were planning on staying in the small town, and they hoped to find work at local industry or the prison when they graduated from high school. Unless their parents were farm owners, they did not plan to continue working in the onion industry but they recognized the importance the onion farms played in the livelihood of the county.

After I left the high school, I returned to college to earn my master's degree and subsequently began teaching on the college level. In the twenty years since I left my first teaching job, a lot has changed in that town and other small towns in this part of the state. The manufacturing company is still open but is hiring fewer people each year; the ones who are lucky enough to get hired stay on. The textile mill has closed completely. Like

many textile mills in the area, its work has been sent to factories in other countries. While agriculture is still king here, farm work has diminished because farms have consolidated and technological advancements have decreased the need for field laborers. The work that is available is seasonal. Because of the low wages and the physical demands of the work, most of the onion harvest, the one crop that still requires large numbers of pickers and graders, is now done by immigrants, both legal and illegal. I often wonder what has happened to my former students, especially the bright young people who had so much potential but never considered attending college an option for their future. But I do not dwell on them for long. I have continued to live and teach in southeast Georgia, and each year I teach new students much like those I taught over twenty years ago.

While economists argue that a high school diploma is now “the minimum education level” for most adult workers, qualifying for most entry level jobs now requires a bachelor’s degree. In the rural South, a decrease in the demand for farm and factory laborers and increased technological advancements mean that even entry-level jobs are requiring a greater level of knowledge. Therefore, the state has made significant moves, including a measure to insure that every student graduating from a Georgia high school with a B or better average can attend college by offering lottery-funded HOPE scholarships. But HOPE came too late for the students I first taught in the late 1980s. I often think about my former students, many of whom could have benefited from HOPE had such been available in the 1980s. I am sure some of them got their dream jobs at the local industry or at the prison, but I wonder if they have been able to keep those jobs and have realized the lives they dreamed about. I wonder what they are doing now.

## *Family*

When I think of my own education, I credit my success to sponsorship, which began with my family. According to Deborah Brandt (1998), “literacy sponsors affect learning in two powerful ways. They help to organize and administer stratified systems of opportunity and access, and they raise the literacy stakes in struggles for competitive advantage” (p. 567). Brandt coins the term *sponsors* to describe the people who affect learners throughout their lifetimes. Sponsors may include teachers, family members, family friends, clergy—anyone who is later considered to have had an impact on one’s learning (p. 557). Her study analyzes how literacy continues to be rewarded in society, how sponsors impact the divide between what is needed to be considered literate today and people’s ability to achieve, and how sponsors continue to affect literacy development (p. 559). I had never really thought about my own literacy journey or my grandmother’s role as my first literacy sponsor until early one Saturday morning in May of 1995.

I was awakened by the shrill ring of my bedside telephone and my mother’s surprisingly calm voice telling me that my grandmother had suffered a stroke and died during the night. After a moment of shocked silence, I responded that I was on my way. My grandmother’s house was on the outskirts of Sardis, GA, a little over an hour’s drive from my house in southern Bulloch County. As I turned into the narrow, grass-lined drive of my grandmother’s house, I saw the front porch and yard where I spent many a summer evening swinging or catching fire flies. But I did not stop there. Only company entered my grandmother’s house through the front door. Friends and family always went around back. As I parked, I noticed the other cars in the yard. My aunt and uncle had

already arrived. I walked toward the house and passed the outdoor spigot where Grandmother used to fill a three-gallon washtub on hot summer days so her grandchildren could play and cool off. I chuckled as I looked down at the soft sand that I used to mix with the cool water to make mud pies and frog houses. Taking a deep, calming breath, I opened the screen door and entered the narrow entrance housing the three block steps that led up to the back porch. I listened for my grandmother's voice squealing, "There's my baby," but it never came.

I had always thought of my grandmother's house as big, perhaps because of the important role it had played in my life. No matter where my family moved or what troubles my family faced, I had always known that I could go to Grandmother's house for a warm meal and a compassionate hug. I guess that was why I was so surprised at how small the house really was once we had moved out all of the furniture and taken her paintings off the walls. The little block house originally had three bedrooms, a kitchen, and a living/dining room combination, all in less than 1,000 square feet. My grandmother used to joke about my grandfather's instructions when the family had finally saved enough money to build their own house instead of having to rent from others: "We can have five rooms and a path or four rooms and a bath." Preferring five rooms for her family of five (including a son and two daughters), my grandmother opted for the path down to the outhouse at the end of the field. Years later, right before my grandfather died, he had closed in the screened back porch and added a bathroom off one end. The "back porch" became the main living area of the house and the living/dining room was closed off except for the days when company came.



As I was cleaning my grandmother's bedroom, I pulled back the curtain on the small closet where I found a stack of books, notebooks and papers in the rear corner. I pulled out the stack, curious to know what I had found. I immediately recognized my grandmother's handwriting, so I sat down in the middle of the floor of the now empty bedroom and began to read my grandmother's defined script:

*Lenward Kelly and Corene Morris were married Jan. 4, 1931. I was 15 years old Jan. 5, 1931. I was married on Sunday and was 15 on Monday. On Sunday afternoon when Lenward came we took Lois with us and started to get married. We went to Hiltonia and couldn't find where the justice of the piece lived so we rode out in the country hunting him. We couldn't find him so we went to another man with authority but he didn't have a book. So we went to another man and he hadn't ever married anybody so he gave us directions of how to find the justice of the piece in Hiltonia. When we found him he couldn't find his book so he went across the road and borrowed the preachers and so we were married. Monday Jan. 5 was my birthday so Mrs Kelly cooked me a birthday dinner, chicken n- everything. On March 2, 1931 Lenward and I moved out to ourselves in a little 3 room house. I like it fine.*

I had found my grandmother's journals, a general accounting of her daily life dating back over sixty years. I found an empty box and searched the closet for every piece of paper I could find. Even though I did not have time that day, I knew that I wanted to read what my grandmother had written, knowing that in some way my grandmother's journals would have a profound impact on me.

I had grown up hearing my grandmother, Corene Kelly, tell stories, but I had lacked the vision to record those stories in her voice. Perhaps I had thought that this tiny woman who had meant so much to me throughout my life would live forever. More realistically, I had simply allowed my busy life to take precedence. As a result, I had taken my grandmother's life stories and her impact on me for granted. Luttrell (1977) describes the life story as "stories that are told in discontinuous bits and pieces and revised over the course of a person's lifetime" (p. 3). Finding her journals, written snapshots of her life, after her death was like finding a hidden treasure—something far more valuable than the other possessions of her life that we were divvying among family members. These pages recorded the everyday events of her life, from the time she was married until the time that she died. Even though I had lost my grandmother, I still had the "discontinuous bits and pieces" of her life. Through her journals, I began to realize what role learning had played in her life and in the lives of her children, two of whom became first-generation college students from a rural, working class family.

*On May 8, 1931 I was sick about a week and Lois came & stayed with me. In August 1932 Melburn was born. Poor little fellow. I didn't think he could live but he did. In February 1934, Melburn had pneumonia. In April 9, 1936 Elsie Clair was born. Then in May Mrs Kelly and Ola went to live with Agnes so we had to come live with Mr. Kelly who was afflicted with paralysis. We stayed with him 13 months and Ola & Mrs Kelly came back so we moved in the little house again. In Sept of that year we had to move back up here. Mr Kelly was so feeble. He died Feb. 13 1938. Betty June was born July 8, 1938.*

In the aged, brown Bluehorse notebook, the scrap pieces of fragile paper, the colorful spiral notebooks, and the leather-bound journals of her later years, I have something better than a recording of her voice looking back on her life; I have over fifty years of her life stories in her own voice, recorded by her own hand. More importantly, I have a chronicle of the social and cultural implications learning had on my mother and my uncle as they started college and began their move from working class to middle class.

Reading her journals has led me to wonder about the students from similar backgrounds who find their way into my classes today at Georgia Southern University.

Did Corene Kelly know that one day her life story would be found and valued? I think not. So why, I wonder, did she write? Why would she take a few minutes at the end of a long day of hoeing in her garden, stooping to pick long rows of cotton, bending over a sewing machine in a dimly lit textile mill, or cleaning and canning to record what had taken place in her life? As I have read and reread her journals, several aspects of her life have become central to understanding this woman and her compulsion to write: her tremendous love for her family, her eternal hope that her life and the lives of her children could get better, and her pride in the accomplishments of everyone in her family. I am amazed that my grandmother, a woman who was forced to leave school in the eighth grade, became a literacy sponsor to her three children and six grandchildren. But Corene Kelly's love of family was not unusual in the South as Best (1999) acknowledged: "Populations [in the South] were thinly dispersed over the land in farms and small towns, and hence the family became the basic organizational unit of the society. With the emergence of larger towns over time, the rural southern character seemed to persist" (p.

5). Even after her children had moved away, family remained the focus of Corene's life, and her influence on me was as significant as her influence on her children. Although Brandt (1998) defines sponsors as "powerful figures who bankroll events or smooth the way for initiates" (p. 557), Corene had neither the money nor the time to make learning easy for her children, but she did realize the importance of education. Like many who have grown up poor or working class, she sensed that education would be the one means by which her children and grandchildren would not have to work as hard as she did just to get by. Reading my grandmother's journals "expose[d] the deeply textured history that lies within [. . .] [my own] literacy experiences" (p. 566), and as Brandt reveals in her research, my grandmother's efforts "help[ed] to create infrastructures of opportunity" for all of her descendents (p. 567).

#### *Corene's Early Life*

Corene Kelly lived in rural Burke and Screven counties for almost all of her life. She was born to poor, hardworking parents who had managed to scrape together enough money over the years to buy a small farm where they raised their children, a few chickens and a couple of hogs. To earn an income, the family also grew cotton, which they harvested by hand. In order to get the crop in, every member of the family was required to help out during the harvest. Once their crop had been gathered, the family would hire themselves out to help neighbors gather their crops. As soon as Corene was old enough, she too was expected to do her share, at first watching the younger children and helping prepare the large, midday meal for those working in the fields and later picking her own rows.

When she was in eighth grade, Corene had to quit school in order to help out on the farm full-time. Even after she married at fourteen, she lived nearby and was expected to work in the cotton fields, despite her own growing family. Her journals reveal the hard times and hard work:

*Aug. 24, 1940. Melburn is 8 years old. We are picking cotton wont make but a little over one bale. We got about ½ a stand and then the boll weevils ate it up. Our mule died in June before Lenward finished laying by and he had to borrow [a] mule.*

*Sept. 1940 We picked cotton for Lester about 3 weeks bought us all some new clothes. We still owe a large grocery bill and can't pay it.*

The hard work involved in earning a living for a poor, farming family in the rural South at that time is hard for most of us to imagine.

I often watch today's farmers turn the earth of the dormant fields in early spring, making easy work of it as they ride along on their John Deere or Massey Ferguson diesel tractors, pulling harrows or plows which turn the soil with toil-less effort. However, Lenward and Corene Kelly did not own a tractor. They owned a mule, which was cinched to a harness which pulled the plow which turned the soil, row after long row, as Lenward's strong arms guided and pushed down on the heavy implement. What a John Deere can do in just a few minutes took Lenward and Corene all day. But the really hard work came with the crop harvest. In their day, cotton was picked by hand, and the pickers would walk along the rows, dragging a sack behind them. They would stoop slightly to reach the white bolls, pull the bolls from the pods, and put the seed-containing

fluff into the sacks. In the process, the pickers' fingers would get sliced by the razor-sharp dried pod covers, and the cuts would bleed onto the white fluff. But blood did not detract from the value of the cotton, and the money the cotton would bring would sustain the family throughout the coming winter months, so the pickers moved on, ignoring the pain and the blood.

When the planting and harvest seasons were over, there was still no rest for the poor farmer in south Georgia. The daily struggle to eke out a living continued:

*Jan. 16, 1950 We candled the eggs in the incubator took out 19 infertile ones.*

*Jan. 16, 1950 Supposed to go with Margaret & Hilda to Savannah but didn't have any money so I washed, sunned beds & cooked turnips.*

*Jan. 19, 1950 Helped Mary and Rayford kill hogs. I dried out lard last night by myself. I always wanted to. Mary says its pretty & white. She gave me a nice pile of liver and spareribs.*

*Mar. 1, 1950 I went to PTA meeting. When I came back Melburns hogs had gotten in potato bed rooted them up turned over 4 buckets & tubs of beet and lettuce plants & ruined them. I hung out clothes while Elsie and Betty cooked. Lenward has my washing machine fixed almost as good as new. He also fixed Avis brooder "My Willie can do anything"*

Despite the hard work that was part of virtually every day of her life, Corene rarely complained. Instead, most of her journal entries are simply "matter of fact." But she was quick to point out the small pleasures she found in life, especially when those pleasures involved her children:

*Feb. 8, 1939 Betty is seven months old and is she sweet, she can say "hey" "ow" and when ever she coughs she will mock us.*

*Jan. 4, 1940 Lenward and I have been married nine years.*

*Jan. 5, 1940 I am 24 years old today. Pappa gave me a quarter. The only present I got.*

*April 9, 1943 Elsie's Birthday 7 yrs. old. We are moving [. . .] two doors down the road. It is a much nicer house and has electric lights. While making over a mattress Elsie's little pullet came in and laid her first egg on the cotton! what a present for Elsie. I gave her 25 cents.*

*June 1943 Attended commencement exercises at Millhaven school. Melburn & Elsie had parts they both did real good. Elsie wore an evening dress and represented Cinderilla.*

### *Corene's Legacy*

Finding and reading my grandmother's journals has led me to reflect on my own literacy and what literacy has meant to my grandmother's descendants. Melburn, my grandmother's oldest child, earned a bachelor's degree in music and went on to earn a master's and education specialist degrees. Betty, my mother and my grandmother's youngest, earned an associate's degree in nursing and later earned a bachelor's in nursing and a master's in health occupations. Elsie, the middle child and the oldest girl, is the only one who did not attend college, even though her academic achievements in public school far surpassed those of her siblings. She graduated from high school about the time my grandfather suffered his first heart attack. Since he was no longer able to work as

hard as he had in the past, Elsie got a job to help supplement the family's income and later continued to work to help Betty, my mother, attend nursing school in Savannah. Like many women in south Georgia in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, Elsie found steady work in sewing factories throughout the area.

As years went by, my mother and our family found ourselves increasingly removed from my grandmother's way of life as my parents moved to Savannah, a mid-sized city in southeast Georgia, and obtained jobs in sales. By the time my sisters and I had started school, my parents took turns supporting each other in order to return to nursing school and obtain their degrees. Therefore, from the time I can remember, school and learning were as much a part of our lives as hoeing and canning were for my grandmother's life. As Brandt (1998) discovered in her research, the changes in literacy between my grandmother and my own seemed to "fast forward. Where once the same sponsoring arrangements could maintain value across a generation or more" (p. 567), my grandmother's efforts set her children and her grandchildren on a journey that has changed our way of life forever. Having made our way into middle class, at least marginally, my family's life was quite different from the life my grandmother records in her journals. My mother had no trouble turning away from her working class upbringing and settling into a more acceptable middle-class existence.

In order to understand literacy fully, readers have to define it both generally and specifically. Generally, literacy has to include vernacular literacy (D. Barton & M. Hamilton, 1998, p. 6)—using systems or texts to make meaning within a culture. To that end, I argue that my grandmother's journals teach us about as well as reflect her own



literacy because they may help us make meaning of a way of life in the rural South. Witte (1992) supported this claim in that my grandmother's journals are a text, an organized set of symbols which "manifests itself in day-do-day human relations [. . .] even though some parts [. . .] do not readily submit to linguistic description or analysis" (p. 269). Moreover, her journals have helped me understand my own literacy development and how my grandmother acted as my literacy sponsor, the person whose influence contributed significantly to my current middle-class life as a college professor.

### *My Birthright*

Finding and reading my grandmother's journals has helped me realize just how much I learned from her, including lessons and skills that I never could have learned from my city-dwelling, middle-class parents. When I was fourteen, I had the opportunity to gain an even better understanding of my grandmother's rural life and the lives of many rural, working-class southerners. A job offer led my family to move from Savannah to rural southeast Georgia in 1974. The summer before my ninth grade year, I found myself in a new house on a small "farm" in Bulloch County. But our farm was nothing like the farm on which my grandmother had grown up. My father and his partner worked in an office in town, so the farm was left as pasture and they bought a few cows to graze the land. Of course, they also hired a man to take care of the cows and the fences since they were too busy. A friend had given me a horse, so instead of joining my sisters in bemoaning their new lifestyle, I set out to explore my new surroundings. I had often had odd jobs mowing lawns or babysitting in our subdivision in Savannah and enjoyed having my own money to spend. I decided that I would have to find other work in this

more rural area since our nearest neighbor was half a mile away. Within just a few days, I had made a new friend and found a summer job picking tobacco for her family on an adjoining farm.

Cotton had slumped as a money crop for southeast Georgia farms, and tobacco had become king. But like cotton, tobacco required hand laborers, and for the first time in my young life, I got to experience the day-to-day toil of eking out a living by working hard when I took a job working in the tobacco fields. Early every morning, the men and older boys would head to the fields while the women cleaned up the kitchen after breakfast, which we had begun preparing before daylight. The men and older boys would walk up and down the rows of tobacco, picking the ripe leaves, starting at the bottom of the stalk. They would stack the mature leaves on a sled, and when the sled was full, one man would bring it to the women and younger children to string; then he would return to the field with an empty sled. The women and children were to take the leaves, three or four at a time, and string them onto three-foot-long sticks about one inch by one inch thick. Each stick would hold about 25 hands of tobacco. After I gained some experience in the field, I would be called upon to pick if enough males did not show up to do the job, and since I made \$1.25 an hour instead of \$1.00, I often jumped at the chance to do so. At the end of the day, we would all return to the barn and, working in assembly-line fashion, would pass the sticks of tobacco up to the men who would hang it in the barn, working top to bottom. Although I worked in the tobacco fields for only three summers—until I was old enough to drive and get a job in town—I remember the muscle numbing tiredness that would come upon me as I was handing the sticks of

tobacco up to the men. I also acquired the infamous “red neck” from working hours in the hot sun. I would be so tired after standing on my feet all day, stringing hand after hand after hand of tobacco that I could hardly wait to get the sleds emptied.

More often than not, we would begin our day at 5:00 a.m. and end it at 10:00 p.m. as we “put in” tobacco three days each week during the hot summer months. Because of the long days, I would just stay with the family. Since I was best friends with their youngest daughter and was contributing to the household, I was treated like a member of the family. These three years, more than any other years of my life, helped me better understand the life that my grandmother had lived when I discovered and began reading her journals. As tired as I would be each night, I would never have thought to write in a journal. How did my grandmother find the time? Where did she find the energy? But not only did she write, she also read and worked hard to see that all of her children grew up literate.

#### *Corene's Later Life*

*Sept. 15, 1939 School has started Melburn is in the second grade he likes his teacher fine She is Miss Virginia Grahaus. He is learning fast.*

*Dec. 25, 1943 I gave [Melburn] a book for a present.*

*Feb. 23, 1950 Lenward made hog shelters for Leroy and I copied spelling words for Elsie she now has collected 2,127 hard words to study for the spelling contest next month.*

*Feb. 10, 1950 Elsie stood a test on history and made A after missing out on the review.*

*March 29, 1950 Went to school house. Caught Mrs. Bargeron. Went to Waynesboro to county spelling contest. Elsie beat them again, just like last year. she received a \$25 war bond each time.*

*April 11, 1950 Went to Statesboro to district spelling bee, Elsie lost out again but tried real hard.*

*May 29, 1950 Went to graduation. Elsie got a certificate to ninth grade & high school. Her card are A's highest in her class*

In addition to encouraging her children, Corene somehow found the time to develop her own skills: *Aug. 22, 1950 Mrs. Williamson (Elsies Home Ec teacher) spent the day with me and taught me a lot about crocheting. I learned to read the instructions. I enjoyed the day a lot.* After Lenward's heart attack, Corene and Lenward gave up farming and Corene found work in a local sewing factory. The work was different but not necessarily easier as she would sit for hours on end, leaning over a sewing machine, striving to make production. She would return home at the end of an eight hour day, barely able to stand from having sewn all day. But she continued to find time to write in her journal and talk about all that she had done and learned. Her love for her family as recorded in her journals continued throughout her life. In fact, her pride in her children and grandchildren and their accomplishments became Corene's way of coping during the most stressful times of her life.

As each of her children grew up, married, and moved away, Corene looked forward to their visits and their letters as she continued to relish in their news and accomplishments.

*Letter from youngest daughter Betty from El Paso, Texas Dec. 28, 1959 to Mr. & Mrs. W. L. Kelly, Sardis, Georgia: Now Karen is another sight. She surprises me at how much she knows. She can say "I want a cookie," "Bath," "no no," "sissy" (sister) plus all the little words she's been saying.*

*Letter from Karen [granddaughter] to Grandmother, Feb. 7, 1969: I miss you very much. I am doing well in school. [. . .]I made an A in spelling, writing and music on my report card. I made a B on Reading, Math, English. And I made a C on Social Study and Science. Your Beloved Granddaughter Karen.*

When Lenward died in 1969, leaving Corene alone for the first time in her life, her writing helped her get through. But she also decided to improve her own education at that time:

*Jan. 20, 1969 Inauguration day. (Nixon sworn in) Lenward and I had breakfast. And were going to work on the den. It started raining so Lenward couldn't go outside to saw lumber. About 9 o'clock he took off his shoes and lay down on his couch. He said "If I can't work I might as well take it easy" I went in bathroom. When I came out he was snoring. I looked at him. He was purple before we got him to the hospital he was dead.*

*April 1969 With the insurance & Lenwards money I finished paying funeral expenses and bought a nice toomb for Lenwards grave \$1,300 I only had to pay about \$50.00 myself. Since funeral it seems like a bad dream Mel & Joyce moved their trailer back here they and the children are a lot of company for me.*

*July 16, 1969 Went out to Armstrong college and stood a GED test. Made good on English and science But flunked math.*

*August 1969 Went back to Armstrong for another test. Made good on science and history. Got a math book. Came home & studied hard. Got Debby Widner to help me about 5 afternoons. Then Mel helped me every night.*

*Sept. 13, 1969 Went back to Armstrong & stood my math test & passed.*

*Dec. 31, 1969 Am ending the most miserable year in my 54 years. Nothing seems real. Hope when I start school Jan. 26, 1970 I'll find myself.*

Even though Corene had quit school in the eighth grade, she loved learning, especially reading and writing, as seen through her journals. So after Lenward died, she decided to leave Sardis and the life she had always known to attend college in Savannah and begin her own move into middle-class, but her college experience was short-lived:

*Mon. Jan. 26, 1970 Started school. Its real hard. Paid dues \$150.00 Book cost \$19.75*

*Tues. Jan. 27, 1970 School got worse. Too much written work & research.*

*Jan. 28, 1970 Had four hard lessons each requiring written essays. Also have to hand in 2 book reports Friday. Had 3 lectures by pastors a Rabbi, a Catholic father, & a Methodist preacher.*

*Thursday. Jan. 29, 1970 Decided to quit school. My nerves are shot. Still have headache. Went out to hospital; talked with supervisor. Will get most of my money back.*

Corene returned to Sardis and to her job at the sewing factory, but her love of learning never diminished: *Dec. 27, 1979 Cleaned house. Cleaned my oven. Typed an hour. I'm learning touch typing pretty good and have a new portable electric typewriter. March 15, 1980 I received the looms I had ordered yesterday; I am real anxious to learn how to use them.* Even though she found college to be too difficult, she always sought to learn new skills, mostly for her own benefit.

### *The Tie That Binds*

Reading about my grandmother's life and her experience in college has led me to think more carefully about my own experience in college. I began college immediately after graduating from high school in 1977, but I did not succeed in earning a degree for many years. I withdrew once for a short period of time, and I changed my major three times before deciding on English. Now that I am teaching many students who come from backgrounds similar to my own, I wonder how they might respond to questions about their lives and their learning experiences: What role does learning play in the lives of first-generation students from rural, working class communities in southeast Georgia, including home, school, work and community? What impact does having attended Georgia Southern have on first-generation students' professions or jobs? What advantages and/or disadvantages do first-generation college students recognize as a result of attending Georgia Southern, and how might teachers of first-year composition build upon them? As a first-year composition teacher who realizes that more of my students will leave than graduate, I also wonder how I might better serve them. Reading my grandmother's journals and reflecting on my own literacy development has allowed

me to answer these questions for myself. Allowing first-generation students from southern working-class families to tell their own stories, to explore their own literacy will enable me to answer many of these questions as they exist for my students today.



## CHAPTER TWO

### “TALKING TO A MAN ABOUT A CROW”: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

When a southerner talks “to a man about a crow,” he is taking care of business. My study, my business so to speak, centers on life and learning in the rural South today, including the role learning plays in the home, school, work and community. In addition, my research questions focus on the impact a college education, both its advantages and disadvantages, has on all aspects of first-generation students’ lives. Recent studies of education in the South have led to more questions and areas for further study, and J. Best (1999) argued that there is “no end of questions relevant to exploring the culture of the South as an educative force.” Best added that “The work proceeds toward a better grasp of education that in the past formed the South and that now influences the developing American South” (p. 15). And while education is just one of many facets of life and cultural change, previous studies support the need for further research in this area, given that “[l]iteracy [. . .] is a valued commodity in this economy, a key resource in gaining profit and edge” (Brandt, 1998, p. 558). However, literacy and education have not always been valued in the South, and unconscious yet enduring cultural values continue to impact first-generation students in the South today. Therefore, my review of the literature begins with a description of the region and people whom I have studied, followed by a brief look at the region’s history and a subsequent look at the southern working class and its attitudes toward education today. I end the chapter with a summary of scholarship which looks at literacy and social class in relation to Composition Studies

in order to defend a study of first-generation students whose lives continue to be affected in significant ways by past historical events and enduring cultural values.

### The Region and Its Culture

When I talk about the South, I refer to the area of the United States comprised of states which were part of the Confederacy during the American Civil War because, as Cosner and Payne (2008) argue, “[T]he South is [. . .] a uniquely distinctive area. Born of politics and economics, slavery and succession, perduring religious habits and recent commercial advances, the South is an obvious choice for regional analysis” (W. Conser and R. Payne, 2008, p. 3). In Cracker Culture, G. McWhiney (1988) focused on the people that settled the South, the Scotch, Irish, English and Welsh settlers who first came to the United States and passed on their love of leisure and fiercely independent nature. His title is significant because “cracker,” a pejorative term once used to describe Scotch-Irish settlers and their ways of life, implies a lack of formal education, for, as Best (1999) pointed out, “The education of the South arose from non-formal sources, from the southern culture, traditions, and institutions more fundamental than mere schools” (p. 11). Yet the negative implication of the term “cracker” ignores the fact that many Scotch-Irish settlers resisted formal education by choice. According to McWhiney (1988), “Formal education [by the end of the antebellum period] enjoyed scarcely more respect among plain southerners [. . .] than it had in colonial times” (p. 194), primarily because “Schooling often clashed with the values and unrestrained habits” that southerners enjoyed (p. 204). However, after the Civil War, the South began to change in significant ways as the myth of the self-sufficient, resourceful agrarian farmer fighting the evil

forces of progress gave way to the need to find work in the industrialized North (Agnew, 2004, p. 87).

However, many native southerners chose to remain in the rural South and continued to work on the land or to seek non-farming jobs in the area. These southerners have become even more entrenched in what I call the southern working class, a group which continues to hold many of its Scotch-Irish values. Best (1999) agreed, arguing that those who have continued to live and work in these rural areas have formed a society “that regards modernization, much less the idea of progress, with considerable suspicion” (p. 12). While most areas of the country have valued education and the progress that can be made by virtue of having an education, many southerners have continued to be suspicious of education, believing that education “weakened or destroyed their native values and traditions” (McWhiney, 1988, p. 215). But holding to that belief has become increasingly difficult as the South has progressed, and, as Flannery O’Connor (1962) pointed out in “The fiction writer & his country” nearly 50 years ago, “we are getting more and more like the rest of the country” (p. 29).

Yet O’Connor could not have predicted the rapid changes that have occurred in the South since her death in 1964 and the end of the Civil Rights Movement in 1968, changes that have significantly impacted southern attitudes. Shirley Brice Heath’s Ways with words (1983), perhaps the first important work to acknowledge the impact of those changes, documented a study she conducted in the rural South between 1969 and 1978, the same years during which I attended elementary, junior high, and high school. The lives of the people she described are the lives of people I have lived among since moving

from urban Savannah, Georgia, to rural Bulloch County, Georgia, in 1974. Her landmark study must be acknowledged in any current ethnographic study of today's rural South since, as Heath states, "Opportunities, values, motivations, and resources available for communication in each community are influenced by that group's social history as well as by current environmental conditions" (p. 7). Her study, like mine, is dependent upon "timing, location, and particular interplay of people and historic social conditions," making it "a unique piece of social history" (Heath, 1983, p. 7).

In her study, Heath (1983) described the lives of many southern whites and blacks in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as more families were forced to become less dependent on the land and more dependent on manufacturing (p. 25). Stuckey (1991) found fault with Heath's work, arguing that grouping white and black people together is problematic in that being white automatically implies economic privilege. But I disagree with Stuckey's view. The economic opportunities for many Southern whites and blacks have been similar, meaning that a study of the working class southerner doesn't have to look at a sub-factor of race. When I first moved to rural Georgia, little had changed for many working-class white and black families in the rural South as I witnessed firsthand shortly after arriving in the area.

When my family moved to rural Bulloch County in 1974, we lived about seven miles out of town, down a long, sandy dirt road. Only one other house, a ramshackle, unpainted clapboard house which sat up off of the ground about three feet, was between our house and the highway. The house had no underpinning. A well sat off to the side of the house; an outhouse, behind. That house was occupied by a black family. Other than

seeing the mother hanging clothes on the line or drawing water from the well, my only encounter with the family was a quick hello or nod when the children would get on the school bus each morning. The black family's tenant house sat at the cross-road, where another dirt road bisected ours. My best friend's house was about a half mile down on the right. Her family worked as sharecroppers for a white landowner whom I heard about but never met. My friend's family's house was not much better than the one at the cross-roads. The Knight's tenant house was also clapboard, only theirs had once been whitewashed though the faded gray tint of the boards indicated that a paintbrush had not been used on the exterior for many years. The Knight house did have a flushing toilet, albeit one that had obviously been added on to the original structure. The "bathroom" consisted of a toilet and a sink with running water. An old claw-footed tub occupied one side of the room, but the water had never been connected to the tub.

The house had no hot water heater, so the family would heat pans of water on the stove, water which would later be poured into a washtub on the kitchen floor so the children could bathe. The rooms were large, and during the winter months, the heating water kept the kitchen toasty warm. During the summer months, the heating water made the kitchen unbearable. The other rooms were rarely comfortable, winter or summer. During the winter, each room was heated by an inefficient wood burning stove. During the summer, the windows were opened to allow in a few breezes and lots of flies. Despite the years of "progress" in the United States, my best friend in the mid 1970s lived much like my grandmother had lived in the earlier part of the century and not much better than the black family occupying the other tenant house at the crossroad. The Knight family

and the family up the road were and probably still remain members of the South's working-class.

### Defining Southern Working Class

Many Georgia Southern University students today are first-generation college students from agrarian and working class backgrounds who now find themselves in a new South, a place that has changed significantly since the mid-twentieth century. Yet their identities remain entrenched in the values passed down to them from parents and grandparents, former farmers and laborers who valued family and hard work over formal education. Understanding their current attitudes toward learning is best understood when examined in a historical context since, as Elspeth Stuckey (1991) explained, "Literacy itself can be understood only in its social and political context" (vii) because our current education system supports societal beliefs and behaviors (vii). To fully understand first-generation students' struggles, therefore, we must understand beliefs and behaviors that impact their struggle, particularly in a region that has changed so much.

After the Civil War, the large plantations in the South were broken up into smaller farms, allowing many blacks and poor whites to own their own land for the first time. These farmers were quite different from the plantation owners; these new landowners worked their own land instead of depending on slaves to work it for them. According to McWhiney (1988), these southerners descended from people who "doubted that much could, or should be done to improve things in the world. They looked more to the next world, where they believed life would be all leisure and comfort" (p. 253). They used money to buy necessities, but they had little respect for people whose lives were

devoted to making money beyond what they needed (McWhiney, 1988, p. 249). The end of the Civil War also brought other changes to the area, changes that created a more defined working-class than had existed during the plantation era. Southerners who did not own their own land often found work as tenant farmers, an agreement wherein they worked the land for the landowner in exchange for a portion of the profits. According to Lytle's (1930) account of the emergence of the southern working class in "The hind tit," this new generation of farmers became increasingly dependent on a cash economy (p. 214). According to Robert Penn Warren, this change had a negative impact on the farmers:

So long as they paid him well for his labors, it was profitable; but he learned that there was no assurance that this would continue. Something he could not understand was beginning to control his life. He could only hope for better days, and in the meantime mortgage next year's crop. Because it was the money crop, the merchant forced him to grow only cotton and buy the feed for his stock. This caused over-production, a drop in prices, more mortgages, and still greater over-production. Such conditions broke many, and for the first time in the Cotton Kingdom, white tenantry developed. [. . .] This turned the plain man, for he had lost his independence, into something he had never been before, the pore [*sic*] trash, the hookwormed illiterate (p. 214-215). In turn, the history of the poor white "shows him to be just as much the victim of the slave system as the negro." (Penn Warren, 1930, p. 258)

Ever since, the southern working class has remained on the bottom rung of the southern social-class ladder, having developed a perceived “tradition of improvidence, moral degeneracy, lack of ambition, and indifference to profitable labor [. . .] What is missing is a sense of purpose or a clear-cut conception of the meaning of [their] existence,” according to Thompson (1975) (p. 279). J. Wayne Flynt (1985), another Southern historian, described these southerners as people who “moved about almost as often as they bore children [. . .] hoping by each move to better their conditions” (pp. 226-27). Flynt added, and Shirley Brice Heath’s study confirmed, these working-class southerners “were often ‘put down’ for their habits, clothes, speech, or food” (p. 230), yet they maintained an enormous sense of pride despite their established place in Southern culture (p. 231). These cultural influences continue to shape first-generation college students at Georgia Southern today as they enroll in classes with students from metropolitan areas of the state.

While identifying cultural differences may seem obvious, defining class is more problematic because, as Ryan and Sackrey explained, “Class is more than an abstract category or benign label assigned to self and others. Each class has a distinctive social existence, a culture that creates a sense of belonging among its members” (in Gardner, 1993, p. 51). Scott and Leonhardt (2005) confirmed the difficulty in defining class:

One difficulty in talking about class is that the word means different things to different people. Class is rank, it is tribe, it is culture and taste. It is attributes and assumptions, a source of identity, a system of exclusion. To some, it is just



money. It is an accident of birth that can influence the outcome of a life. Some Americans barely notice it; others feel its weight in powerful ways. (p. 8)

Southern working class is further complicated by the fact that both blacks and whites are majority members of the class, at least when working class is defined by job types and income levels. While the majority of the middle and upper-classes in southern society is white and the truly poor in the South are predominantly black, both races make up the working class in almost equal proportion, especially in the rural areas of Georgia.

The complexity of southern class structure is revealed in Flannery O'Connor's (1971) story "Revelation." In the story, Ruby Turpin, a 1950s southern woman, enters a small-town doctor's waiting room. Seated around the space are a well-dressed, pleasant looking woman and her nineteen-year-old college daughter and, by contrast, an old woman in tennis shoes, a sniveling child in a dirty romper and its "white-trashy" mother wearing bedroom slippers. As she takes her seat in the waiting room, Mrs. Turpin recalls a frequent daydream of hers in which she ponders the various levels of southern society:

Sometimes Mrs. Turpin occupied herself at night naming the classes of people.

On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them—not above, just away from—were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. But here the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below she and

Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent, and then there were colored people who owned their homes and land as well . . . Usually by the time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her head, and she would dream they were all crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven. (p. 491)

As Ruby Turpin's dream reveals, the class system that evolved in the South after the Civil War was and remains more complicated than most. Perhaps the most significant aspect of Ruby Turpin's dream is the bottom rung of the ladder, the one occupied by whites and blacks alike. However, the dream also reveals that land ownership in rural areas has been a stronger socio-economic indicator than money.

As the small tenant farms were bought out and the people who once farmed these patches of land moved into the factories and mills dotting the southern landscape, the working-class southerner continued to abide by a code of behavior, not always understood yet often ridiculed by outsiders. According to historian Edgar Thompson (1975),

Relations between all races and classes [in the South] [are] governed by a customary ethic [. . .] by what it is decent to do or not to do, the laws and morality notwithstanding [. . .] Ordinarily it is not reflected upon; it is just expected as a matter of second nature. It does not involve the application of force, it is not a matter of conscience, but it has, nonetheless, a compelling quality. (pp. 38-39)

Shirley Brice Heath made a similar observation when she described mill families whose lives were significantly influenced by “behavioral norms and [. . .] expectations” of the society in which they lived (p. 155). Flannery O’Connor (1962) offered perhaps the best description of southern personality that I have ever read:

Southern identity is not really connected with mocking-birds and beaten biscuits and white columns any more than it is with hookworm and bare feet and muddy clay roads. Nor is it necessarily shown forth in the antics of our politicians, for the development of power obeys strange laws of its own. And identity is not to be found on the surface; it is not accessible to the poll-taker; it is not something that *can* become a cliché. It is not made from the mean average or the typical, but from the hidden and often the most extreme. It is not made from what passes, but from those qualities that endure, regardless of what passes, because they are related to truth. (“The regional writer,” p. 58)

Despite O’Connor’s claim that southern character cannot become a cliché, in southern literature and television shows set in the South, two stereotypes often emerge from the white southern working class: red necks and white trash, identities quite different from the landed gentry portrayed in *Gone with the wind*.

Outsiders rarely make distinctions between the two “classes” of southerners and often buy into the stereotype, leading Hephzibah Roskelly (1993) to challenge V. S. Naipaul’s attempt to define the term “redneck,” a definition, Roskelly fears, “much of the country [. . .] believes to be true”:

A redneck is a lower blue-collar construction worker who definitely doesn't like blacks. He likes to drink beer [. . .] he's going to be mad as hell if he doesn't have some cornbread and peas and fried okra and some fried pork chops to eat—I've never seen one of those bitches yet who doesn't like fried pork chops. And he'll be late on his trailer payment. (p. 293)

Yet Roskelly countered Naipaul's description with a more positive one of her own, describing a redneck as someone who is "defined by his work on the land [. . .] a decent farmer who worked hard and who loved the land he worked even when, as was nearly always the case, it was not his to love" (p. 293). My idea of the working-class aligns more along the lines of Roskelly's, having had working-class grandparents and having married a man who grew up working the family farm and later became a truck driver. Therefore, I cede to Roskelly's distinction between rednecks and white trash because, like Roskelly, "the people in my [family] would never have called themselves white trash precisely because they knew how to behave" (p. 303). To be honest, I have never heard a southerner refer to him or herself as "white trash," but many that I know are quite proud to be rednecks even though they no longer depend on the land for survival. Today many earn their living as mechanics, machinists, truck drivers, beauticians, bookkeepers, or many other jobs that qualify my friends and family members, as well as my first-generation students' parents, as southern working class.

To simplify the complexities of southern classes for this study, I used Tokarczyk and Fay's (1993) criteria to define working-class: People whose work is "often physically demanding, repetitive, or dangerous"; "working-class positions are largely differentiated

by their lack of autonomy,” the land owner having simply been replaced by the shift supervisor, business owner, or plant manager; working-class “are closely supervised” (p. 5). Whether they live on their own land or rent from others, rent or own their trailers or small houses, working-class southerners are proud of who they are and believe in their lives and what they can accomplish. In recent years, their children have been finding their way into my university’s first-year writing classes where, as research has shown, “their current identity and their preparation for the achievements which will frame their future” will be significantly changed (Heath, 1983, pp. 367-368) because, as Collins and Blot (2003) claimed, “the wherewithal of everyday practice—habits and identities, values and meanings, inculcated senses of power or powerlessness—interact with schooled expectations to promote one social class and demote others” (108). As teachers, therefore, we need to know more about our first-generation students’ experiences both before and after they enter the university in order to help them achieve their educational goals.

#### Southern Attitudes toward the Value of Education

Many of my first-generation college students from the rural South must resist societal attitudes and behaviors as they work to find their place in the university and make progress toward their degrees. While the socio-economic realities of their parents’ and their lives have changed fairly quickly, their ideologies have not, often making their transition into the academy more complex. According to Elspeth Stuckey (1991), “Literacy itself can be understood only in its social and political context, and that context, once the mythology has been stripped away, can be seen as one of entrenched

class structure in which those who have power have a vested interest in keeping it” (vii). Stuckey adds that our current education system supports societal beliefs and behaviors, all of which work together to limit prospects for those outside of the dominant class (vii). To fully understand first-generation students’ struggles, therefore, we must understand beliefs and behaviors that impact their struggle, particularly in a region that has changed so much in the past forty years.

Increased mechanization in farming and a decrease in unskilled jobs in the area have led to working-class families in South Georgia to look for other ways to make a living. In most cases, doing so means higher education. Shirley Brice Heath attributed the need for change to Southern blacks, but many whites have faced the same fate: “[Those] who no longer wanted to sharecrop or work as hired farm hands or domestics turned eagerly to mill jobs. They moved from the farm into the towns [. . .], drawn by new job opportunities and the hope of better schooling for their children” (p. 27). But many mills in southeast Georgia have closed; the industries that remain require more knowledge and training than jobs of the past; in many cases, good jobs require a college degree. Therefore, the southern working-class attitude toward education has begun to change as well. While early southern settlers “displayed a contempt for formal education” (G. McWhiney, 1988, p. 205), the demise of agrarian life and a decreased need for an unskilled or semi-skilled labor force, the idea that education can offer a way up and a way out of the working-class life has emerged, and to that end, as Best (1988) argued, “Schooling, however limited, [has slowly become] the inevitable measure of success” (p. 9) in the South. According to Yagleski (2000), “Americans for the most part

seem to remain committed to long-held notions of individuality and self-reliance: You can do anything you want if you are given the opportunity and work hard enough. Formal education is the primary means by which individuals are given opportunities [ . . . ]” (p. 37). Today, most working-class southerners have come to agree with Yagleski’s claim: Opportunities depend on attaining an education (p. 23).

As many researchers have noted, however, change in class status does not come easily. In School-smart and mother-wise, Luttrell (1997) records the stories that northern, urban, working-class white women and southern, rural, working-class black women tell about their educational experiences. While her southern, rural, working-class group included only “women of color” [Luttrell’s words], women who referred to themselves as black, her participants are like many working-class southerners, white or black, whose children have become first-generation students at Georgia Southern University: “The [ . . . ] women [ . . . ] had all been raised in southern rural communities [ . . . ] Most had grown up on tenant farms, and all but two had tended tobacco and picked cotton in their youths. They had all attended school before the 1964 desegregation ruling, often in one-room schoolhouses” (p. 19-20). While most first-generation students at Georgia Southern University have not experienced the hard labor of farming, most have grown up hearing the stories of their parents or grandparents who have.

Like Luttrell’s study participants, many of our first-generation students today can tell “stories about the tremendous social and political changes in the South that have occurred over the course of their lives and [relate] how these changes ha[ve] affected

them” and their families (p. 20). bell hooks tells about her own experience being a first-generation college student and its impact on her family:

Like many working-class folks, they feared what college education might do to their children’s minds even as they unenthusiastically acknowledged its importance. They did not understand why I could not attend a college nearby, an all-black college. To them, any college would do. I would graduate, become a school teacher, make a decent living and a good marriage. And even though they reluctantly and skeptically supported my educational endeavors, they also subjected them to constant harsh and bitter critique.” (pp. 100-101)

In true southern form, hooks’ family feared what they did not know. Nevertheless, they let their daughter go, hoping that she would not have to work as hard as they had worked all their lives. Jacqueline Burnside (1993) also recounts her own family’s struggle to “pass on a legacy by teaching their children the work ethic of a family farm, by accumulating enough money to buy their own land, and by providing access to higher education” (pp. 140-41). Today, many first-generation students at Georgia Southern are looking toward higher education to better their socio-economic status, and their parents are helping them in that endeavor.

As first-generation students enter the university, however, they face challenges that they neither fully understand nor are readily prepared to overcome. In her literacy study, Luttrell “examine[d] the historical, institutional, cultural, and psychological ways in which the women learned about themselves and their place in American society, and reveal[ed] the personal costs of these lessons” (p. 3). Her study focused on women who



had returned to adult educational programs, years after having dropped out of school. Their stories, according to Luttrell, “provide[d] insight into their multiple positions, sometimes as victims of, sometimes as rebels against, and sometimes unaware of oppressive cultural conditions” (p. 4). Luttrell’s study is comparable to mine in that it examined the issue of class and its impact on student success, or, in the case of Luttrell’s case studies, early failures in school:

The women’s studies shed new light on the social production and reproduction of inequality, especially how people arrive at their sense of personal limits and social standing. Indeed, their stories reveal a complicated web of psychodynamic and political conflicts regarding selfhood; gender-, race-, and class-based identities; types of knowledge; and images and fantasies about authority, dependency, and nurturance—all of which must be taken into account. (Luttrell, 1997 p. 7)

While Luttrell’s study focused on working-class women who have not been successful in school, many working-class learners are succeeding. But their success is often sporadic: They often withdraw from classes or withdraw from the University for extended periods of time. They sometimes stay in classes they are bound to fail, believing that if they work harder they can make a passing grade. But they continue to believe in education, no matter how long their dream may be deferred, believing that an education is the key to a better life.

In Limbo: Blue collar roots, white collar dreams, Lubrano (2004) revealed that the education alone does not always make one’s advancement smooth as he studied

working-class individuals who have managed to pull themselves up but continue to question where they fit between their working-class roots and their middle-class lives. According to Lubrano, “For the last 30 years, universities have been awash in the politics of self-awareness, teaching the Holy Trinity of Identity—race, gender, and class. While race and gender have had their decades in the sun, however, class has been obscured and overlooked” (p. 4). I have to agree. While Georgia Southern has programs in Women and Gender Studies and African-American Studies, it offers no such program for the working-class to which many of its first-generation students belong. Lubrano’s study focused on people who managed to break through the working-class barrier as they have graduated high school, sought degrees in Ivy League or seven sisters schools, and become successful business people and/or college professor, despite Lubrano’s classifying them as “straddlers,” people “born to blue-collar families [who] then [. . .] moved into the strange new territory of the middle class” (p. 2). Yet few working-class southerners who gain admission into a university make it to the Ivy League. Most are content with state schools, a fact that is established through many of the contributions to Tokarczyk and Fay’s (1993) Working class women in the academy. Unlike the participants in Lubrano’s study, many of Tokarczyk and Fay’s contributors attended state schools and struggled as a result of their entrance into the academic setting. Therefore, Tokarczyk and Fay’s questions mirror many of the concerns I have about first-generation college students today, for, as Tokarczyk and Fay acknowledged, “To have to invent an idea of one’s self as an academic is a difficult task that can prove insurmountable” (p. 9), a claim that is confirmed by my participants’ experiences.

While the three studies described above offer input into what it means to be from the working class, they leave a wide chasm into which many first-generation students fall. Unlike the participants in Lutrell's study, my participants have been successful. All have graduated from high school, and all have earned admission into a major university. While they have not gained admission to the notable schools mentioned by the participants in Lubrano's study or earned the degrees of Lubrano's participants and Tokarczyk and Fay's contributors, academically they have achieved what no one in their families has achieved before—admission into the academy. Moreover, my participants continue to work toward their degrees despite academic setbacks, yet none have attained their degrees within the four-to-six year period sanctioned by administrators and accrediting bodies. Understanding why they do not graduate within the usual four to six year will help can contribute to our knowledge as educators and perhaps affect our teaching in powerful ways, leading us to contribute more effectively toward their ability to succeed.

What Lutell, Lubrano, and Tokarczyk and Fay's works have in common is the value of allowing participants to tell their stories. As Rose (1989) asserted, "To understand the nature and development of literacy we need to consider the social context in which it occurs—the political, economic, and cultural forces that encourage and inhibit it" (p. 237). What better way to understand Georgia Southern's students, their choice to attend a four-year university and the hurdles they have to overcome before graduating, than by having participants give voice to their own experiences because, as Roskelly (1993) asserted, "Hearing your own voice is another way of saying believe in your life

(p. 303). My goal as a researcher and writer is to give my participants this opportunity. As a southerner only one generation removed from my participants' lives, I am connected to my participants in ways that enhance my ability to tell their stories. In "The regional writer," Flannery O'Connor (1962) argued that a "Southern writer is no longer someone who leaves and can't come home again, or someone who stays and is not quite appreciated, but someone who is part of what he writes about" (p. 56). I fully relate to O'Connor's claim--I am a part of what I write. Like O'Connor, I am "concerned with in the most objective way . . . the region that most immediately surrounds [me]" and "the country, with its body of manners, that [I know] well enough to employ" ("The fiction writer and his country," p. 28). For O'Connor, my study participants, and me, that country is rural southeast Georgia.

First-generation college students at Georgia Southern University have achieved the literacy level their parents have always believed would guarantee their children's success, but for reasons that have not yet been determined, they have not succeeded, at least not to the point of earning an undergraduate degree. Stuckey (1991) recognized the value of education as a "credential status" that may "mean little [but is] required" if one is to have the opportunity to move beyond the working class (p. 58), yet she also argued that educators participate in an "entrenched class structure" in which we subconsciously work against our students success (vii), suggesting that those of us who teach in the university bear part of the responsibility for our students' leaving. However, J. W. Urban (1999) argued that "outside eyes often point out [the limitations of southern education]" but "those of us who live and work in southern universities [can best] identify and

criticize the weaknesses of our own institutions” (p. 234). My study may “criticize” my university, but its findings also reveal much of what we do right. Nevertheless, the fact that we have a six-year graduation rate of only 43%, despite our best efforts to raise that number, indicates that we need to change in significant ways. But how can we know what to change or how to change unless we hear and interpret our students’ stories? Their stories, as Luttrell claimed, may “illuminate the limitations of current school ethnographies and theoretical discussions” that are currently used to make decisions about ways to improve retention (p. 5).

To help readers better understand my participants’ culture and how that culture impacts their attitudes toward education, I have called upon southern sayings, clichés if you will. One of the most vivid memories I have of growing up in the South is my grandmother’s use of common aphorisms which she used to explain or bring meaning to the events of her everyday life, sayings such as “having a long row to hoe” when there was still much work to be done or “being in high cotton” when she had a moment of good fortune in life. In the South, according to Shirley Brice Heath (1983), [P]roverbial guides to behavior abound [. . .] The [. . .] voices of those who have abided by these lessons [. . .] remind [them] of behavioral norms and reinforce expectations of predictable actions and attitudes among community members (p. 155). Seitz (2004) argued that working-class tropes may offer insight into students’ social reality, and his words rang true as I interviewed my participants and heard them use such sayings as they talked about their lives and their educational experiences. Therefore, I have centered my study on common southern sayings, proverbs that are in many ways as applicable today as they

were during my grandmother's life. While my participants may not be chopping cotton or picking tobacco to earn a living, they still "have a long row to hoe" as they work toward college degrees and a potential move into middle class.

### Social Class and Composition Studies

In 2005, The New York Times embarked on a project to look at the role social class plays in American lives. In an attempt to discover whether class is extraneous or significant, reporters spent months concluding what educators have already determined—class matters. To find out more, the reporters sought individuals whose life stories "embody the trends" (Keller, 2005, p. xii) and compiled those stories into a collection of narratives which reveal the extent to which class influences people's lives. In the collection, Scott and Leonhardt (2005) argued that "Class [. . .] attitudes and assumptions, a source of identity, a system of exclusion" (p. 8) affect many Americans "in powerful ways" (p. 8). Scott and Leonhardt (2005) cited statistics which document that earning a bachelor's degree today makes a significant difference in American's lives, but they also concluded that "class [. . .] plays a [. . .] role in determining who does or does not" earn those degrees (p. 21). Several of the stories in Class matters mirror the stories of my study participants. Della Mae Justice, a woman from Appalachia, who "was always hungry for a world beyond the mountains" (Lewin, 2005, p. 64) used her college and law degrees to move into the middle class, but she admits that she still has trouble feeling middle class because she lacks confidence in making the choices her new status allows (p. 65). Andy Blevins, a warehouse worker from Virginia, dropped out of college because he had never really felt comfortable in the academic setting and the

mediocre grades he earned went against his working-class ideologies (p. 88). Like many first-generation, working class Americans, Blevins planned to return to college one day and earn his degree. While the narratives in Class matters were interesting, they were not enlightening given my own experiences in the college classroom and my connection to the working class.

In recent years, an awareness of class as something that shapes students' learning has come to the attention of educators, who, in turn, have developed theories about how to embrace class differences despite disagreement about the extent to which socio-economic class makes a difference in student success. Composition Studies has joined in the move to “[analyze] class as a factor in individual and collective identity and the power relationships among social groups” (Linkon, Peckham and Lanier-Nabors, 2004, p. 150), and has embraced the growth of the field of working-class studies in various ways. In 2004, in fact, College English devoted a special issue to “the deepening and expanding of class-based analysis in English studies” (Linkon, Peckham and Lanier-Nabors, 2004, p. 150), pointing out that “scholars have developed a rich and critical language for analyzing class as a factor in individual and collective identity and the power relationships among social groups (Linkon, Peckham and Lanier-Nabors, 2004, p. 150). The articles in the College English issue largely support my research findings.

In the issue, Jennifer Beech (2004) examined how critical pedagogy has found fault with working-class students but has failed to acknowledge its own perpetuation of “mainstream classist and racist ideologies” (p. 173). She argued that “most documented references [to] poor whites [occur] in the rural South, suggesting that these terms embody

or reinforce mainstream [. . .] thought” (p. 174) that racism is largely a southern phenomenon. In her article, Beech also agreed with Zweig’s (2000) assertion that “power [. . .] is not about income” and Jarosz and Lawson’s (2002) assertion that popular culture supports the redneck myth and reinforces the control other classes have over working class lives (p. 175). Therein, Beech argued, educators “are forced to reconsider who specifically populates our classrooms and the degree to which our pedagogies truly are inclusive” (p. 176). Beech concluded by recommending a composition classroom pedagogy “that allows students from a variety of backgrounds to make use of knowledge brought from their home communities while still making their way into academic discourse” (p. 183), but to do so, those of us who teach in the South must first understand our students’ culture and the roles that culture plays in our students’ academic lives. Beech referred to O’Dair’s (2003) claim that “critical pedagogues do a disservice when they ignore working-class student’s [. . .] reasons for obtaining degrees [. . .] to get better-paying jobs” and concluded that part of our responsibility in helping first-year students succeed is to help them assimilate. Given that my participants have not graduated despite having first enrolled at least four years before their interview, I was particularly impressed by Beech’s claim that “composition’s cultural work may be all the more important for those working-class students who do not graduate” (p. 183), and I feel that my study contributes significantly to our understanding of why they do not graduate and how we can better help them benefit from the time they spend in our classrooms.

Two other articles in the College English issue offer significant insight into class studies and into the experiences of my participants. Julie Lingquist’s (2004) article



examined students' understanding of class and how class impacts their engagement in the composition classroom. She argued that such inquiries are important for students from working-class backgrounds given that their "acquiring academic literacy entails complex affective mediations between past experiences and hopes for the future, between loyalties to the very different public constituencies of home communities and middle-class institutions" (188), a claim that my study fully supports. Further understanding of class impact, Lingquist (2004) argued, is essential if we as educators are to both honor our students "experience and history" while simultaneously encouraging them to "form new [. . .] relationships with that experience" (p. 191). David Seitz's article was particularly interesting in its mention of cultural tropes and the role they play in creating students' "social reality [which] teachers may not share and may consequently dismiss" (p. 212) given my own experience with cultural truisms and my participants' invocation of similar adages to explain so many of the events in their everyday lives. The issue, as a whole, offered deeper insight into my own understanding of my students' lives and the role that social-class has played and continues to play in their success.

#### Literacy, Identity, and Social Class in the Composition Classroom

Educators in Composition Studies now recognize that class shapes students' learning and have begun to look at the extent to which socio-economic class affects student success. Recent studies of education in the South reveal that further study will, as Best suggested, provide "a better grasp of education that in the past formed the South and that now influences the developing American South" (p. 15). This study contributes to compositionists' understanding of how identity and social class impact first-generation

students from rural, working class families in the South. Increasing that understanding is important because most first-year curricula require composition classes, and composition teachers are among the first faculty to help students practice or learn literacy strategies necessary to succeed in the academy. In the process, first-year writing teachers also have the power to invite students into the academy and ease their transition into the academic community.

Heath's (1983) landmark study revealed that "Opportunities, values, motivations, and resources available for communication in each community are influenced by that group's social history as well as by current environmental conditions" (p. 7), and, as Rose (1989) asserted, "To understand the nature and development of literacy we need to consider the social context in which it occurs—the political, economic, and cultural forces that encourage and inhibit it" (p. 237). As first-year teachers, when we ignore the role social class plays in education, we unintentionally "promote one social class and demote others" as we impose our own middle-class ideologies and inadvertently affect our students' success (Collins and Blot, 2003, 108) because, as Stuckey (1991) explained, our education system supports societal beliefs and behaviors, all of which work together to limit prospects for those outside the dominant class (vii). Most first-generation students from working-class families in the rural South are from "outside the dominant class" but their social realities, as this study reveals, play an integral role in their academic success. Therefore, an important step in the recruitment and retention of first-generation students from rural, working-class backgrounds relies on a better understanding of their cultural experiences and the development of pedagogies that

enable students' to acculturate into the academy as they develop contacts with faculty and students from other cultures.

Fully understanding the needs of first-generation college students from rural, working-class families relies on an understanding of the region's history and southern working class attitudes toward education both in the past and today. The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes toward learning and education through interviews and observations of first-generation college students from rural, working-class families in Georgia. Hearing their stories will help teachers in the first-year writing classrooms better meet the needs of these students as they strive to assimilate into an academic culture that often times conflicts with all they have thought and believed before, particularly in terms of what it takes to attain academic success.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “DON’T GO OFF HALF COCKED”: RESEARCH PLAN AND METHODS

In the South, a person setting off to achieve a specific goal is advised not to “go off half cocked” so as to increase one’s chances of success. Since moving to Bulloch County, Georgia in 1974, I have become completely immersed in the geographical, cultural, and academic impulses of the community. Therefore, my research plan was based on my years of living, socializing, and teaching among the people I planned to study. Specifically, I centered my study on the following research questions:

- What role does learning play in the lives of first-generation Georgia Southern students from rural, working class communities in southeast Georgia, including home, school, work and community?
- What impact does having attended Georgia Southern have on first-generation students’ professions or jobs?
- What advantages and/or disadvantages do first-generation college students recognize as a result of attending Georgia Southern, and how might teachers of first-year composition build upon them?

To find answers to these research questions, I opted to use ethnography, a combination of interviews and field observations, which allowed me to learn more about first-generation students as they attended classes, interacted with their families, and carried on their everyday lives. Hearing their voices and observing different aspects of their lives helped me better understand how growing up and living as working class in the rural South today has affected students who have attained admission to the university but have not

yet successfully completed their degrees. Shirley Brice Heath's (1983) work showed that ethnography is a powerful way to conduct such studies. Collins and Blot (2003) agreed, arguing that "[Heath's] ethnographic methodology uncovered the meanings of literate practices [and] allowed for cross-cultural comparisons to be made easily and effectively (p. 44). Ultimately, I determined that ethnography was the only way that I could find valid answers to my research questions.

### Resolving an Ethnographic Dilemma

As a researcher and teacher, I have come to accept social constructivist theories that social phenomena develop in societal contexts, but I also believe that most people cross cultural lines and have experiences outside of their dominant culture. These experiences impact who they are and how they interact within their dominant culture. As a professor, I have earned middle-class status based on my income and my profession. However, I have been married to a working-class man for twenty-seven years, and I am completely accepted by his working-class family and our rural working-class neighbors. Therefore, I am a member of two different cultures and participate as an insider (a member of the community) and research as an outsider (a member of the academy observing members of the rural community). This duality led me to question whether or not I could effectively use ethnography as the basis of my study and, if so, how I could become a participant observer given that I am already a member of the community I planned to study. To resolve the issue, I selected participants from the rural areas surrounding Georgia Southern but eliminated any subjects that I knew prior to conducting my interviews and observations. All participants were referred to me by

colleagues, and none of the participants knew me beyond my role of professor and researcher prior to participating in the study. Therefore, immersing myself in the culture and establishing rapport with my participants relied on my competence as a researcher, including the knowledge and skills needed to rein in my insider preconceptions while simultaneously developing my outsider responsiveness to my participants' stories and experiences.

### Research Site

Bulloch County has been an agricultural community throughout its history. Cotton, tobacco and peanuts remain the primary cash crops of the region, while pine and pecan trees also dot the landscape. Statesboro, the county seat, has approximately 25,000 inhabitants. Many of the city's adult residents work for the university or one of several local industries, including the Walmart distribution center, Briggs and Stratton (an industry that builds small motors), or Viracon (an industrial glass manufacturer). Statesboro is home to Georgia Southern University, "the largest and most comprehensive center of higher education in the southern half of Georgia" (Georgia Southern University Undergraduate & Graduate Catalog 2004-2005, p. 10). An undergraduate institution since 1906, Georgia Southern University began as an agricultural school and became a university in 1990. A predominantly undergraduate university, Georgia Southern has committed itself "to 'teaching first, '" and its mission is "to uplift [the] region's educational attainment [ . . . ] and [promote] student growth and success" even though the University is located in a largely rural area "of endemic privation" (GSUU & GC 2004-2005, p.10). However, the success of Georgia Southern's mission rests upon

understanding its students and their needs, including students from areas surrounding the university.

The campus serves approximately 17,000 students from throughout the state, the nation, and the world. In addition to its many undergraduate degrees, Georgia Southern currently offers master's degrees, a six-year education specialist degree, and three doctoral degrees on its 675-acre campus. Fall 2007, approximately 2,600 first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students were admitted as freshmen (Georgia Southern University Fact Book 2007-2008, p. 9). Even though 79% of the freshmen who were admitted in Fall 2006 returned in Fall, University studies indicate that the retention rate of these students will diminish significantly as each year's class moves toward graduation. In fact, after six years, only about 40% will have completed their bachelor's degree (Georgia Southern University Fact Book 2005-2006, p. 45), an appallingly low rate despite the fact that Georgia Southern's admissions standards "are designed to identify students whose academic backgrounds indicate they are capable of successfully completing [college level] work" (GSUU & GC 2004-2005, p. 20). My research connects first-generation students' college experiences to their everyday lives in order to understand better why their graduation rates remain so low.

As a first-year writing teacher, I and my colleagues are among the first faculty to work with entering freshmen. All undergraduate students at Georgia Southern University are required to take courses in six areas which make up the core curriculum. Courses in Area A are considered "essential skills" courses and act as pre-requisites for many core courses in the other five areas as well as upper-level courses, so these courses are usually

required in each students' first and second semester of enrollment. Included in Area A are ENGL 1101, Composition I, and ENGL 1102, Composition II, courses designed to enhance the reading and writing skills. The courses emphasize exposition, analysis, argumentation, interpretation, and evaluation. In addition, the courses teach students necessary research methods and documentation skills. Enrollment in these two courses is limited to 24 so that students may receive individual attention from faculty who work with students to hone their writing and critical thinking skills and to prepare them for their academic careers.

I have taught ENGL 1101 and ENGL 1102 at Georgia Southern for the past 15 years. During those years, I have encountered many bright, well-prepared freshmen from the rural areas surrounding Georgia Southern. These students have graduated from area high schools having completed a college preparatory curriculum, including four years of high school English courses. I am impressed by how well prepared these students are when I consider that many of their parents are working class, many eking out a living on small farms or working in area industries. Statistics from the 2000 U. S. Census support the economic deprivation of many area students. The median household income in the area averages less than \$27,000, and, on average, 25.8% of the people in Bulloch and surrounding counties live below poverty as depicted in Table 1.



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Table 1  
*Income and Poverty Rates by County*

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County	Median Income	Poverty-Level Population
Bulloch	\$29,499	24.5
Burke	\$27,877	28.7
Candler	\$25,022	26.1
Evans	\$25,447	27.0
Jenkins	\$24,025	28.4
Screven	\$29,312	20.1

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Nevertheless, many area students look to Georgia Southern University as a means of breaking out of the working class. When they first enroll in Georgia Southern and first-year writing, they seem well on the road to earning a college degree, a standard of success that no one else in their family has achieved. Yet six years later, less than half of these students will have graduated. Interviewing and observing students who have not graduated and hearing their stories will better help Georgia Southern faculty, especially those of us who work with them during their first year, serve our students in the future, insuring that even those who do not graduate benefit from the time they spend in the university.

## Participants

I began the process of identifying participants after I successfully defended the first three chapters of my dissertation and received approval from the Human Subject Review Boards at Georgia Southern University and Indiana University of Pennsylvania. To begin my study, I chose participants from among students who have come to Georgia Southern from rural, working-class families in the surrounding area and who met the following criteria:

- To have been born and raised in rural southeast Georgia
- To have been accepted and enrolled in Georgia Southern University
- To have successfully completed ENGL 1101 and/or ENGL 1102
- To have at least a 2.0 GPA
- To have not graduated

To begin, I contacted several offices at Georgia Southern University, including the First-Year Experience Office, the Academic Success Center, and the academic advisement centers. I also contacted supportive colleagues and asked for referrals. Through these sources, I located 47 potential participants. I then looked up transcript and background information to insure that participants were in good academic standing, had graduated from high school at least four years earlier, and had not yet completed their degrees. I eliminated eight from the original list because they did not meet all of my research criteria. I first contacted the participants by phone to find out if they would be interested in participating in my study. Based on that initial contact, I found twenty students

willing to participate. Table 2 provides information about the twenty willing participants.

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Table 2  
*Initial Participant Demographics*

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Initials	Race	Sex	Age	Participant
E. B.	W	F	49	N
K. C.	W	F	47	N
W. B.	W	F	49	Y
B. M.	B	F	38	Y
K. J.	B	F	23	Y
D. M.	W	M	52	Y
J. B.	W	M	29	Y
J. O.	W	M	23	N
J. D.W.	W	M	30	N
R. C.	W	M	23	Y
V. K.	W	F	22	Y
W. B.	W	F	29	Y
T. B.	W	M	26	N
R. J.	W	F	23	N
L. L.	W	F	34	N

B. B.	W	M	38	N
C. B.	W	F	26	N
D. B.	W	M	30	N
M. P.	B	F	23	N
G. M.	B	F	42	N

---

I originally thought my participants would range in age from early twenties to early thirties, but I found the range to be much greater. However, I concluded that the range, in fact, reflected a thirty year period and allowed my study to actually begin where Shirley Brice Heath's ended, and would test Sowell's (2005) admonition that not "all people [ . . . ] had the same culture, much less to the same degree" and that "[t]here are not only changes over time, there are cross-currents at a given time" (p. 13). In addition, the twenty qualified, willing participants included males and females, blacks and whites from each age group. Therefore, I decided to continue with the group rather than expand my search for additional participants. All twenty participated in a telephone interview during which I asked questions about their current GPAs, hours earned, and family members' education. I did not tape or transcribe the telephone interviews; instead, I used a check-sheet to record participant responses to questions to verify that they met my research criteria and were first-generation students. I wanted as much diversity as possible in my final group, so I grouped the twenty participants in terms of age, race, and sex and randomly selected participants for the final study, making sure I included participants from each age group, sex, and race. I wrote each participant's name on slips of paper and

put the slips into categories. Since I had fewer black participants than white participants, I began by drawing two slips from the four in that group to include in the final study. I then drew three names from the group of seven males. Since I had no black males in the initial group of twenty, I knew that this process would give me five participants of different sexes and races. I then separated these five participants into age groups. After grouping them, I decided to add one white female from each age category to round out my list of final participants, a group that was also representative of the larger group in age, sex, and race.

### Research Methodology

For this study, I selected first-generation college students from rural, working-class families, who have attended Georgia Southern University and done well in their classes, but who have not yet graduated. Once I had eight willing and qualified participants, I began data collection. My plan was as follows:

- Interview each participant in a neutral, non-threatening setting
- Observe those participants in their homes or in class
- Interview family members (children, spouses, parents) to learn more about attitudes toward education
- Schedule a final interview with each participant in order to share the interview transcriptions and clear up any misunderstandings on my part

### *Interviews*

I conducted all but two interviews in my office at Georgia Southern University. Two participants worked full time and lived out of town, so I met with them away from

Georgia Southern. One interview took place in a private home; the other, in a quiet corner of a restaurant. In my interviews, I asked open-ended questions which enabled my participants to express their “ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 19). According to Stake (1995), “[t]he interview is the main road to multiple realities” (p. 64) since each participant’s story is unique. To help my participants feel more comfortable and pave the “road to multiple realities,” I began each interview by thanking my participants for helping me, explaining or clarifying the purpose of my research, and asking them if they had any questions or concerns that I could address before we began. I also had each participant sign the Informed Consent form (Appendix B) and provided participants with a copy for their records. Finally, before turning on the tape recorder and beginning the interviews, I again asked each participant for permission to tape record their responses. Each interview lasted at least one hour; the longest interview lasted two hours and ten minutes.

During the interviews I focused on allowing my participants to tell their stories. While I worked from my original list of interview questions (Appendix A) in all cases, I allowed my participants to move beyond those questions, especially when they wanted to elaborate or offer a specific story in response to my questions. My participants come from a culture that has long valued an oral tradition, so I used that tradition to my advantage. In most cases, my participants offered detailed stories of their families and learning lives. As they talked, I listened carefully and sympathetically, yet I must admit that I, too, told stories related to theirs. In many cases, my interjections led to more stories and deeper reflection on their experiences. During the interviews, I asked

questions about participants' lives both before college and during college, including the time that they had spent away from college for those who had withdrawn and later re-enrolled. I encouraged my participants to narrate significant events in their lives so that I could blend those stories into my research findings.

Narrative, according to Gian Pagnucci (2004), "is crucial not only for our writing and teaching but also for connection to our past, our future, and, most importantly, each other" (p. x). Cinthia Gannett added that "narratives are part of a change in thinking which at last acknowledges that the autobiographies of 'ordinary' people can construct new knowledge about society" (qtd. in Pagnucci, p. xvi). I used the first chapter of this dissertation to tell my own story and used my grandmother's journals to tell her story. Telling my grandmother's story and connecting it with my own has enabled me to appreciate my grandmother as a powerful literacy sponsor in my life. Although Brandt (1998) argued that people from working-class backgrounds "have less consistent, less politically secure access to literacy sponsors—especially to the ones that can grease their way to academic and economic success" (p. 559), I hesitate to make such a claim. Like me, my participants had simply never had the opportunity to reflect on people in their lives in that particular way. When given the opportunity to talk about their lives during the interviews, all of my participants were able to talk about family members or teachers who had had an impact on their lives. Their stories about their experiences became the framework for the final chapters of my dissertation.

### *Transcription*

Interview transcripts ranged from nine to fifteen single-spaced pages per participant, and I was able to transcribe all interviews myself. When I began playing the recording of Drew's interview, I realized that his voice had faded in places and I had difficulty understanding everything he said. I used my interview notes to fill in where possible, and then I contacted Drew to review the transcription and fill in more where possible. After transcribing the other interviews, I replayed each tape and verified the data, clarifying inaudible comments and adding editorial comments based on my recall of the interview session. I then shared transcripts of the interviews with each participant, and asked them to add, clarify, or correct as necessary.

Several of the participants had strong southern accents and used nonstandard language. Given the nature of my study, I was concerned that transcribing the interviews in the participants' voices would make the participants self-conscious. After all, television has had fifty years to stereotype yokels who speak like Jed Clampett or Gomer Pyle. Therefore, I took Cindy Bishop's (1999) advice and defaulted "to an informal, but lightly edited presentation of speech" (p. 107). I began by following Katherine Sohn's (1999) choice to "regularize all nonstandard verbs and to leave in idioms and colloquialisms," a tact that enabled me to preserve the meaning of the words without affecting the self-esteem of my participants. My goal was to standardize my participants' language yet still capture the flavor of the language. Knowing the dialect as well as I do and using dialect myself in informal social situations, I believe that I was able to achieve that goal and capture the voice without stigmatizing the person.



### *Participant Observations*

Seeing what my participants do, where they live, and how they interact with others has given me a clearer understanding of the role learning plays in their lives. Ideally, I planned to observe participants in both home and either work or school settings; however, most of my observations took place on campus or where the participants worked. I observed Sandra, a teller in a small bank in a nearby county, for one hour prior to our interview as she greeted and served customers. I observed Bettye, a participant who worked full-time in the campus Parking and Transportation Office, as she helped students, faculty, and visitors prior to our initial interview and once again at work after that interview. Justin and Cindy, a married couple, lead busy lives since they both work in addition to taking classes, and they are also raising their young daughter. While they both invited me to visit them in their home, we could not arrange a mutually convenient time to do so. I could not get permission to observe Justin at his job with the Walmart Distribution Center. Therefore, I shadowed them on campus one morning as they attended classes and met with each other and classmates for study sessions. Two participants, Drew and Kimberly, were both enrolled in writing classes during the semester that I conducted interviews, so I was able to attend classes with them and observe them as students. In addition, I have continued to meet and observe Drew around campus. Finally, I was able to visit Melanie and Dusty, two other participants, in their homes and observe them as they interacted with family members.

While I would have liked to observe all participants in a similar setting, I ultimately concluded that the diversity in settings reflected the diversity of their ages and

situations and did not take away from my research goals. By observing my participants in life, I was better able to “grasp the[ir] culture in its own natural, ongoing environment” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 273). In each case, I spent at least two hours observing each participant, and field notes from these observations resulted in forty pages of additional data. In all cases, observation allowed me to better understand how my participants use and value learning, and, in most cases, to affirm that what they said about learning was reinforced by what they do. As Shirley Brice Heath (1983) observed, “timing, location, and particular interplay of people [. . .] and social conditions make [. . .] ethnography a unique piece of social history” (p. 7), and my observations added significantly to the interviews.

#### *Family Interviews*

When possible, I planned to interview at least one family member of each of my participants, yet in some situations, I was not able to do so. In other cases, the key role that family plays in so many southern lives worked to my advantage. Justin and Cindy provided a unique situation in that they were a married couple, and I conducted the initial interview with both participants simultaneously. However, I also interviewed each individually. Doing so helped me get more information from Justin, who tended to depend on Cindy to initiate responses when the two of them were together. I was also able to talk to Dusty’s mother, Melanie’s grandmother, and Sandra’s husband during the research process. My goal in talking to family members was to find out family perceptions of my participants’ education as a result of their having attended college and to find out how my participants’ educational goals have impacted others within the

family. By talking to family members as well as participants, I was able to know my participants as not only learners but also spouses, children and grandchildren. In two cases, my final participants were also mothers of prospective participants who participated in telephone interviews but were not selected by the random process I used to select participants for the final study. Hearing both mothers' and children's voices, however, allowed me more carefully to consider Heath's remark that the ways children learn are dependent on the ways their roles as family and community members (p. 11) and helped me understand family expectations and the impact those expectations have on students' lives.

### *Validity*

The most pressing validity issue that I encountered was the potential to impose my own biases or beliefs on those whom I was studying. I was born and raised in the South. I am the daughter of first-generation college students from a rural, working class families, and I well remember my family's socio-economic struggle when first my father and then my mother returned to school. Moreover, I married a man whose family has not yet broken out of the working-class lifestyle of rural, farming families in southeast Georgia. My father-in-law had little or no formal education; he could barely sign his own name. My mother-in-law had a third grade education; she could read and write on that level, yet she fully understood the power of education and the importance of learning. She was not in a position to do much to help her children, but she worked hard to ensure that each of her children graduated high school. All four did. But education beyond high school was not something she understood or endorsed, and none of her four

children attended college. In fact, of her seven adult grandchildren and four adult great grandchildren, only one has attended and graduated from college. In other words, I strongly identify with my research participants, so I had to work diligently to insure that I told their stories and not what I assumed their stories to be.

I validated my study and my findings through member checking and peer debriefing. Two colleagues who teach at Georgia Southern offered me the best possible sources of peer debriefing as they have read, responded to, and reacted in an objective way to my study. One colleague is from an educated family from the rural South; the other, a working-class family from the North. To that end, both have a connection to my study but also a distance, which helped to ensure their objectivity. In addition, my long-term friend who grew up in the share-cropping family I described in Chapter 2 acted as a reader/reactor to add further objectivity to my subjects' stories.

Member checking has helped to ensure that I do not interject my voice and my perceptions in my participants' stories. After I transcribed the interviews, I asked each participant to read the transcript of his or her interview and to add clarifying information when necessary. After I made changes or corrections based on their input, I again sent each participant a copy and encouraged feedback. Because I am sympathetic to my participants' difficulty in attaining a college education, member checking and peer debriefing have helped me ethically and objectively evaluate my research. I ensured triangulation by comparing complementary data: participant interviews, observation notes, family member input. I consulted my colleagues and friend when necessary. Finally, one of my participants has remained interested in my work since our interviews.

He has willingly responded to any questions or concerns that I have had since that time and has also expressed interest in reading the finished draft. I have kept a well-organized paper trail to document and validate my research.

### *Methods of Analysis*

Throughout the study, I looked at emerging data, specifically to find patterns and make discoveries. I realized that technology does not always make life easier or faster, and I resorted to an “old-fashioned” technique of coding, using various colored markers, scissors, and cork boards. As I coded my data, I used the constant comparative method of analysis. Effective coding enabled me to sort data effectively to match my original research questions and to find patterns that developed beyond those questions. In all, the data that emerged fell into seventeen distinct patterns. As I anticipated from the questions I asked, several patterns of information included responses from all eight participants: family background, family support, changes in attitude toward learning and college, and educational hurdles. A few were unanticipated and included responses from fewer participants: changes in attitude toward family and culture, family pressure and/or expectations, class and race issues, participants feeling different from others within their community, religion as a deterrent to educational goals. As I coded the data, I also looked for patterns of similarities between participants’ stories and made notes of those similarities at the end of each transcription. When unanticipated patterns included two or more participants’ stories, I noted them as significant, and I used the connections among participants’ stories as the basis for my study’s conclusions, particularly on common experiences leading toward their attending college and the sponsors who paved their

ways. I also focused on their experiences once they enrolled in college, hoping to reveal ways in which teachers of first-generation students in the first year or two of college might help these students succeed.

### *Presentation of Data*

I present my data through both biographical sketches of my eight participants and stories that my participants told about their lives, families, and educational experiences. I have used pseudonyms to ensure each of my participant's anonymity in my notes and transcripts and in the final draft of my dissertation, but using their stories and their own words has added a depth to my study that I as an observer could never have achieved by using my own words. Other than the changes I acknowledged above, to "regularize all nonstandard verbs and to leave in idioms and colloquialisms," I have made no changes to their responses when I quote them. I have omitted names and specific place references when I felt that including them might compromise my participants' rights in any way; however, I have found it unnecessary to make many such changes. In most cases, their reflecting on teachers or family members or times and places that have impacted their lives has added significantly to my study. Pagnucci (2004) acknowledges that "nothing is more anti-narrative than the traditional format of the dissertation" (p. 24), but in my final presentation, I have tried to blend the best of both possible worlds.

Despite the fact that I am a college-educated teacher and a person born one generation outside of the culture that I have studied, I am still an ethnographer, one who has close connections to the lives of the students I have studied. To that end, I am not one who seeks to find new understanding, but one who seeks to refine the understanding

that I already have (Stake, 1995). Because I plan to finish my teaching career at Georgia Southern, I will continue to play a part in the culture I have studied, but since my study, I have begun to reflect more on “[my] direct and personal engagement with [the] historical period” which I have studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 13). To that end, I offer this study, my contribution to the field of composition and to the First-Year Writing and First-Year Experience programs at Georgia Southern, to help us better meet the needs of our first-generation students.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### “GOING WHOLE HOG”: LIFE AND LEARNING IN RURAL SOUTHEAST GEORGIA IN THE PAST 30 YEARS

In the South, when people go “whole hog,” they are making their very best attempt at something. In this chapter, I provide background information about each of my participants and then focus on what led them to go “whole hog” as they embarked on the college careers in order to find answers to my research questions:

- What role does learning play in the lives of first-generation Georgia Southern students from rural, working class communities in southeast Georgia, including home, school, work and community?
- What impact does having attended Georgia Southern have on first-generation students’ professions or jobs?
- What advantages and/or disadvantages do first-generation college students recognize as a result of attending Georgia Southern, and how might teachers of first-year composition build upon them?

I used ethnography, a combination of interviews and field observations, to learn more about first-generation students as they attended classes, interacted with their families, and carried on their everyday lives. My final study group included three men and five women who are representative of the ages and races of my original pool of participants. Table 3 provides information pertaining to these final participants, including dates for first and last semesters attended, hours earned and GPA:



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Table 3  
*Participant Profiles*

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Participant	Race	Sex	Age	First Enrolled	Last Attended	Hours Earned	GPA
Drew	W	M	52	F 1974+	Sp 2009	123	3.46
Sandra	W	F	50	W 1998+	F 2003	63	3.47
Bettye	B	F	39	W 1990+	Sp 2009	51	2.35
Justin	W	M	30	F 2006	F 2007	20	2.30
Cindy	W	F	29	S 2004	Sp 2009	72	2.09
Kimberly	B	F	24	F 2002	S 2008*	126	3.02
Melanie	W	F	23	F 2003	Sp 2009	91	2.98
Dusty	W	M	22	Sp 2004	Sp 2009	77	2.94

+ Quarter System

\* Graduated

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In this chapter, I augment the demographic information provided in the table with biographical sketches of each participant. Then, since my students' experiences have spanned over thirty years, I use my participants' stories to show changes in societal attitudes toward education in the rural southeast over that span of time leading into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Biographical Sketches

### *Drew*

A fifty-two-year-old white male, Drew was born in 1956 and grew up near the Middleground Community, a rural area in Bulloch County, Georgia. He attended Bulloch County public schools and graduated from Statesboro High School in 1974. While he always did well in school, Drew felt out of place: “I especially did not like high school. I seemed to get lost in the herd. There was a cliquish hierarchy at Statesboro High School, and I did not fit into any clique. [ . . . ] We weren’t poor, but back then in Bulloch County, if you didn’t have the right last name, you were considered ‘poor white trash.’” Despite his not liking high school, Drew felt that college was the next logical step for him:

I remember I enrolled immediately after high school, but I waited a year before I actually came. I worked full time for a year and then I came here. I came in and out. [ . . . ] I was doing really well, but I still couldn’t find my way. My parents were very encouraging [ . . . ] I got my SAT back and had done well enough to get into college. They didn’t know how to help me, but they were encouraging.

Drew first began taking classes in the fall of 1974, but he withdrew before the end of the term. He resumed classes in the summer of 1976 and continued through the fall of 1979. He dropped out again in 1979 when his father became ill and Drew stayed home to take care of him. After his father’s death, however, Drew moved away from Bulloch County in an effort to find himself. He first moved to California and later to New Mexico and Colorado. During the years he was away, Drew took a few classes at Santa Fe

Community College but never completed a degree. When he returned to Bulloch County, he resumed classes at Georgia Southern, beginning in the summer of 2006 and continuing until the present. To date, he has earned 123 hours toward graduation and has a 3.46 GPA. Today, he has a much more positive attitude: “I like school now. I enjoy taking classes. I tell people that I’m taking classes for the joy of taking classes, the joy of learning.”

*Sandra*

Sandra, a fifty-year-old white female and married mother of two, was born in Burke County, Georgia in 1958. She grew up in rural Burke and Screven Counties in southeast Georgia. She attended elementary school in Sardis and middle and high school in Sylvania, after her family moved to Screven County when she was in sixth grade. She graduated from Screven County High School in Sylvania in 1976, but she does not recall her high school years fondly: “I had a very bad experience in high school. I was a nobody; I was the new girl in school who the quarterback of the football team liked, so none of the girls liked me.” Having gotten pregnant right after her senior year of high school, Sandra chose to attend Swainsboro Technical School, where she received a diploma and became a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN). But she always thought about attending college:

I got pregnant at eighteen and I had a small child when I was in nursing school. I graduated in 1979. My husband worked a regular job. But back then, the only jobs I could get were working 3 to 11 or 11 to 7, so it just didn’t work out for our marriage and I stayed home for a long time. I just didn’t get anywhere so . . . I

always wanted to be a nurse, and I guess my intentions were to finish technical school and then go back and get my RN later. You know, work as an LPN and try to get it later on.

She had a second son a few years later and stayed home with her boys until they were kindergarten age. When they started school, she wanted to go back to work and found a job in a local bank: “I started out there as a switchboard operator. And I went from there to bookkeeping, and from there I went to the line and then head teller.” At first, she would work from 9:00 until 2:00, when she would pick up her children from school and take them to their after-school activities. Once they were grown, she decided to return to college to pursue a degree. She first began taking college classes in the winter of 1998 but withdrew before the term ended. Then in the fall of 2001, she quit working at the bank and began attending Georgia Southern University full time. She took classes each semester through the fall of 2003; however, a family crisis forced her to stop attending after that term, and she has not yet been able to resume classes, despite having earned 63 hours and having a 3.47 GPA.

### *Bettye*

Bettye, a mature black woman and mother of two boys, was born in 1967 and has lived her whole life in rural, southeast Georgia, including Stillmore and Twin City, both in Emanuel County, and Metter in Candler County. Her family settled in rural Bulloch County when she was in ninth grade. She attended Statesboro High School and graduated in 1986. She, her husband and her sons live in Nevils, a small farming community in the county. Her husband works for UPS driving an eighteen wheeler, and

Bettye works for Parking and Transportation at Georgia Southern. Bettye first began college in the winter of 1990 and has “been there off and on” since that time:

Well, I started right after high school, and then I got pregnant with my oldest son. So I kind of pushed it out. Then when he was two years old, I started back, but I wasn't focused at that point in time, so I just stopped. Several years later, after I had started . . . about five years later . . . I got married and got pregnant with my second son. I started back about three years later, but that didn't work out for me. I just couldn't focus on school right then. So I just stopped for a little while and then started back again in 2004 and haven't stopped yet.

She has earned 51 credit hours toward graduation and has a 2.35 GPA. In fact, both Bettye and Chris, her oldest son, are currently enrolled in college, Chris at Southwest Georgia in Carrollton, and Bettye at Georgia Southern in Statesboro. She plans on finishing her degree this time around: “I had already made up my mind that once I started this time, I can't stop because if I stop this time, I'm not going back. So I just have to keep going on.”

#### *Cindy and Justin*

Cindy and Justin, a married white couple, are supporting each other and their four-year-old daughter Olivia while they pursue college degrees. Cindy divides her time between taking a full load of courses and taking care of their daughter. Justin works full time at the Walmart Distribution Center on the fourth shift, three twelve-hour shifts on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, to support the family. He also helps out with Olivia and tries to take a couple of classes each semester. Cindy was born in 1978 and grew up near

Portal, Georgia, a small town in northern Bulloch County, where she attended Portal High school, graduating in 1995. After high school graduation, Cindy floundered a bit but eventually found her way to Georgia Southern University in the summer of 2004:

I tried tech school for a little while and it wasn't for me. I guess it was that teenaged mentality. I think I stayed grounded from the time I hit 9th grade. So once I hit 18, I was ready to go out on my own and try new things. You know, I really didn't get into a lot of trouble; I wasn't the partying type or anything, but just to get out from under my parents' wings a little bit. I think if I had tried Georgia Southern right out of high school, I would never have made it. It's such a struggle right now, you know. In some ways, it would have been easier, but in some ways it would have been harder.

Justin was born in 1976 and grew up in rural, southeast Georgia, but his family moved around a tri-county area—Emmanuel, Bulloch, and Jenkins Counties. Justin did not graduate high school: “I dropped out in Swainsboro in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. I ought to have my butt kicked, but . . .” He eventually got his GED and attended Swainsboro Tech, where he took drafting classes. He did not finish his diploma program, but feels that he learned a lot while he was there. While at Swainsboro Tech, he met Cindy. After they married, Cindy decided to begin taking college classes. To date, she has earned 72 credit hours toward graduation and has a 2.09 GPA. Justin credits Cindy and an older sister with his decision to come to college: “What got me going back was Cindy. You know, she was going to college, so . . . and my sister, she just finished college last year. She's teaching. She's like forty something and she graduated, so I thought I could do it.” He

first enrolled in the fall of 2006 and continued until the fall of 2007, but he has not re-enrolled since that time. However, Justin plans to resume his education after Cindy completes hers; at that time, he will be able to work part-time and devote more time to his classes. To date, he has earned 20 credit hours toward graduation and has a 2.30 GPA.

*Kimberly*

A young, expressive, single black female, Kimberly was born in 1984 and grew up in Jesup, Georgia, a town in Wayne County, about sixty miles south of Statesboro. She graduated in 2002 and came straight to Georgia Southern University: “It was a big deal because even though it’s not that far away, it was my first time being away from home and away from my parents and my family and being by myself. But it wasn’t too bad because there are a lot of people from Jesup here.” She is the youngest child in her family but not the first to attend college: “One sister went to South Georgia College in Columbus, but then she got pregnant and dropped out. She never went back. Another sister went to UGA [the University of Georgia], but that didn’t work out and now she’s in nursing school. So my parents are like . . . well I’m the 3<sup>rd</sup> one, so hopefully I’ll go ahead and finish.” She is a Writing and Linguistics major who has always been a good student, but she also feels that she has been pressured into attending college:

I was always a good student going through school, but I feel like there’s been a pressure on me since my siblings—my two sisters—they didn’t finish up. A lot of the black kids I went to school with, they just stayed home or got pregnant or got married. They’re working at Walmart or some job like that. And a lot of

times I've thought, why don't you just bump this and go to work at Walmart and party on the weekend where you don't have to worry about school. At times it seems like they're having the best life, but on the flip side, they're jealous of me because I'm able to be in school. So I guess the grass is always greener on the other side.

Kimberly has been inspired by other, older women in her family who have started college: "My aunt, she went back to school. She was a lunchroom lady and she went back to school and she's about to finish up. So just seeing [her] . . . and then my sisters." Her biggest hurdle since coming to Georgia Southern has been with herself and "realizing that I just gotta focus and stop hanging out . . . and whatever." Despite a few rough semesters, Kimberly finally graduated in the summer of 2008 with a 3.02 cumulative GPA.

### *Dusty*

Dusty, a twenty-two-year-old single white male, was born in 1986 and graduated from Portal High in 2004. He came to Georgia Southern within one year of graduating, beginning in the spring of 2005. Dusty has two older brothers, but he is the only one who is attending college. His family owns a farm in northern rural Bulloch County, not far from the Jenkins County line, but all of his family work jobs away from the farm as well. In fact, his mother, who drives a school bus for the Bulloch County Board of Education, has taken a second job as a bus driver instructor to help pay Dusty's way through school. Even though he has grown up on the family farm, Dusty has always known that he would not go into farming: "Friends of my daddy and momma, more of an older



generation, told me not to get into farming. And I've already told my daddy that I'm not going to do that. There's no money in that. And people I went to high school with that didn't go to college, some would tell me that they wish they would have went." After high school, Dusty began working construction for his uncle to help put himself through school: "My uncle Ricky, he's like been working with my boss for 4 ½ or 5 years. [. . .] I'm supposed to be like a helper and stuff cause he has a hurt foot, and he can't climb ladders and stuff. And they seem to like me a lot [. . .] and he says I should make a pretty good carpenter, but I told them I wanted to go to school. I had already made up my mind." He has been attending college on and off for three years and has completed 58 hours toward graduation: "That's not failing classes; its just I haven't went . . . my first semester out of high school I didn't go, and this past semester I didn't go because I had to work and I couldn't get the classes I needed." Dusty has a solid 2.70 GPA.

*Melanie*

A twenty-one-year-old white female, Melanie was also born in Bulloch County, grew up in the Portal area and attended Portal High School, graduating with Dusty in 2004. Even though she was an honor graduate, her SAT scores were not high enough to enter Georgia Southern immediately, so she attended East Georgia College, a two year college in Swainsboro, that has a satellite campus in Statesboro. In fact, many East Georgia classes are offered on the campus of Georgia Southern and East Georgia students use Georgia Southern's facilities, even though East Georgia has its own staff and faculty. Melanie grew up as an only child, but after her parents divorced, each remarried and has

had children with their new spouses, so Melanie proudly talks about her siblings whom she helps tutor in school.

Melanie was raised to value education and to work toward college: “Not just my parents. Everybody. I mean my family. Everybody. I mean, I guess they know where they come from and they didn’t want me to have to work as hard as they did to get by.”

She fondly recalls her high school years:

There were 48 of us, and 95% of us graduated together. We knew each other from kindergarten. In high school—I loved high school—I guess that’s when I started realizing . . . I look back on it as being something great. I loved it. My look on school changed in high school. You know, teachers loved me, I loved school, and I was a good student.

Even though she has found college to be more difficult, she has managed to earn 79 hours and maintain a 2.5 GPA: “I didn’t think I was going to have to work very . . . harder than I did in high school, but I got a mind blow after my first and second semester. But I think there’s a big difference. I guess some people go to college just to go and say they’re going to college, but people who want to go and want to do good, it’s a matter of managing your time.”

#### Past and Present: Life and Learning in Rural Southeast Georgia

According to Southern education historians (W. J. Urban, 1999; Urban and Wagoner, 2004; G. McWhiney, 1988) higher education has traditionally been scorned by southerners. Stemming from the pre-Civil War era when large land owners either sent their sons North or brought in northern tutors, higher education has been viewed as an

entity which acculturates values contrary to traditional codes of behavior. While education laws changed significantly after the Civil War and schooling had become mandatory in all 48 states by 1918, the South lagged way behind its northern counterparts well into the last half of the twentieth century (Urban & Wagoner, 1996). Many of the changes that have led to my participants' enrolling as first-generation college students at Georgia Southern began in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as farming and mill jobs began to decline and high school graduates began to consider higher education as an option. As attitudes toward schooling and higher education have begun to change, Georgia now mirrors average education figures nationwide as census data confirms. Nevertheless, as the data I presented in Chapter One illustrates, rural areas throughout the state have continued to lag behind the national averages, particularly in the number of people earning bachelor's degrees. Taking Sowell's (2005) admonition that a "broad-brush discussion of cultural patterns must [. . .] not claim that all people [. . .] had the same culture, much less to the same degree" and that "[t]here are not only changes over time, there are cross-currents at a given time" (p. 13), I selected first-generation college students whose lives and experiences span a thirty-year period. By doing so, I have been better able to show such cross currents. Sowell (2005) supported such research, claiming "it is useful to see the outlines of a general pattern, even when that pattern erodes over time and at varying rates among different subgroups" (p. 13). My participants' stories show that a definite change has begun. Therefore, I begin this section with a closer look at Drew and Sandra, both of whom grew up in the 1970's rural South, and move through

the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with stories of my research participants' lives during those decades.

*Attitudes toward Higher Education in the 1970s South*

In the rural South, people who move away from their heritage or attempt to break away from societal norms are said to be “getting above their raising.” Two of my older participants became the first in their families to enroll at Georgia Southern, even though doing so meant breaking away from societal norms. Traditionally, southern children have been raised to respect their parents and their elders and to value hard work. Whether they are at home, at school, or at church, children are expected to behave and to “have good manners,” as J. Best (1999) explained: “[S]outhern society was one in which codes of behavior became enormously important, with attention to manners in almost courtly style within and between castes; respect for authority and for social class position, white and black; pride in family and loyalty to kinsman, and, above all, loyalty and honor [. . . .]” (p. 5). Through their decisions to go to college, my two older participants’ challenged a code of behavior that has influenced southern families for generations.

Drew grew up in a rural area outside of town and, as the youngest of three children and the only boy, his rural life left him feeling “isolated and sheltered.” His father, a machinist, had an eighth grade education, and his mother, a high school graduate, worked retail. Neither parent seemed to put a great deal of emphasis on education: “Dad’s schooling was difficult because he was needed on the family farm which took precedence over education. I don’t remember much my mother ever said about her education except that college was not an option.” Perhaps because his parents’

lives did not focus on education, Drew felt uncomfortable and out of place during most of his public school years:

I did not attend kindergarten like most kids in my first grade, so I always felt I lagged behind and out of place. I especially did not like high school. I seemed to get lost in the herd. There was a cliquish hierarchy at SHS [Statesboro High School] and I did not fit into any clique. Here in Statesboro, when you start out here, you're stereotyped. I mean I sort of overcame it in a way, but I never had support from anyone at the high school or the junior high.

Despite his lack of support at home and at school, Drew became a good student and developed a genuine love for learning, especially reading and writing:

My fifth grade teacher read to us for 15 minutes after lunch every day. The first book she read to us was *The Secret Garden*. And she read with such expression on her face that every child in that class was mesmerized. She was animated with her hands and face. She had very large eyes. And she made me want to read for myself. And before that, mother would take us to the library, but I didn't get involved. After fifth grade, I was always reading a book. During my youth, reading was escape and writing was a way of releasing the frustration of my life [. . .] One of the best things my mother did for me was to buy me the World Book Encyclopedia. And that became my world. I would come home from school and read about the world.

After graduating high school, Drew decided to attend college, seeing "education as a way out of a life that was crushing [his] soul." Martha Lou Roberts, a teacher Drew had in

high school, led him to make that decision: “Only one teacher, Martha Lou Roberts, the wife of the GSU golf coach, inspired me and encouraged me in high school. She often said, ‘THERE IS A WORLD OUT THERE FOLKS!’ Sure enough, she was right.” But finding that world has not always been easy for Drew.

In the mid 1970s, Drew believed that having an education would open the world for him, just as his encyclopedia had done in his youth, but he described his first few years in college as bewildering: “There was a lot going on in my life back then. I was raised in a rural area, so I was bucking a trend. It was horrible. My parents were supportive, but my mother didn’t know how to help me or how to support me. My grandmother—she was very religious—had concerns about education corrupting me. But I grew up hearing that. I was supposed to go off to a religious seminary. I couldn’t have been corrupted there.” Drew recalls feeling lost most of the time during his first years in college: “There seemed to be an assumption by the system that I knew how to navigate the process or had educated parents at home to assist.” But without a support system, Drew did not complete a degree during those first trying years: “I left [college] when my dad died. I had managed to stay in and do well through all his long illness, but after he died everything seemed to stop.”

Like Drew, Sandra does not recall education being significant or important during her early years:

I don’t remember it being real important. I don’t remember them ever helping me with homework . . . except when I went to private school. I can remember my mom helping me, but I don’t know if it’s because she was paying for it [laughing]

or if she wanted to make sure . . . or maybe I was struggling. I just don't remember why, but that's the only time I remember her helping me with homework. And I don't remember being encouraged to go to college or make good grades or anything like that. I mean, I think they wanted me to go to school, but they didn't do anything to prepare me.

Both of her parents had high school educations, but her father went into the army after high school and then opened a business when he returned to Burke County. Her mother married her father right out of high school, and Sandra was born two years later: "In a ten year span, she had six kids."

Sandra felt prepared when she entered first grade at Sardis Elementary school: "They wanted me to skip first grade because I knew everything, and they wanted me to go on. I don't think I was that smart; it was just that my grandmother had a business. I would work in her business when I was four years old. She taught me to make change and stuff that most four and five year olds weren't exposed to." Yet Sandra's most vivid memory from school is far from positive:

I had a bad experience in first grade. I was accused of cheating that year. It was early on in the year, and so the teacher made me sit in the back of the class for the rest of the school year. She put a copy cat thing on my desk and all. It wasn't until the end of the year testing that they figured out that I wasn't copying. It wasn't that I was copying. I was just a day dreamer. I mean I would finish my work, and I would just day dream. And maybe I was staring on other people's

papers, but I wasn't copying from them. And [the teacher] never caught on to that. But I didn't hate school as a result or anything.

Like Drew, Sandra remembers having a set of encyclopedia in her home; she also remembers a set of children's bible stories at her grandmother's house. She remembers that her grandmother was an avid reader, and her grandmother encouraged her to read. She remembers reading a lot as a child and reading to her younger siblings:

I remember my little brother that died. He was in the hospital from like August until October. And my mother was away during that entire time. We barely ever saw her. But the library was right down from the hospital and she would bring me books from the library. And that was so comforting to me because I know that she had gone and actually chosen them for me. And even though I couldn't talk to her or hug her or whatever, you know, that was just a comfort. And that sparked me to read even more. From that point on, I just kept reading.

But Sandra, like many of her era, did see college as an option immediately after high school; instead, she attended Swainsboro Tech and earned her nursing diploma.

Soon after graduating from Swainsboro Tech, Sandra married and concentrated on raising her family. During those years, she recalls reading to her boys and helping them with her school work, but she did not really think about continuing her own education. However, when her boys started school, Sandra had more time, so she decided to pursue the college education she had put off for so long, becoming both a first-generation and non-traditional student at Georgia Southern:



It was just something that I've always wanted to do. I mean, all of my life I've wanted a college education. I don't know why. I don't know where it came from. Because, like I say, I don't think my parents ever encouraged me really to do that. But it's something that I wanted to do for myself, so I knew that I would go to college and finish one day.

At a time when less than 20% of Georgia high school graduates chose to enroll in college, according to the Georgia Department of Education, both Sandra and Drew became the first in their families to chose higher education—Drew, to find a world beyond his rural, working-class upbringing; Sandra, to do something for herself. Neither grew up in families that encouraged or expected education beyond high school, but both sensed that college could offer them something beyond what they already had although neither really knew what it would be. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century drew to a end in the rural South, more first-generation students would follow Drew and Sandra's lead.

*Attitudes toward Higher Education in the 1980s South*

By the time Bettye graduated from high school in the 1980s, attending college had become a more viable option for many rural, first-generation southern whites, yet fewer first-generation blacks saw college as an option. Despite graduating a full decade after Drew and Sandra, Bettye shares a similar educational background:

When I was growing up, school wasn't really pushed on us, but it was something that I wanted to do for myself just to get . . . just to not be in the situation my parents were in. Because my mom and dad were having problems. I was last . . . I'm the youngest of six. And during the time between when my oldest sister was

born and I was born, there were a lot of problems in their marriage [. . .]

Whenever me and my two brothers, the two just a bit older than me, got to a certain age, my mom was raising us by herself. I mean my father lived with us, but he wasn't there. So whenever we got older, I had already made up my mind what I wanted to do and what direction I wanted to go in. I just had to focus and stay put. I had to have the right attitude to get it done.

Like Drew and Sandra, Bettye does not recall education being important in her home:

“[School] wasn't encouraged in the household because my mom was working all of the time. While she was working, we were still in school doing what we were supposed to do. We weren't . . . I wasn't the type of person who . . . I wasn't like some of the other kids. I was in class. No matter what was going on, I was in class.” When she decided to go to college after high school graduation, Bettye recalls her mother's being happy about it: “I mean, she realized that she could help me get through whatever I could.” Despite starting out in Developmental Studies classes, Sandra adapted quickly and managed to hold her own through a full year of college classes even though she found the work more challenging than she had thought it would be. About that time, she married and became pregnant with her second son, events which forced her to withdraw from college.

Although Sandra's and Bettye's early pregnancies caused them to delay their own education, they passed their educational goals onto their children, all born in the 1980s, a pattern that is reflected in all of my younger participants' lives. Sandra recalls both she and her husband wanting more for their boys and seeing education as the means to that end:

Well, my husband was a mechanic, and for him, he didn't want them to have to depend physically on their bodies to earn money. He knew . . . he had seen his dad do it; he was also a mechanic. He knew they were both smart boys, and he wanted them to use that to get an education to get a different kind of job and not have to work so hard manually. And for me, I just wanted them to do what they wanted to do. They were both smart, and I felt like . . . you know . . . that was where they would figure out exactly what they wanted to do was in college.

With that goal in mind, Sandra recalls encouraging her boys in ways that her parents had not encouraged her:

I pushed them pretty hard, but the first one, he was a rebel, so it didn't do much good to push him. [Laughing] He was going to do his own thing no matter what I did, no matter what I took away or what I gave him. So he did just enough to get by. And fortunately, the younger boy, he was a different type of child, and I guess he did just enough to get by, too, but his getting by was a lot better.

In Sandra's mind, college was the next and only logical step for her sons after high school.

Likewise, Bettye encouraged her sons in the same direction: "I push them to be the best . . . to strive for the best because I want them to be where they can manage a lot better because I feel like, if they have that education, they will be able to manage their money and manage their lives a lot better." She laughingly says that she has never given her boys any other option:

Well, we did [give them an option] in the sense that they know they went to school or they went to work. Because if they weren't going to school, then it doesn't make any sense for them to stay here and live with me and live off of me and not work. So they didn't have to go to school if they didn't want to, but they had to go to work. Children have to do one or the other. And that's pretty much what we've instilled in them. We push education . . . lean toward education more than anything because we know what having that education can do.

Even though Bettye has not yet achieved her educational goal, she continues to work on her degree. However, she has put her son's need for a college education above her own. She takes classes when she can afford to, but her son's college expenses are her first priority at this time.

Sandra's and Bettye's desire for their children to be better educated represents a shift in the value of education and educational expectations in rural, working-class families in South Georgia, the first of several "cross-currents at a given time" that have lead to "changes over time" as my study documents (Sowell, 2005, p. 13). While all of my older participants viewed attending college as something that they have done for themselves, younger participants, for the most part, have seen attending college as something they have been expected to do. Cindy and Justin are the anomaly, the "cross-currents" of my study. As the oldest members of my younger group of participants, their educational experiences mirror my older participants'.

Justin's dad worked with a telephone company for many years, and his mother was a homemaker. Cindy's father worked for Great Dane until he had an accident which

forced him onto disability: “But he’s tough. Nothing stops him. He’s a real inspiration to me, you know. A lot of people use disabilities as a crutch, but he’s . . . you know . . . you want something, you go after it.” Neither Cindy nor Justin had particularly positive experiences in high school. Justin goes as far as to blame teachers for his giving up on his high school education. Cindy recalls a particularly negative experience in her own grade school education:

I did have a teacher in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade who had three or four little girls in the class that she favored. They’d get to do extra things in the classroom. She actually told me . . . we had a writing assignment to do an essay. She read my essay and obviously didn’t like it and said, “You’ll never be a writer; you’ll never amount to anything.” She was there for about a year, but two years later I ended up winning a state essay contest and going to Columbus and won \$25.00. It was one of those things where I wanted to say “In your face!” I’ve won several awards because English, especially literature, is one of my strong points.

Neither Cindy nor Justin was encouraged to seek an education beyond high school.

Justin, in fact, dropped out before earning his high school degree, but he later earned his GED. Yet both have chosen to go to college in an effort to improve their own lives and their young daughter’s lives. Justin sums up their goal succinctly: “We just want to do better. We don’t see ourselves just throwing our hands in the air.” For them, education is the only way to improve their lives.

*Attitudes toward Higher Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century South*

Justin and Cindy were born about the time Sandra and Drew graduated from high school. At that time, major changes in the South's education policies were taking place according to the Southern Education Foundation's history of southern education. Focused on desegregating higher education in the South, several key political moves made college accessible for both working-class blacks and whites. These changes seemed to have an almost immediate effect on southern attitudes toward education, and my younger participants have reaped those benefits. Kimberly was never given an option about going to college: "I didn't really have a choice in my family. I had to go to school. My mother, she was like you need to go to school; you had better be going to school." Although Kimberly's mother was a "housewife," she considered college before she married Kimberly's father:

Well, my mother, she was basically a housewife. Well, before they got married, my mother wanted to enroll in college, but my daddy didn't want her to go to school. Basically it was a control thing, you know. And then they got divorced when I was like in first grade. And she was a housewife, but she wanted to support her kids, and she told us that, as a woman, "it's okay to be a housewife, but you need something in case you can't depend on the man all the time. You see, he's done left us and I have to support you girls and everything. So you need to have an education so that if you need a job you can be able to support yourself."

Her family's emphasis on education caused Kimberly a great deal of peer and family pressure growing up: "Education growing up with my family was different. Education was a big focus and a primary goal for us, but a lot of black people thought we were just trying to be white. If I had a penny for every time I was told that I was trying to be white for caring about school, liking to read and liking to learn and all that." Her most vivid memory from school stems from that pressure she felt:

A lot of teachers, they didn't care, but some they do care. And one teacher I had for high school math, she was one of the teachers, she reached out to everybody. And she reached out . . . I'm horrible with math and everything growing up . . . and people knew about my mom's strictness with grades and stuff, and people knew she worked right across the street. And how I had trouble was making bad grades in algebra, and I was all failing and stuff and she could have called my mom and said Kim is having trouble and making bad grades, but she knew that I would get in trouble. But she taught my sister and she taught me. She tutored me before school and helped me with math and everything. And I was always wondering why didn't she just go ahead and call my mom and tell her that Kim's failing and you know . . . and she knew that I would get in trouble with my mom, so just why did she never call her? And me and my mom were talking about that the other day and why she never called or sent a note or anything. She knew I'd be in a lot of trouble.

But the stress adversely affected Kim's overall high school experience:

When I was there, no black people were in honors and gifted, and they like kept trying to put me in honors and gifted, but I was like I don't want to be no token and everything. But honors and gifted was majority white and it's always somebody . . . people who are somebody in the community. And when I was in high school, first I was in the gifted classes. And I was like, and my momma was like, yeah, you can go with just basic college prep. And I liked being college prep because there was like some other black kids in there with me. You know I didn't want to be by myself, you know, the only black kid in an all white class. In college prep there was at least one or two black kids in there with me. And I felt more comfortable learning even though it was at a slower pace, and a lot of times it drove me out of my mind, you know. I would just get so bored and everything, but I still made the decision and I don't regret it.

Kim adds that racial pressure has diminished significantly since she has gotten to college: "When I got to college, there were more black people here, and seeing them finally validated what I care about and what I like."

Dusty grew up on a family farm and has been expected to work on the farm throughout his life. He attended elementary and high school in Portal, GA, recalling about "275 students [in his school] and 48 of us graduated together [. . .] Our class was considered a pretty smart class. I think we won a governor's honors cup or something, but it was awarded the year after we graduated. It was based on our test scores and all." High school was a positive experience for Dusty, an experience which he shared with three of his first cousins: "Well, we had . . . let's see . . . one, two, three, four . . . four of



us are the same age. We were all in the same grade, which we all did pretty good, but [. . .] I didn't graduate with honors. I lacked like 3/10 of a point. I probably could have, but you know, in high school, you fart around. You don't pay attention all of the time." Though good grades were recognized in his home, work was stressed more, especially work on the farm. But he knew he did not want to be a farmer after graduation. Going to college, according to Dusty, was simply a matter of "making up [his] mind" to do it:

Well, I always thought about it through high school, you know, and I . . . it's hard to say. I don't know when I just thought about it like that, but when I got out of high school, I thought, "Well, what am I going to do now?" And I . . . so I just thought what I would like to do the rest of my life and said, "Well, I guess I'll go to college and decide what I'll do then." I told [my family] I wanted to go to school. I had already made up my mind, so . . . .

Having played baseball in high school, Dusty even considered trying out for GSU's team: "I probably could have tried to be a walk-on at Georgia Southern but I knew that I really needed to work instead of playing baseball, and I didn't know if Momma and Daddy could support me in that." Despite neither of his parents having a college education, they have supported his decision to attend school, seeing education as "work" in a very real sense. In fact, his mother has taken on a second job away from the farm to help pay Dusty's way through school: "My mom is actually paying tuition, and I'm buying books and stuff like that and everything I need." Dusty speaks admiringly about his mother and her efforts to raise Dusty and his two brothers: "My mom . . . she works all the time. And I know that she didn't go to college, but sometimes, you know, I figure she wouldn't

have had to work so hard if she had gone to college . . . that she would have had a better job. Well, she likes what she's doing, which is all right, I mean, which is good. But for her to work all the time, she ought to be making more money. That's what I think. So I'd rather go to college, and you know, get a good salary."

Melanie, Dusty's first cousin, recalls how hard Dusty and his family had to work and how she has been taught to respect Dusty's background:

Well, you know Dusty and them live on a farm. And I can remember when them boys were little doing chores around the house when I would go over there.

Dusty has worked since he was old enough to walk. Dusty has worked so much in life that I think going through college makes him not want to farm all of his life. I mean, in high school, he never did anything because he had to work. My daddy will tell you to this day that those boys know the meaning of work and they know the meaning of family and they know the meaning of respect.

Likewise, Melanie grew up with an appreciation of hard work, but her parents stressed the need for a college education more than Dusty's family: "My daddy always said, you know, for my life to be better than the way his was so to take advantage of what I have and if I have the ability to go to college, then I need to do it. And make a living for myself." In fact, both Dusty's and Melanie's goals of receiving a college education include being able to "make a better living" without having to work so hard.

Although Melanie's parents lived in a rural area, they no longer farm, which enabled them more time to stress the importance of learning within the home: "In kindergarten . . . I picked up reading fast, which I was a fast learner . . . yeah, and

momma and daddy always pushed me to read. During my spare time, I was reading. If I wasn't helping momma or daddy or grandma or granddaddy." She recalls going to her grandparents' house after school and helping them, but "[she] always had to get [her] studies and [her] homework done." She recalls all of her family stressing the need for an education: "Not just my parents. Everybody. I mean my family—my aunts, my uncles, my grandma, my granddaddy, my poppa—everybody. I mean, I guess they know where they come from and they didn't want me to have to work as hard as they did to get by."

The pressure to get good grades for Melanie is similar to the pressure Kimberly felt in her family:

I lived with my daddy for a while during high school and like in kindergarten and middle school . . . I mean . . . Momma wasn't hard on me. I did my work; I got A's; I did good. But . . . I mean . . . I'd have to say that momma's the one who got me up to high school to where everything really started counting, but while I lived with Daddy . . . like I made one or two B's in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, but if I'd bring home a progress report with a B on it, I got grounded—a B. A progress report, not a report card. I got grounded. An 89 . . . it didn't matter. He grounded me. I mean it was punishment for me at the time but looking back it taught me that I could have studied a little bit more [. . .] But Momma and Daddy always wanted me to go and make something better of myself. Always.

Despite the pressure to make good grades, Melanie recalls her school years fondly: "You know, teachers loved me, I loved school, and I was a good student." Her most memorable educational experience was positive:

Well, you know, this day and time, a lot of teachers have classes where there's Special Ed kids . . . you know, all mixed together. Well, I had a class like that, and we all had to go through government and one of my other classes that was on the graduation test. We all had to go through it half a semester and the other half of the semester, a whole new topic. And, you know, [the teacher] she would do anything she could to get her kids to get what she was saying. She wouldn't leave nobody behind basically. If one person didn't know what they were doing, then she would . . . after class . . . tell them, "Stay and I will help you and you'll get it." And she made sure, from then on out, I mean . . . I took every class I could take from her. I mean she did anything to benefit the student. She wasn't worried about herself. She wasn't worried about her time. She was worried about the student, and if the student didn't get it, she was there.

At first, Melanie struggled in college, but she has continued to improve. After her first semester, she decided that she "had to start buckling down when [she] realized this ain't high school." Last semester, I was happy to see Melanie's name on the Dean's List for the first time.

Interviews of first-generation college students whose lives and experiences span a thirty-year period document the shift in attitudes toward education that have occurred during the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, shifts that have led to more first-generation students from working-class families to enroll in our college classes. For my older participants, getting an education stemmed from an inexplicable desire. Their parents were not well educated, nor did their parents stress a need for an education. But

each of the three older participants talked about something within them that led their enrolling in college as first-generation students. For my younger participants, enrolling in college resulted from their wanting to do something with their lives so that they could have better lives than their parents. An increased value for education has emerged as part of the shift, a value attributed to work in the earlier generation. But the value of hard work has been retained in the process; today, the value of hard work has been taken out of the fields and the factories and placed in the college classrooms. To that end, Kimberly, Dusty, and Melanie have not only made it into the University, they have come with the attitude that if they work hard enough, if they apply themselves fully, they will be successful. But their experiences at Georgia Southern University thus far have not resulted in success, at least not in terms of attaining a college degree.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### “IN HIGH COTTON”: FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY SOUTH

In the South, “in high cotton” is a good place to be, stemming from the days when pickers did not have to stoop so low to pick the bolls when the cotton was high. Today in the South, a college degree is perceived to be the benchmark that separates the middle class from the working class, so by working toward a college degree and potential entrance into the middle class, my participants would be considered “in high cotton.” In this chapter, I summarize political changes that have led more first-generation students to enroll in college and then examine my first-generation participants’ experiences once they enrolled in relation to my research questions:

- What role does learning play in the lives of first-generation Georgia Southern students from rural, working class communities in southeast Georgia, including home, school, work and community?
- What impact does having attended Georgia Southern have on first-generation students’ professions or jobs?
- What advantages and/or disadvantages do first-generation college students recognize as a result of attending Georgia Southern, and how might teachers of first-year composition build upon them?

I end the chapter by making connections between the shifts that have already occurred and the impact of those shifts on education in the South today.

In 1966, S. Wiggins claimed that “the admissions barriers of race, of poverty, and of marginal pre-collegiate schooling comprise[d] a formidable cluster of issues” that kept

many young southerners, both black and white, from crossing the line into middle class (p. 71). However, political changes since the 1970s have led to fewer barriers to higher education in the South and have opened the doors for the first time for blacks and working-class whites to attend college. Most notably, Title VI guidelines established in 1977 identified “four major elements that must be reflected in state higher education [. . .] plans,” including increasing underprivileged enrollments and reporting progress toward that end (J. B. Williams, 1988, p. 8-9). Even though my parents had earned their college degrees by that time (my father in 1968; my mother, 1972), my family was in transition; we had not yet established ourselves as middle class. Therefore, I was among the first to reap the benefits of the political changes taking place at the time when I first enrolled in 1977. At that time, I took advantage of a state-funded incentive program, backed by the Higher Education Act:

In 1972 Congress amended the Higher Education Act with the intent of drawing out more student aid from states; the State Student Incentive Grant Program (SSIG) provide[d] federal matching funds for qualifying state need-based programs. To qualify, state awards [. . .] [had to be] based on financial need. This program [. . .] [e]ven on this limited scale [. . .] proved to be extremely effective in drawing out new or revised state appropriations for state aid. (V. Fleming, 1975)

One of these programs, the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant (BEOG), offered me financial assistance to pursue a degree. Similar programs over the past decades have led more students from working-class backgrounds to do the same, but, as my participants’

experiences reveal, breaking down admissions barriers and providing financial assistance does not guarantee academic success.

### Sponsorship, Discouragement, and Perseverance

After enrolling in college for the first time, I soon realized that financial assistance was only one of many needs that had to be met if I were going to succeed in the academy. I now realize that my greatest need was academic counseling. After changing majors twice and withdrawing completely for over a year, I returned to college and began taking classes I enjoyed. While enrolled in my fifth literature class, my professor asked me why I was not majoring in English. I was taken aback by her comment and naively asked, “I can major in English?” That professor became my advisor and literacy sponsor, which led to my eventual success as a student and an academic. Hearing a similar pattern of experience in my participants’ stories, I have concluded that helping our first-generation students succeed must begin with a careful examination of the pattern. As my participants told their stories and the pattern emerged, I thought about the many adages that have governed my life and the lives of so many southerners, the lessons that remind us “of behavioral norms and reinforce expectations of predictable actions and attitudes among community members” (S. B. Heath, 1983, p. 155). So I frame each section of this chapter with one of these lessons and how it applies to first-generation college students today.

#### *Sponsorship: “Even a Blind Hog Finds an Acorn Now and Then”*

When a blind hog finds an acorn as it roots around, the hog takes advantage of the morsel and continues in his or her quest for food. First-generation college students also



happened upon acorns in the form of literacy sponsors, people within the educational system whose encouragement or advice keeps them going. Brandt (1998) claimed that “[ . . . ] literacy sponsors affect literacy learning in two powerful ways. They help to organize and administer stratified systems of opportunity and access, and they raise the literacy stakes in struggles for competitive advantage. Sponsors enable and hinder literacy activity, often forcing the formation of new literacy requirements while decertifying older ones” (p. 567). Several of my participants’ stories confirm the power of sponsorship.

When Drew first entered college in the 1970s, he did not find the sponsorship he needed. As a result, he felt “lost most of the time” and that there was “an assumption by the system that [he] knew how to navigate the process or had educated parents at home to assist.” So even though he believed that education would provide him a way out of a life he found “isolated and sheltered,” getting that education has become a life-long process for him. Drew’s incongruous feelings surfaced almost immediately upon his entering college, beginning with his first-year writing courses: “They were structured and punitive, focused more on the finer points of grammar than writing and communication. They were discouraging.” The two skills that sustained him in his everyday life contributed to his frustration in college and led to his decision to leave, despite having completed nearly three years of coursework and having a solid B average. Drew continued to write for himself and established himself as a writer despite not having a college degree: “I started writing seriously in ‘86. I had my first short story published in ‘93. I had always written before then. But I didn’t call myself a writer until after I got

published.” Over the years, Drew published twelve short stories and wrote an as yet unpublished novel.

After learning that Georgia Southern had established a writing program, Drew re-enrolled to polish his writing skills, but he initially felt much of the anxiety he had felt years before:

It’s an odd feeling coming back on campus because at first I had this sense of being a 50-year-old among these 19-year-olds. I had the sense of being 19 years old all over again. All of those doubts started coming back. It was different at first. I had trouble adapting. I came back to Newton [the building that has housed the English Department for many years and now houses English and Writing], the one building that really hasn’t changed that much.

The main difference Drew found after returning to college were professors who offered the sponsorship he needed. During our interviews, Drew mentioned two by name and talked about how wonderful they have been since his return. One writing professor in particular has been most inspiring and encouraging, leading Drew to have more confidence in himself both as a writer and a student, a feeling that has been validated by many of his professors. He now looks forward to classes for the joy of learning and writing, and he talks about the value of workshop-style writing classes: “I’m amazed at how brave I have become [. . .] in order to share my personal writing with others in the class.” In Drew’s case, sponsorship has enabled him to succeed as a student and helped assuage the negative feelings he had when he first entered college so many years ago. Drew senses a change in the attitudes of younger students in his writing classes as well:

“I admire the confidence that today’s young people feel. Even though I had my parents’ ‘permission’ to go to college back then, I really didn’t feel as though I had their confidence that I could do it. Their attitude was more ‘we hope you can do it.’” Today’s students come with the attitude ‘I can do it.’”

Sandra has also found sponsorship in her pursuit of a college degree. Being older when she first enrolled, Sandra felt anxious: “I was the only non-traditional student in every class [. . .] so that was quite intimidating [. . .] But being 40 years old, oh, you know, you don’t really care what anyone else thinks. But I thought it would have been nice if there was just one other older person in there.” She feels that having a college background gives students an edge. And even though she did not have a background herself, her non-traditional status put her under the umbrella of someone who did:

I wouldn’t have been as successful if it had not been for Joanne [her advisor]. Georgia Southern needs a lot more people like [her], I’ll tell you right now. I mean I have had other people advise me, but I have NEVER had anybody who cares like she does and is knowledgeable. I’m not even sure how I came to find [her], but she’s been there and done that. You know, she got her education later, too, so I think she just has a passion for non-traditional students to finish school.

This guidance has given Sandra a confidence similar to the confidence Drew has developed as an older student. Sandra admits that her empathy for younger students has helped her in the classroom and made college a positive experience for her:

I ended up taking algebra my first year, and there was a guy who sat beside me and he was really sweet about helping me. And vice versa. Sometimes I helped

him. I remember one guy I helped [in English], I think that he just didn't have . . . you know, he didn't have a dad. He was raised by his mom. And that was my first English class, and I helped him a lot. I mean he could write; it was in his head. He just couldn't . . . the grammar was horrible. He was very appreciative. I remember there was one girl in my class who was struggling financially, and I had a really good friend who had a clothing bank, and I set her up with some clothes. I nurtured everyone around me.

Sandra adds that she understands students who “come from a background where there is no education.” She has seen the difference that background can make as she has worked to get her youngest son into college; she provides the support for him that her non-traditional advisor has provided for her.

Only one younger student in my study was able to name someone she considers a mentor since she has been in college and, interestingly, she holds the highest GPA and has earned the most hours among my younger participants. Despite feeling confident when she first came to college because she found more black students like herself, Kimberly's first few semesters were a struggle: “I think my biggest hurdle was myself with my studying because in high school I really didn't have to apply myself [. . .] Here at school I realized that I was going to have to study. I've got to put more effort into education.” Deciding on a major was a challenge for her as well: “I realized that . . . when I first got to school, my family and my momma were like, ‘You need to go get something that makes sure when you get out you get money’ and stuff like that, and then I realized that I need to do something that I like doing and I enjoy.” She began as an

anthropology major and then changed her major to English. Later, she became a writing major when the major was approved in 2004.

Becoming involved in campus activities led Kimberly to her sponsor, the advisor of a service organization at GSU and Kimberly's advisor since becoming a writing major: "It's just her being a black woman here, being a professor, and just teaching and everything. I know she's really busy and stuff, so I don't try to hassle her all of the time, but I know that she is there and if I need something, I can always go to her. I know Ms. Pate is there for me and I can go talk to her, and if she can do something, she will help me." Having someone she considers a mentor has not alleviated all of Kimberly's problems, but she does feel better about herself, her major, and her writing: "I think that's one reason why I became a writing and culture major. Real life is happening. It's kind of better than fiction, and my life and my family, oh, it's a great story, even better than some fiction stories." Interestingly, the three students who acknowledge sponsorship have the highest GPA's among the participants I interviewed. Drew and Kimberly have also accrued the most credit hours and are the two students most likely to graduate within the next two years. In other words, they have found the acorns needed to sustain them.

*Discouragement: "Getting the Short End of the Stick"*

In the South, someone who gets the short end of the stick gets a bad deal in a situation, dating back to days when farmers would move heavy loads (usually bales of cotton or hay) with long sticks. Each person would have an end of the stick and thereby displace the weight of the load equally. When the load was off center, however, the

person with the shorter end would carry the larger burden. In the cases of several of my participants, they seem to be carrying the short end in their pursuit of a college education. Dusty and Melanie both continue to struggle toward their degrees, but their transcripts indicate that they have not yet found their way. Melanie's transcript reveals a few failing grades and several course withdrawals, at least one each semester. Dusty's grades as a whole are better, but he also has several withdrawals. In addition, Dusty has sat out two semesters of his college career to date. His first semester out was a learning experience for him as a student: "Yeah, well, my advisor . . . I guess I really should have went to someone else. My advisor was in Egypt, and she's in Egypt the whole summer. She came back like two weeks before, and I didn't realize that. Turns out I couldn't get the classes that I needed, so I just didn't go. I said I'd just work and make some money instead." When I asked him if anyone had ever told him about overrides, he replied that they hadn't. Likewise, Melanie had to learn that withdrawing from classes imposed a lighter penalty than earning a bad grade. When her GPA fell below 3.0, Melanie lost HOPE (Georgia's lottery funded scholarship for high achieving students): "I don't have HOPE cause I lost it [ . . . ] I thought I would have to [drop out], but me and Momma, we were able to . . . I mean I was going no matter what, and I got PELL (a federally funded grant based on financial need) for this semester. I mean it wasn't a big problem because momma saves and so do I." Melanie also expressed disapproval toward students who do not seem to struggle financially as she does, but in doing so, she also reveals how her working-class background impacts her attitude:

Well, I'm not judging people . . . well, yeah, I can say I'm judging people . . . All these sorority and fraternity kids are . . . I'm like "Are you serious?" All it is is them getting everything they want, and seeing them in class talking about everything they want and them buying this new thing and their momma and daddy giving them this and giving them a brand new car. I mean they're doing horrible in school but they're getting fed rewards for something they should be punished for. I see it all the time. I just thank God I wasn't raised that way they were. And I thank God I don't have everything brand new because then I wouldn't know how to work toward something and wanting to achieve it myself.

Despite her academic setbacks, Melanie seems to be learning her way through the system: "Now that I'm in my teacher education program, I know where to go and who to contact. Back then, I was clueless."

Cindy and Justin related similar experiences which led to frustration in college. Even though they are non-traditional students in the sense that they are slightly older, married, and parents, they have not found the support that Sandra has enjoyed with a non-traditional advisor. Therefore, Justin feels, "Older students aren't being taken care of. We have to work harder. We older students don't get the same opportunities." Because he works full time and shares the responsibility of taking care of their young daughter, Justin has not always been able to take the classes that he needs when they are offered:

One thing I would say about college is that the further I get into college . . . once you get in, they try to get you on a schedule and then just vrrrooooooom! They

just throw you in and just get you on out. I'm like, 'NO!' I'm trying to make good grades here. Not everybody has the same pace to go by. And I don't want to come out with a GPA of 2.0 or 2.5; I want to try at least to do the best that I can. Everyone learns at a different pace, and if you just take everybody and throw them on through, somebody is not going to learn as others. Let someone who actually wants to learn take their time to learn; then when they get out, they know how to do the job.

Cindy agrees: "Yeah, like I try to learn but then at the end of the semester I guess I just do a brain dump. [. . .] And I think about how much time I spent trying to get it right, but I can't remember enough to help him do it."

Clearly Melanie, Dusty, Cindy, and Justin want a college degree, but they also want to find value in everything they learn. But the process in place at Georgia Southern does not support the expectations they have put on themselves. Many programs have set course rotations, forcing students to take prescribed classes at given points in their academic careers. Continuation often depends on students' following the sequence as it is laid out. In addition, many financial aid programs require students to take a certain number of hours each semester and to make "reasonable academic progress" each year in order to receive aid in the following year. Such guidelines have forced Cindy and Justin to work their lives around college even though college is only one of their priorities. As a result, all four participants talked about being discouraged and frustrated at times. In other words, they have found the weight of earning their college degrees much heavier on their end of the stick.



*Perseverance: “Hard Work Never Hurt Anybody”*

Most people from rural, working-class families in the South are familiar with the saying, “Hard work never hurt anybody,” a saying that has governed their families’ work ethic for generations. My participants display a similar work ethic in both their college classes and their everyday lives. Drew, the most mature and financially stable of my participants, puts everything he has into his coursework and is cleared to graduate in May 2009. In classroom observations of Drew after our initial interview, I saw a disciplined student, one who usually got to the classroom early, sat by himself, and reviewed his reading or writing assignments before the class began. He always had the day’s assignment prepared and could knowledgeably participate in class conversations. He also willingly shared his work with other students in the class and offered input about their writing when asked. In a writing class he had earlier this year, Drew was frustrated by the grades he was receiving, but he never blamed anyone but himself. His comments always focused on what actions he was going to take to make his future drafts better. In other words, he was willing to work harder in order to make the grade he wanted to make. Ultimately, he earned an A in the class.

Despite years of hard work and perseverance, Sandra is not as likely to complete her degree, even though she is a rising junior with a 3.47 GPA. Her oldest son had a diving accident when he was 18 years old and is now a quadriplegic. In fact, his accident is what prompted her to return to GSU after she withdrew the first time: “I was trying to get my education because I’ve realized that things can happen. And I realized that I needed an education so that I could take care of my family if something happened to [my

husband]. And that was our goal, but we only got half way there.” While she was taking classes toward her degree, her husband also had an accident, putting even more responsibility on Sandra. Her story reveals that she is willing to work hard; after all, she is caring and providing for both a disabled son and husband. But her work ethic is also what keeps her from returning to college at this time: “One of the reasons that I have been so reluctant to go back is because [her husband] might have to have surgery, and . . . and I didn’t want to like . . . the first semester that I was back after his accident, I was taking two classes. I finished one, but I didn’t finish the other. It took me a whole year to finish the second class. My GPA is so high, and I don’t want to ruin it.” So for now, Sandra works full time at the bank and helps in the family business: “I’m sure I’ll go back one day. I’m just not as driven as I was before. I just can’t handle the pressure of it now with the family situation, too.”

Although Bettye’s progress toward her degree has been significantly slower than my other participants, her work ethic, enthusiasm and expectations remain strong as she works toward becoming a financial advisor. Bettye currently works as a casual laborer in Georgia Southern’s parking and transportation office; therefore, she does not qualify for benefits, including tuition remission which is offered to GSU staff who take classes toward degrees. She has to take classes around her work hours, and she depends on student loans to help pay for the classes she takes. Yet Bettye does not complain about her situation, and she continues to take a class or two each semester. When I visit Bettye at work, she always greets me with a smile and updates me on the progress she is making toward her degree. She assures me that she is still working hard and that her hard work

will eventually pay off. She also remains optimistic that a college degree will make a difference in her and her family's lives, particularly in terms of providing a comfortable living and retirement so that she does not end up like her mother:

My mom is living off of Social Security and it's hard because she's only getting nine hundred and something and that's only because her husband died in January so she's getting a widow's supplement. What can you do with nine hundred and something dollars a month? She's got a mortgage; she's got a car payment; she's got a truck that her husband was paying for, and we're trying our best to get it sold. It seems like the more we try to get something, something keeps setting us back.

So she keeps working and encouraging her sons to work toward the same end: "I push them to be the best . . . to strive for the best because I want them to be where they can manage a lot better because I feel like if they have that education, they will be able to manage their money and their lives a lot better." Bettye not only believes in the value of hard work for herself, she also instills that same belief in her children.

Cindy and Justin are optimistic that they will finish, but both want to finish at their own pace. They feel that learning well is more valuable than getting through quickly. Cindy adds, "I want to get to the point where I can take a few classes here and there, and that way I won't have such a full load on me. I won't have to commit myself to the financial aid standards where I have to take so many hours. I've found that 12 hours is just about enough for me." Justin adds that they want to remain in Bulloch County after they graduate: "I would like to. I mean . . . uhm . . . this has been home to

me and I would like to stay here. Plus, I see Statesboro growing.” Like Bettye, Justin would like to have his own business when he graduates, but he sees moving into management at the Walmart Distribution Center as a possibility, too. Cindy adds that they do not see a significant change in their lives once they graduate: “I just want a future with job security and a better life for my daughter, better than we had as children growing up. I’d like to save for her college future so that she won’t have to go through the same problems that we’re going through now. And that sense of achievement.” So they continue to work hard and to get the most out of the classes they take. After our interviews, I would occasionally meet Cindy and Justin on campus to catch up with their lives and progress. Since Justin leaves campus to work his shift at the distribution center and Cindy has to pick up Olivia from daycare, they depend on these sessions between classes to study and complete assignments since their “hard work” really begins after they leave campus.

Dusty and Melanie, more than any of my participants, have recognized that hard work is essential to get through life though neither of them connected their college classes with hard work. Both grew up in farming families and are used to long hours of physical labor. The youngest of three boys, Dusty has decided not to go into farming and is currently majoring in construction, but he is not sure what he will do with his degree: “I haven’t decided what I want to do yet. Maybe contractor . . . but I don’t know.” He began as an engineering major, but “didn’t think [he] could hang with it,” having to take 18-20 hours each semester in order to keep up with the program. Having to work as much as possible to subsidize his education made construction a much more viable

option. But he also expressed concern about moving into management in the construction area: “I couldn’t stand to be cooped up in an office, which I may end up doing, but there ain’t no telling. But I’d rather be working with my hands than in an office.” He knows that he does not want to work as hard as his parents have had to work, especially his mother, a school bus driver who also works on the family farm: “So I’d rather go to college, and, you know, get a good salary.” He also knows that he wants to stay in Georgia, although he understands that he may have to leave Bulloch County in order to get a good job after graduation. To Dusty, earning a college degree could be a mixed blessing. He may not have to work as hard physically as his parents have had to, but he may have to give up the outside work that he enjoys.

In Dusty’s interview, he was quieter and less willing to share information than the rest of my participants. His reticence carried over into the classroom where he usually sat quietly as students around him visited before class began. He never asked questions in class although he assured me that he was willing to approach a professor after class if he did not understand something. But when I visited Dusty on his family’s farm, I saw more of his personality emerge. As I visited with Dusty’s mother, I watched Dusty, his father, and one of his older brothers as they unloaded bales of hay. Despite the obvious hard work involved, they seemed to be enjoying themselves as they joked and regaled each other with stories and anecdotes. I came to understand why Dusty never referred to his classes as work.

Despite hard work and perseverance, most of my participants do not expect their college degree to change their lives in significant ways. Drew and Sandra, perhaps

because they are the most mature of my participants, are most realistic about college and what a degree will mean to their lives. After leaving the South years ago and traveling around the country, Drew has chosen to “come home” to the area he once wanted so badly to leave. And even though he will more than likely complete his degree in the coming year or so, he does not see that degree having a major impact on his life. He already sees himself as a writer, and his publications reinforce that image of himself. He knows that he will continue to write and looks forward to having his novel published and writing a second novel. He may go into a graduate program, but he will do so because he likes taking classes. In other words, the desire that has kept him coming back all of these years is still in him though he realizes that the degree will not make a significant change in who he is or how he lives. For now, Sandra works full time at the bank and helps in the family business: “I’m sure I’ll go back one day. I’m just not as driven as I was before. I just can’t handle the pressure of it now with the family situation too.” When she returns, Sandra is considering majoring in either early childhood education or writing. Regardless, she does not see a degree making a significant difference in her life as she will remain focused on her family and making sure that their needs are met first.

Melanie wants to become a teacher and is considering working with learning disabled students. She enjoys the time that she spends tutoring her younger siblings: “I [was] inspired when my little sister was like 2 or 3 . . . right when she started learning to count and all that kind of stuff and seeing her catch on to things . . . I mean, she was . . . I never had a little brother or sister . . . that was my first that come along. And that was my little baby doll. That was my kid.” For now, she adds, “My daddy is just happy that I’m

in college and I'm making something of my life." Like most of my participants, Melanie wants to stay close to home after she graduates: "Growing up, I always said I'd move to Tennessee, but I'd stay here because I can't leave my family. I'll be here until the day I die. I can't leave my family." I find irony in the fact that my participants all talked about the value in hard work and their willingness to work hard as they worked toward their degrees; however, the only benefit they saw in having a degree was not to have to work as hard as they or their parents have worked in the past. With only one exception, my participants plan to stay in the rural South once they complete their degrees.

The one exception is Kimberly, perhaps the most aspiring of all my participants, who knows that she does not want to return to Wayne County after she graduates. She believes that a college degree will totally change who she is as a person: "It will enrich my life and make me more open minded. I think I'll have more experiences because I won't be closed-minded. I'll have opportunities and I'll take more chances than I would if I was more guarded or if I didn't have an education." Her immediate goal is to get a job with Teach for America to help her get away from the area in which she grew up:

I have this little fantasy, like . . . send me to New Orleans but know that it's still kind of broke down and everything and a lot of crime. Some people go crazy, like "What the hell you thinking about?" but I kind of have this romanticized idea that I'll be the saving teacher and I want to go there and help down-trodden students and displaced people and all that. I've got this little romantic fantasy in my head.

Part of her desire to get out of the area stems from the hypocrisy she saw in her home town while growing up, especially her having to be “the token black person” in many aspects of her life. She feels that if she returns to Wayne County to teach after graduation, she will end up teaching lower level classes and unmotivated students simply because of her race: “Yeah, there are not enough black teachers because of the racial thing. They [the upper-class white families] don’t want their kids being taught by a black person, having a black person in authority over them.” When I asked about agencies in place to govern against discrimination in the school system, Kimberly was quick to defend her position:

Every once in a while the NAACP will actually get up and do their little obligatory “there’s no black teachers” little spiel and they might hire one or two. It’s all peachy cream from the outside, but when you’re in the system then you have . . . when you’re a second class person in a system you see how it is. You say, “don’t want to be a part of it” or “the hell with it.” If you’re upper-class and white you can easily get a job because your momma was there or your family has been born there and you have an old family name.

Nevertheless, Kimberly dreams her Teach for America dream and looks toward graduate school. Yet despite her strong feelings about not returning to Wayne County, she does not see herself leaving the South:

Now that’s kind of the reason that I want to get away more and be somewhat different. But I’ve kind of realized that I love the South, and I might get away from South Georgia, but I don’t know if I want to get away from the South



altogether . . . the region. I don't think I would be happy if I didn't hear somebody talking the drawl and I got to really listen to every word they say and I can't go to the restaurant and they don't have sweet tea on the menu.

She eventually sees herself entering graduate school and aspires to write her own life story, becoming like her idols, Zora Neal Hurston, Octavia Butler and Alice Walker, black southern women writers.

*Degeneration: "The Good Lord Willing and the Creek Don't Rise"*

When southerners are looking forward to an expected outcome, they often preface that hope with the expression "The good lord willing and the creek don't rise" to indicate unforeseen circumstances that might get in their way. The saying reflects many southerners' strong faith in God but also their fatalistic attitudes toward life in general, for, as McWhiney (1988) reminds us, these students are descended from people who "doubted that much could, or should be done to improve things in the world. They looked more to the next world, where they believed life would be all leisure and comfort" (p. 253). Even though Flannery O'Connor once claimed that "while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted ("The grotesque in southern fiction," p. 44), a pre-occupation with God and the hereafter have long been a part of our culture. After all, as McWhiney (1988) revealed, "The way to heaven, as explained by most preachers and accepted by most southerners, was simple enough—one only had to believe in the divinity of Jesus and to be baptized" (p. 189). While I did not ask my participants questions about their own religious beliefs or experiences, several evoked religion during our interview, offering validity to O'Connor's claim that a southerner "is

bound by his particular past and by those institutions and traditions that this past has left to his society” (“Novelist and believer,” p. 155).

Like many southerners, I grew up in the Southern Baptist Church. Rarely did a Sunday service or Wednesday family night go by without my grandmother, my parents, and my sisters and I in attendance. We were active in all areas of church life, from my grandmother’s keeping the nursery, my parents singing in the choir, and my sisters and I participating in youth activities. I heard echoes of my past in my participants’ voices during our interviews. For the most part, my participants’ mention of religion was subtle: Melanie “thank[ing] God” for her being raised the way she has been raised, Bettye’s adding that her son’s love of rap is fine as long as he is singing rap “to the glory of God,” and Sandra’s mentioning that she has been keeping a prayer journal for years. However, two participants talked about religion extensively, specifically mentioning how they have grown away from the religion of their youth and how this growing away has been difficult for them.

Drew first mentioned religion when he talked about his grandmother, a very religious Southern Baptist. While his parents were not opposed to his going to college, his grandmother voiced serious concerns about higher education corrupting him. While his early plans to attend a religious seminary in Missouri were fine with her, his enrolling in Georgia Southern, a college just a few miles away, raised major concerns. Drew acknowledged that his education has led him to question a great deal about his heritage, especially his belief in a God who punishes disbelievers so severely, and has led to his wanting to know more than blind faith allows. But, he added, his education has not

changed who he is or his system of values. When he returned to the South over twenty years after he left, he was able to meld his new belief system with the beliefs of his mother and siblings. As Drew explains, “I have recovered. I have moved on.”

Kimberly, on the other hand, is still trying to find a way to integrate her changing beliefs with those of her family:

When I go home, it’s a whole different world and a whole different mindset. [. . . .] My mother’s family is very religions, and I think it’s so weird with the Christian and the super-natural and Africa with non-traditional religious stuff. And how it’s so blended together. I mean you go to church and you have the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and then a crazy superstition where you don’t eat so and so’s food because they got an ivory necklace on or . . . just stuff like that. My mom believes in the supernatural and stuff, and my family’s church, they believe in the supernatural and all that stuff on good and evil and bad omens and good omens. That’s what I grew up around.

While Kimberly is able to laugh about her past, “Sometimes I felt like I was in a horror movie, thinking about demons and monsters and dreams and premonitions and all that stuff,” she has found that her changing beliefs are problematic: “I can’t tell my momma this is wrong or this is crazy, you know. I can’t ever say that.” She adds that her different beliefs have led to her wanting to “get away more and be somewhere different.” Being the youngest in her family, she also finds that her mother is less likely to take her or her changing beliefs seriously: “She just thinks I’m young right now and that one day I’ll get back to God and all. I’m just young and exploring and stuff like that right now. I

think that's what she sees in me right now." But Kimberly, like Drew, probably knows that she is no longer bound by the same religious convictions as her mother.

#### Shifting Values in the South—Reading and Writing and Other Issues

All of my participants remain physically in the South and plan to remain in the South once they finish their college education. At this time, no participant has seen a significant change in the way he or she lives, although subtle changes have begun to occur, particularly in the importance of literacy and what being literate means in their everyday lives. As my participants' stories reveal, past attitudes toward schooling and literacy have shifted, albeit slowly. The permission that gave Drew what he needed to go to college but that left him feeling unprepared and inadequate has been replaced by a need and respect for literacy and expectations that today's first-generation students will go to college and have better lives than their parents.

Perhaps the most obvious shift noted in my interviews with participants is in the availability of print literacy in the homes. When he was growing up in rural Bulloch County, just a few miles from Statesboro and Georgia Southern University, Drew does not recall having a lot of books in the home or seeing his parents read or write in carrying out their day-to-day responsibilities. His mother worked retail and took care of the family, and his father was a machinist. Other than investing in a set of World Book Encyclopedia, books were not something they invested their money in. Nevertheless, as he was growing up, Drew found that "reading was an escape and writing was a way of releasing the frustration of [his life]," and he would lose himself in World Book after returning home from school or look forward to the bookmobile or occasional trips to the

library to get him through the long, idle, summer days. Today, Drew sees literacy as the one aspect of his life that has sustained him: “Reading and writing are an intricate part of who I am—not a hobby or avocation, but part of the way I live my life artfully.” His books are as valuable to him as his mother’s cooking utensils or father’s tools were to their everyday lives.

Sandra also recalls having a set of encyclopedia as well as a collection of bible stories in her home. But she does not recall reading or writing as something her family valued as she was growing up. Her family owned a motel and her grandparents owned a business as well. So when Sandra started school and was slated to skip first grade, she recalls her math skills as the reason: “When I was four-years-old, [my grandmother] taught me how to make change and stuff that most four and five-year-olds weren’t exposed to.” She also recalls her grandmother’s encouraging her to read, but Sandra had to depend on the bookmobile or the library to provide her with books. Buying books was not something her parents did. Likewise, Bettye does not recall reading being important in her family, and she does not recall reading materials in the home. In all three older participants’ families, reading was a necessary skill but not one particularly valued over other skills.

However, Drew, Sandra, and Bettye all had a drive, a determination that has led them to value knowledge as something they wanted for themselves and something that led them to first enroll in college. In addition, education is something that Sandra and Bettye have encouraged in their children. To help their children achieve their educational goals, both Sandra and Bettye created homes much different than the ones

they grew up in. While her childhood reading was limited to the encyclopedia, the bible, or trips to the library, Sandra has made the opportunity to read more readily available to her sons: “We always had some kind of magazine . . . you know, *National Geographic for Kids* or whatever. I always tried to have some kind of magazine coming in monthly that was of their interest . . . that they could choose.” After having to work so hard to graduate high school and get into college, Bettye recalls being frustrated by her oldest son’s attitude toward education: “[He] graduated from high school, but he didn’t reach his greatest potential. And I could have choked him.” Yet she continues to stress the importance of education to both of her sons, including the oldest who is now in college: “I push them to be the best . . . to strive for the best because I want them to be where they can manage a lot better because, I feel like, if they have that education, they will be able to manage their lives a lot better.”

Despite Sandra’s and Bettye’s encouragement, their sons face many of the same problems that my younger, first-generation students who have been encouraged by their parents face. Bettye blames herself for the problems that she knows are in her son’s future as he pursues a college education, particularly paying for his college education:

He wasn’t able to get financial aid. My husband makes too much, and with me working, we really make too much. I didn’t want to, but he had to take out student loans. But it was our fault. We didn’t do what we were supposed to do. We started a college fund for him but not until late. So my husband borrowed against his 401K to get [him] through that first year. Now I’ve prepared him that

he's going to have to start working and cut down on the number of classes that he's taking. That's not what I wanted for him, but sometimes you just have to. But receiving financial aid comes with its own problems, as Cindy and Justin confess. Cindy and Justin have both received financial aid while in college, but they have come to view that assistance as both a blessing and a curse: While it provides them with the money they need to pay their tuition and buy their books, it forces them to make "reasonable academic progress," a pace that both Cindy and Justin find too taxing given the complexity of their lives. To that end, despite their being literate individuals, enthusiastic about their education, they feel as though they are being pushed through the system, not taught the things they know they will need to find and keep good jobs once they leave the university. Financial problems are one of several hurdle my first-generation students have faced.

Sandra's youngest son started college but, like many of my participants, he has come and gone over time. His ability to do well has not been an issue, but his not knowing what he wanted to major in has been: "He wasn't ever not sure that [attending college] was what he wanted to do. I don't think that was ever an issue; he just wasn't sure what he wanted to do when he got to college." Sandra blames herself for many of her son's problems in college: "I guess I wasn't as focused on trying to get him to succeed." However, Sandra's son faces the same dilemma as many first-generation students face. Of my eight participants, seven had changed majors at least once. Two had still not committed to a major. I expected my older participants to be undecided, at least for a while, because they had never planned on going to college. However, I was

surprised to hear that my younger participants had similar problems deciding upon a major despite growing up knowing that they would one day go to college.

My participants' stories clearly document the shift in attitude toward education that has occurred in the South over the past thirty years, but their stories also reveal that other problems faced by first-generation students have yet to be resolved. Their stories also provide tentative answers to my research questions. Learning plays an increasingly important role in the lives of first-generation Georgia Southern students from rural, working class communities in southeast Georgia today. More first-generation students are being raised with the expectation that they will go to college and that they need to go to college to be successful. Yet few of my younger participants could articulate how a college degree would change their lives except that they would not have to work as hard or struggle as much as their parents. The most significant insight offered by my participants' stories, however, is that gaining admission to college is only the first hurdle that first-generation students must overcome.

#### Mending Their Ways

While my participants may be "in high cotton," their stories reveal that getting into college alone has not been enough to make a smooth transition from rural, working-class life to academic excellence. Despite their academic struggles, almost all have called upon their southern, working-class work ethic to pull them through. From Kimberly's acknowledging that she "just has to focus" to Dusty's determination to "make up [his] mind to do it" to Melanie's commitment to "working and working and working" to achieve her goal, they persevere. In her 2006 dissertation, my friend and colleague



Kathy Albertson examined the “disconnect between the talent and potential of students and the difficulties in their adjusting to literacy expectations” and concluded that “perceptions on the part of students and teachers played a significant role in literacy practices—those accepted, adapted, and rejected” (p. 132). While her study focused on first-year students at Georgia Southern University in an effort to answer questions about “how students learn as well as how they adjust to college-level expectations,” she concentrated on students in the classroom, not on factors affecting these very same students outside of the classroom. Moreover, her study focused on students from throughout the state and the region and included students from various socio-economic classes and backgrounds. Her conclusion highlighted the fact that students’ literacy skills “take time to develop and never stop developing” (p. 134). My participants, however, have articulated factors affecting their success that go much deeper than developing literacy, problems that are not necessarily being addressed by the university on a uniform basis to all students.

According to the Grant Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship, a two-year study conducted in the mid-1980’s of 16-24 year olds, “As young Americans navigate the passage from youth to adulthood, far too many flounder and ultimately fail in their efforts. Although rich in material resources, our society seems unable to ensure that all of our youth will mature into young men and women able to face their futures with a sense of confidence and security.” The study claimed that failure is “especially true of the 20 million non-college-bound young people” who become the newest generation of working class in America. My study, however, has revealed that a similar end may come

to many first-generation students from working-class families who do make it into college, but not because they are not capable of handling college-level work. My participants have shown that they have both the literacy skills and the commitment to attain the elusive college degree and the key to a middle-class life. But they cannot achieve that end until other needs are acknowledged and met in more meaningful ways. In Lives on the boundary, Mike Rose (1989) laments, “Research universities are awful places for freshmen to be adrift, to be searching, to be in need” (p. 204). I would argue that the same holds true for first-generation students at Georgia Southern. Most of my participants have changed majors at least once; all have taken at least one semester off from classes for various reasons; all have withdrawn from classes and a few have failed classes instead of withdrawing. Almost all depended on financial aid, but they also found that financial aid erected additional hurdles in academic progress and GPA expectations. In most cases, financial aid and program expectations tied students to a rigorous 4-year graduation pace, leading to their feeling overwhelmed by the load and unsure of their ability to learn what they needed to know. These factors indicate that Georgia Southern must do more to help first-generation students if they are to succeed.

## CHAPTER SIX: “CAN’T SEE THE FOREST FOR THE TREES”

When I designed my study, I used three key questions to guide me: What role does learning play in the lives of first-generation Georgia Southern students from rural, working-class communities in southeast Georgia, including home, school, work and community? What impact does having attended Georgia Southern have on first-generation students’ professions or jobs? What advantages and/or disadvantages do first-generation college students recognize as a result of attending Georgia Southern, and how might teachers of first-year composition build upon them? In this chapter, I come full circle, beginning with a brief look at my experiences teaching students from rural, working-class families in Georgia for the past twenty years and the political changes that have opened the doors of Georgia Southern to more of these students. I then use my participants’ stories to provide answers to my research questions and use those answers to draw conclusions and make implications as to how teachers in first-year writing and first-year experience courses might better help our first generation students. I end the chapter with a final reflection on what this study has meant to me and my research participants.

### Reminiscing

When I first began teaching in southeast Georgia in 1986, few opportunities beyond high school graduation existed for my students from working-class families, despite their being good students fully capable of working on a college level. Their socio-economic status simply did not give them access to the academy. At that time, Ronald Reagan was President, and during his administration, “federal funding for

education [. . .] decline[d] 21 percent,” virtually shutting the door on the political changes in the education system in the South that had guaranteed me financial assistance when I had begun college ten years earlier. By the time Reagan left office, however, new political changes were underway, once again unbolting the doors for black and white working-class students in the southern United States to receive financial assistance to attend college. But the door has opened slowly. In fact, “Miles to Go” (1998), a message from the Southern Education Foundation, emphasized that “closing the gap in educational achievement by race and income in the Southern states had been a far too slow and arduous process,” leading the US Congress to reauthorize the Higher Education Act of the 1970s and make more financial aid opportunities available to students from the rural, working class South. In addition, in 1993 under the leadership of then Governor Zell Miller, Georgia started a state-funded education lottery, ensuring that every student graduating from a Georgia high school with a B average would have the money for tuition and fees at state colleges and universities.

Despite the political maneuverings opening and closing the door to higher education for students in the state, other changes in this area of the country have made college not only a possibility but also a necessity if our young people hope of moving out of the working class. Many of the industries which used unskilled or semi-skilled labor have closed their doors. The new industries that have moved into the area require increased literacy and technical skills for even entry-level positions. For the students wanting better than entry-level employment, a college degree has become a must. As earlier studies have shown “[l]iteracy [. . .] is a valued commodity in this economy, a key

resource in gaining profit and edge” (Brandt, 1998, p. 558). Heath (1983), along with Stuckey (1991) and Collins and Blot (2003), also argued that schools play a significant role in shaping identity and determining the value of literacy for a given generation:

The school is not a neutral objective arena; it is an institution which has the goal of changing people’s values, skills, and knowledge bases [. . .] Their socially determined habits and values have created for them an ideology in which all that they do makes sense of their current identity and their preparation for the achievements which will frame their future. (Heath, 1983, pp. 367-368)

Heath’s argument that “the wherewithal of everyday practice—habits and identities, values and meanings, inculcated senses of power or powerlessness—interact with schooled expectations to promote one social class and demote others” (108) supports my attempt to better understand the challenges first-generation students face as they attempt to attain a college degree, move beyond the working class, and discover the “habits and values” that play a key role in their success. As an assistant professor with a voice in academic affairs at Georgia Southern, I have the opportunity through this study to “point out [the] limitations” and “criticize the weaknesses” of the university in an effort to help us better meet the needs of our first-generation students who come to us believing in what we have to offer (Urban, 1999, p. 234).

#### Looking For and Beyond the Cultural Traditions

My participants all came to Georgia Southern with the idea that their willingness to work hard would help them succeed and that if they studied hard enough, they would learn what they need to know. But as my participants’ stories reveal, their university

experience has challenged their idea of themselves and their preparation for higher learning. They have worked hard, but they have not always succeeded: They have withdrawn from and/or failed classes, changed their majors, and taken semesters off. None had graduated or cleared to graduate at the time of our interviews. Several expressed concern that becoming educated might threaten their cultural ties or relationships with the very people who have encouraged their educational success. To that end, they have supported Tokarczyk and Fay's (1993) claim that "invent[ing] an idea of one's self [. . .] is a difficult task that can prove insurmountable" (p. 9). But all of my participants continue or plan to work toward their degrees despite the challenges they face.

According to Tokarczyk and Fay (1993), middle-class families have learned how to work and succeed within America's class structure, including the schools, largely because their parents and siblings have paved the way for their success. However, "the working class, in contrast, often have no academic role models in their backgrounds. To have to invent an idea of one's self [. . .] is a difficult task that can prove insurmountable for both men and women" (p. 9), whether white or black in southern culture. Despite the quarter century that has passed since Heath conducted her study, the differences described among Heath's Roadville, Trackton and Townspeople remain in play for first-generation college students from working-class families at Georgia Southern today. Tokarczyk and Fay (1993) contended that, "our classrooms and faculty meetings resound with middle-class ideologies that work to cover up, even as they produce, the tensions that undermine our vocational efficacy" (p. 15); therefore, a closer look at working-class

principles—work hard and succeed; study hard and learn well; don't quit—has provided some insight into the difficulties first-generation college students from working-class families face and offered answers to my research questions.

**Question: What role does learning play in the lives of first-generation Georgia Southern students from rural, working-class communities in southeast Georgia, including home, school, work and community?**

For first-generation Georgia Students from rural, working-class families today, education plays a more significant role than it has played in the lives of earlier generations. Today students are encouraged at home to succeed in school so that they can become more successful in life. My study, beginning with my grandmother's journals which described her children's successes in school, moving to my own story and experiences in learning, and culminating with my participants' stories, chronicles the role that learning has played in the lives of students from rural, southeast Georgia over the past few decades. When my grandmother raised her children, she encouraged them in their learning, doing all she could to insure that they could achieve more than her own eighth-grade education. But throughout her journals, she makes no mention of wanting significantly more for them than a high school education. But something inside of her knew that education could make a difference in their lives. In fact, she believed it could make a difference in her own life as well, leading her to complete her GED in 1969 and look forward to attending college: *Dec. 31, 1969 Am ending the most miserable year in my 54 years. Nothing seems real. Hope when I start school Jan. 26, 1970 I'll find myself.* While my grandmother's hopes for a higher education did not work out, her

sense that education could make a difference has obviously been shared and nurtured in the working-class South since the mid-twentieth century.

All my participants recall being good students in school even though my older participants were not necessarily encouraged to do so. My older participants' lives seem most comparable to the lives my first-generation parents faced when they returned to college in the 1960's and 1970's. My parents first attended college in the 1950's; in fact, they met during their first year. But they, like my older participants, floundered at first. They dropped out, got married, and began raising a family before deciding that they wanted more for themselves. Returning to school while raising three young children was not an easy decision for them, and the sacrifices they made were significant. However, they both eventually graduated—my father in 1969 and my mother in 1972. Likewise, two of my three older participants first entered college right after high school but dropped out before graduating. My third older participant knew that she wanted to attend college, but decided to attend vocational school instead, feeling that she could then work as an LPN when she eventually came to college to earn her RN degree. Those first experiences did not work out for any of them.

Interestingly, all three older participants talked about school and their parents' attitudes toward school in similar ways. As they were growing up, the older participants were sent to school to learn and were expected to do their best, but they were not rewarded in any significant way when they did well. They also acknowledge school as something that was removed from everyday life in the home and the family. It was a place they went and something they did, much as their parents went to work and did their



jobs. My older participants also recall little significant encouragement when they first made the decision to go to college. While their parents supported their decision, they would have supported their other options equally. But all three describe going to college as something they have always wanted for themselves, an inherent desire that they have nurtured despite their first-generation status. The journey toward a degree has been long and arduous for all three.

Drew feels that his mother's "We hope you can do it" attitude gave him permission to go to college but also cloaked the fact that she did not really understand or value what he was doing. Those underlying feelings, Drew believes, contributed to the insecurities and lack of confidence he felt during his first few years as a college student. Sandra acknowledges that her parents wanted her to go to school, but she also adds that they did not do anything to prepare her for that experience, largely because they did not know how. Her early pregnancy prevented her from coming to college immediately after high school, but Sandra acknowledges that earning a college degree is something that she has always wanted for herself. Being older when she had her first opportunity to attend college, Sandra was more quickly able to overcome her initial feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, and she did extremely well for the two years she attended. Bettye's dreams of earning a college degree were also compromised by an early pregnancy, but like Sandra and Drew, she also describes a college education as something that she has always wanted for herself. But Bettye was the first to articulate a feeling expressed by all of my younger participants: She did not want to have to work as hard as she saw her parents having to work. For Bettye, education seemed to be the only way out of working

class. Both Sandra and Bettye have children about the same ages as my younger participants, and, as parents, they have participated in a paradigm shift in learning and the importance of education in the South. They have instilled the goal of a college education in their children from the time they were born, even though they have not been able to earn a degree for themselves. So unlike their parents, who did not really understand college or the difference a degree can make in their lives, Sandra and Bettye have done all that they can possibly do to teach their children the value of education.

The stories Sandra and Betty told about teaching their children to value education mirrored those of my younger participants who grew up in households where parents, particularly mothers, valued education. My younger participants have had college as a goal from as early as they can remember and most recall liking school and being good students. The only exceptions among the younger generation are Cindy and Justin, who have characteristics similar to my older participants, despite my initially categorizing them as younger participants. However, I feel that they are not so much an anomaly as they are a testament to Sowell's (2005) theory that "Any broad-brush discussion of cultural patterns" must acknowledge "changes over time" and "cross-currents at a given time" (p. 13). So while Cindy and Justin did not grow up knowing that they would go to college, they are raising their own daughter with that goal, both in teaching her and showing pride in her accomplishments, playing the same role in her life that my younger participants' parents have played in theirs.

The other three younger participants have always been nurtured and encouraged by their parents, and all three were raised with the belief that a college degree would

move them into the middle-class and make their lives much easier than the lives their parents led. Kimberly, like Bettye, was raised to believe that, as a black woman, a college degree would give her the ability to take care of herself and take care of her family. Dusty, having been raised on a farm by parents who also had to work in jobs away from the farm, has always known that he would not farm when he grew up. Melanie and Kimberly also recall learning as something they had to do in their families, both telling stories of times they knew they would get into trouble for not doing well in school. Yet both recall the stories in a positive way, acknowledging that good teachers played an important role in helping them overcome their problems so that they could live up to their parents' expectations. These positive experiences, complemented by their love of learning, have led both to pursue degrees in education. Both Melanie and Kimberly express a desire to help other students in the way that teachers in their pasts helped them.

One particularly interesting difference between the home lives of my younger and older participants is the role that reading has played in the home. None of my older participants recall reading being valued in any real way. In fact, both Drew and Sandra recall World book encyclopedia as the main source of reading material when they were growing up. Sandra also recalls a book of bible stories. Bettye recalls a bible but mentions no other specific books in her home. In their homes, reading was used to achieve a specific end or accomplish a particular goal—learning practical information that they needed to succeed in school or learning about God. Although all three claim to have liked learning, and Drew and Sandra both recall being avid readers, books were not something that were valued beyond necessity, at least not in the day-to-day lives of their

working-class families. My younger participants, on the other hand, told stories of parents who have encouraged their success in school, and all remember reading as something valued within their homes and everyday lives. Kimberly, Melanie, and Dusty recall books and magazines as part of their lives growing up; Kimberly and Melanie also fondly recall summer trips to the library. All of my younger participants specifically mentioned books they have brought, authors they enjoy, or magazines they subscribe to on a regular basis. My participants' stories indicate that print has become a worthwhile investment in more rural homes today as reading and education have grown in value for working-class families in the rural South.

**Who or what influenced you the most in making the decision to attend college?**

While my three research questions did not focus on students' motivation to attend college, several of my interview questions led to interesting answers about who influenced my participants and how my participants now influence others. My interest lay in having recognized that my grandmother and her journals were instrumental in helping me find my focus for this dissertation and acknowledging her influence on my life throughout my school years. I wondered if my participants would acknowledge similar influences in their lives. My older participants told stories about encouraging their children and younger relatives to seek a college education, but they did not readily recall stories about people that had influenced them. My younger participants eagerly acknowledged the encouragement they received from their parents. Eventually, every participant told a story about someone who had been instrumental in nurturing their desire to earn a college degree. In every case, women have been the ones who have

influenced and inspired my participants in meaningful ways, even those who were not encouraged by their parents.

Drew did not recall either of his parents' influencing his learning life, but he did recall a fifth-grade teacher who encouraged him to find the "world out there," a pursuit that has kept him going for well over forty years. He recalled her reading aloud to his class every afternoon and leading him to discover Walt Whitman and a love of poetry. In turn, he discovered his own identity as a writer. Despite finding English "structured and punitive" as a major when he first began college, Martha Lou Roberts' influence enabled him to continue to nurture his love of reading and writing and to return to college over thirty years after dropping out the first time. Sandra, on the other hand, did not recall an inspiring teacher; in fact, her most vivid memory from elementary school was punitive, a time when she was accused of and censured for cheating. Fortunately, that incident did not keep her from working toward a college degree, a goal she had always wanted to achieve for herself. After enrolling in Georgia Southern, however, she was inspired by her non-traditional advisor. Sandra cited her advisor's story of completing her degree later in life as inspiring her to pursue a degree, despite being over forty years old when she first enrolled. But what was most revealing in my interview with Sandra was her stories of inspiring her own sons in pursuing their educations. Although Sandra felt that much of what she did to help her youngest son in college was "not letting him grow up," her efforts were well-intentioned. She wanted to help him in much the same way that her non-traditional advisor helped her so that his journey toward a degree would be easier. In addition, Sandra acknowledged that she had played a nurturing role with several first-

generation students in her college classes. Bettye also talked about the role she played in pushing her sons in school, making sure that they did well in school and reached their potential. Because of her efforts, her oldest son has embarked on his own college education. Their stories indicate that women play a key role in the lives of first-generation college students in the South.

My younger students told stories about their educational success to date, and they, too, identified women more than men. Even Justin, the one participant who had never thought of college for himself, especially after he dropped out of high school before returning for his GED, said he was influenced by his older sister and his wife Cindy, both of whom enrolled a few years after graduating from high school. Kimberly, Dusty, and Melanie, the three youngest and most traditional students at the time of my interviews, gave the most credit to their mothers. Kimberly went so far as to say that she “hope[s] to be half the woman” she perceives her mother to be, acknowledging the sacrifices her mother made to support her three daughters after her husband left the family and to help her daughters achieve their college educations. Dusty, the participant most reticent in talking about his background or his goals, gave inordinate credit to his mother, especially her taking on a second job outside of the farm to help him pay his way through college. Melanie, the only participant to mention both her mother and father as instrumental in her educational achievements, focused on the sacrifices her mother made to keep her in college, especially when her GPA fell below 3.0 and she lost HOPE.

So while either an internal desire or a need to achieve more and better than their parents before them has been the primary reason my participants have chosen to pursue a

degree, they have all been influenced by someone in a significant way in setting or achieving that goal. My younger participants cited mothers and family members as being most influential in their establishing educational goals. My older participants also acknowledged an influential person, but none acknowledged a parent. However, my older participants indicated that they have assumed a role of influence with their own children's lives. Even Drew, who does not have children of his own, admits to influencing his nieces, his sisters' children, as they have graduated high school and pursued college degrees.

**Question: What impact does having attended Georgia Southern have on first-generation students' professions or jobs?**

When asked how attending college has impacted their lives, none of my participants could provide concrete answers. Most responses were veiled clichés indicating future impacts, such as steady jobs and good benefits. Surprisingly few of my participants felt that a college degree would change their lives in significant ways. In her 2003 dissertation, Geraldine Mendoza Gutwein concluded that “realization is a form of liberation. Through their family support and beliefs in their achievements,” Gutwein claimed, her participants were “able to liberate themselves from the oppressive attitudes they encounter from the people within their own cultural group” (p. 140). My participants, for the most part, have not been able to move beyond their working-class ideologies, despite the support they have found from their families. Their liberation may be hindered by the fact that they have not yet graduated, but my study also reveals that their working-class attitudes also contribute to the obstacles that prevent their graduating.

Yet the significance of my study lies in my participants' perseverance despite having tangible rewards as part of their educational goals.

The struggle to move beyond his working-class roots has been most notable for Drew. From the time he began kindergarten and discovered his love of learning, Drew acknowledges feeling "behind and out of place," feelings that stayed with him through his first few years of college and eventually led to his withdrawing. The strong belief that he did not belong in college stayed with him despite his success as a writer in life beyond college. Even when he returned to Statesboro and began taking classes when he was fifty years old, Drew maintained that the feeling of "being alone and unguided ha[d] never left [him]." He admits that his own internal desire has kept him attending classes, but he no longer comes with the focus of attaining a degree. Today he comes because he genuinely loves writing and sharing his writing with others in his writing workshop classes. He also acknowledges earning the degree that has eluded him for so long will not make a significant difference in his life even though he is looking toward earning an MFA or MA after he graduates. The institution that once left him feeling so alone has now validated him as both a writer and a person. He of all my participants seems most content with his life and has finally found himself. His writing, whether it culminates in a degree or not, "is an intricate part" of whom he has become. He adds that writing is "not a hobby or avocation, but a part of the way he lives his life," something that a degree cannot change.

Sandra has not given up on her dream of attaining a college degree, but she also acknowledges that circumstances in her life have made her realize that the degree is not



as important as it once was. Today, she puts the needs of her quadriplegic son and her disabled husband above her own. She is also a realist, noting that a degree probably will not change her life or her status given her circumstances. She is rooted to Screven County and realizes that her options in a rural area are somewhat limited. She has decided that she will not major in nursing when and if she is able to return to school. Since so much of her day is already devoted to caring for her family, particularly her older son, she cannot imagine working in the medical field outside of her home. Her educational focus has shifted from being a means of moving up in socio-economic stability to something that she wants to accomplish for herself. At this time, she is considering changing her major to early childhood education or writing, majors that may help her find self-fulfillment. She feels that teaching and mentoring are ways that she can nurture others outside of the nursing field. In addition, a degree in one of those areas would allow her to get a better paying job in Screven County while also allowing her the time she needs to devote to her family. Bettye also has no plans to leave her rural Bulloch County home and sees herself starting her own business after she graduates. Her goal in starting that business is not to change the way that she lives her life but to help those around her improve theirs.

Studies have revealed that literacy expectations in college lead to new academic identities (Smith, 1994; Haswell, 1991; Gee, 1989), forcing students to leave old identities behind. My older participants all seem to have come to terms with their new identities, but their contentment comes more from their maturity than from their educational experiences. They are more content with the decisions they have made and

the progress they are making. My younger participants, with the exception of Kimberly, are still developing their identities and are still struggling to find their footing as they make their way through the academy. They are also unable to articulate how having a degree might impact their lives. For now, Cindy and Justin hope only to have more financial security so that they might provide a better living for their daughter than they had growing up. Dusty sees himself continuing to work in the construction area, fully realizing that reaping the benefits of that degree might move him out of the field and into an office, something that he does not look forward to. More importantly, he expects that a really good job in construction might mean his having to leave Bulloch County permanently or to be away from his home and his family for extended periods of time. Regardless, he feels that a degree is what he will need to insure that he and his future family do not have to work as hard or sacrifice as much as he has seen his parents and brothers do throughout their lives. Melanie also hopes to get a job teaching in southeast Georgia once she graduates. Like most of the others, she has no plans to leave the area, claiming that she cannot imagine life away from her family. She also predicts that her life will not change significantly once she graduates. A teaching job might increase her socio-economic status slightly, but the major advantage will be a sense of job security and job benefits that no one else in her family has had.

For now, Cindy, Justin, Dusty and Melanie have one foot in their past and another in their future. Hesitancy on their part has prevented them from moving fully forward, and this hesitancy is also slowing their progress. For now, they are more inclined to feel a sense of accomplishment in the effort they are putting into earning their degrees than in

moving forward more expeditiously. Perhaps their focusing on the moment better helps them when yet another hurdle—earning a low grade in a class, having to withdraw from a class, having to sit out a semester because they can not get the classes that they need or do not have the money to pay that semester’s tuition—delays their progress toward something that remains elusive at this point in their lives. Kimberly, the one exception among my younger participants, seems to have very definite ideas about her future and what a degree will mean to her. Perhaps because she is a step closer to graduating than any of my other younger participants, Kimberly knows for now that she wants to teach, preferably for Teach for America, and that she does not want to return to Wayne County. But Kimberly also acknowledges that she does not want to leave the South and she does not want to get too far away from her family, despite having significant concerns about her mother’s religion and the small town political attitudes she witnessed growing up. Kimberly sees hope in moving from a rural area to an urban area, a move that will allow her to stay in her southern “comfort zone” while also removing her from the aspects of her life that she has found most challenging while growing up and attending college.

Family ties seem to be the most important social and cultural implication in the lives of these participants as they reflect on their learning lives to date. With the exception of Drew, family has been the most important motivator for each of these participants. Sandra, Bettye, Justin, Cindy, Kimberly, Dusty, and Melanie all acknowledged the impact that their families, either children or parents, have had on their college careers to date. Although their families have encouraged the steps they have taken, family also holds them back in a significant way. Drew, the oldest and most

widely-traveled of the participants, is the one exception: his current success toward finally achieving his degree rests solely from a desire to please himself. Sandra cannot move forward because of her family and her need to put her family first. Bettye is moving forward, but her progress has become secondary to that of her son. Kimberly wants to move forward and is in fact close to attaining her degree, yet even her dreams for the future are tempered by her not wanting to go back to Wayne County but also not wanting to leave the South. Justin, Cindy, Melanie, and Dusty are more entrenched in their homes and their families than they realize; they want the degrees they are seeking but yet they fear the changes that may come once they earn those degrees. Family and culture, while advocating education in one sense, oppose it in another, especially when education means moving farther away, either psychologically or physically, from the very family and culture that has nurtured the desire for that education.

**What advantages and/or disadvantages do first-generation college students recognize as a result of attending Georgia Southern, and how might teachers of first-year composition build upon them?**

Four of my eight participants specifically cited their first-year writing teachers as positive influences, which helped make their transition from high school to college a bit easier. The small class sizes of 24 or fewer and interaction with other students helped these participants feel better about themselves as students and reinforced their drive to continue. Drew was the only participant who talked negatively about his freshman writing classes at Georgia Southern, but significant changes in teaching writing have occurred since he first enrolled in the mid-1970s. For the past fifteen years, I have taught

first-year composition and first-year experience classes at Georgia Southern. These classes are among those that all students take during their first semester of enrollment, giving teachers of first-year students the opportunity to help first-generation students with the challenges they face. While we will not be able to guarantee that they overcome all their hurdles or that they all eventually earn the elusive degree, by understanding their first-generation position, we can better help them meet those initial challenges and help them establish a firmer foundation on which to stand.

The uncertainty and feelings of being out of place or unprepared that my older participants described when they first began college were not shared by younger participants. They have had college in their plans for too long, and they entered the first-year classroom with more confidence in themselves and their abilities, a confidence that Drew envied when he talked about the younger students in his classes today. However, interviews with younger participants revealed that confidence is not always enough, and many first-generation students find that they are going to have to change in significant ways in order to be successful in college. My younger participants have found learning on the college level to be difficult and frustrating. Most have come to accept that a hard-earned C is a grade they can be proud of. Educating their parents that a C is acceptable has been another matter. One participant's father actually asked why the student was continuing in college if all he could make were C's. Therefore, my participants also have to accept that their families may not fully understand the "work" that they do in college, particularly when it challenges cultural beliefs. To that end, my younger participants have

found college an isolating experience, one that has begun to move them away from their parents and families.

Research has revealed that the first classes students take at college begin a change in thinking and learning, a change that continues to develop over time (Sommers & Saltz, 2004; Clinton, 2002; Baxter Magolda, 1999; Sternglass, 1997). All of my participants acknowledged that they have found college to be more difficult than they had imagined. While all of my younger participants are in good academic standing, they have found the 3.0 GPA required by HOPE to be beyond their grasp. In fact, only Kimberly had retained her HOPE scholarship at the time of our interview. Yet none had given up on college or their dream of earning a degree. In fact, the general attitude of all my younger participants was that they simply had to work harder and apply themselves more in order to do well in their classes. They all seemed willing to do whatever was necessary to earn passing grades. While they all aspired to have HOPE reinstated, they also acknowledged that their continuing was not dependent on HOPE. They were more interested in learning the material well than they were in earning a specific grade, but all were aware of our grading system and believed that a high GPA is better than are low GPA. My first-generation students were unable to articulate specific benefits of their education to date, and Justin, Cindy, and Melanie were particularly critical of the fact that their majors had clear expectations for how many classes they were to take and when they had to take them. All three said that they would rather take fewer classes so they could “really learn” the material, indicating that they believed every class should contribute meaningfully to their overall education.

First-year composition and first-year experience teachers should therefore act as liaisons between first-year students and administrators since we are the first ones to teach these students and our small class sizes allow for more interaction with students. Both courses curricula also allow for activities/assignments that could be used to help students express opinions and ideas which can then be shared with administrators through the First-Year Experience Task Force, the college curriculum committees, and other academic affairs committees. The classes also allow faculty to work more closely with students in setting reasonable academic goals, despite the university's push to have all students complete their degree requirements in four years. In the mean time, first-year faculty should advocate for additional studies of various populations of students to determine whether the frustrations my first-generation students expressed are common to other populations of students as well. If common results are found, then the university should shift its emphasis away from a four-year graduation track and acknowledge that, for many students, a slower pace yields better results.

#### Conclusions and Implications for Further Research

My conclusions center on my research questions and my goal to examine the role that education plays in the lives of first-generation students from rural, working-class families in the South today. Many of my participants' values and attitudes can be linked to the traditional values McWhiney (1988) described in Cracker Culture, particularly the notion of early southerners being content with what they had (p. 209). Not one of my participants talked about expecting great changes in his or her life after receiving a college degree. Most saw the degree more as a means of stability than as a move toward

prosperity. Only Kimberly saw education as a means of leaving the life she has always known, and even she was not willing to move too far. My other participants do not seem willing to move at all. In fact, Drew made the choice to “come home” after realizing that his roots run deep, despite the oppressive feeling he felt as a young man longing to get away. Although Dusty acknowledged that reaping the benefits of his degree may mean moving away from his home and his family, he clearly was not looking forward to the time when he might have to do so. So while early southern settlers “saw formal education as an insidious way to acculturate and enslave them” (McWhiney, 1988, p. 214), my participants have faced similar concerns in that education compromises their connections to some of their cultural beliefs, making them hesitant to place both feet firmly in the academy, especially during their first few semesters of enrollment. While McWhiney argued that “Historians, willing captives of their own educational biases, [. . .] rarely have recognized the significance of this acculturation process” (p. 215), I argue that other educators are equally guilty when we fail to acknowledge that first-generation students come with needs that may not be met with current policies and expectations.

My participants’ responses indicate that college professors too often assume that students simply want to absorb information and pass tests; my participants, on the other hand, desire to learn the material. When the pace set by the professor emphasized breadth rather than depth, my first-generation participants suffered. Their attitudes toward learning today counter those of previous generations, indicating that Southerners are valuing education in a way that previous generations did not. As my participants’ stories have revealed, reading and writing have only recently gained equal footing to



working or farming, activities which formerly contributed to one's livelihood. For generations, "The skills [Southerners] have admired most were those that allowed him to live in accord with yet also dominate his environment" (McWhiney, 1988, p. 216). In past generations, these skills have included tilling, cooking, hunting and fishing, and southerners believed that any job worth doing was worth doing well. Only in recent decades has education become a job worth doing, after having previously been among "things [that] threatened their culture" (McWhiney, 1988, p. 216). Therefore, when first-generation students enter the college classroom, their traditional values become a factor in their success. Many of the practices in place at Georgia Southern University work to first-generation students' disadvantage: Many programs have set course rotations, forcing students to take certain classes at given points in their academic careers and continuation often depends on students' following the sequence as it is laid out. In addition, financial aid programs require students to make "reasonable academic progress" by earning a prescribed number of hours each year. Such guidelines frustrate first-generation students who are not quite ready to maintain the pace the current system advocates. Additional studies at other universities in the region and in other areas of the country where large numbers of working-class families live need to be conducted to determine if these findings are indicative of an emerging pattern and growing need among first-generation students from working-class backgrounds.

This study indicates that Georgia Southern needs to do more to contribute to the success of the first-generation students that we serve. If we are to nurture these students in more meaningful ways, however, we must acknowledge and make allowances for the

culture that comes into the college classroom with them. Sandra and Drew best demonstrate the difference attitude can make in a first-generation college students' success. However, I must add that their change in attitude has not resulted from their conforming to the system or from the system's changing them. Their change in attitude has resulted from their own maturity and a more acute sense of who they are and what they want in life. Their experiences and maturity have contributed to their enculturation—their ability to blend their working-class beliefs with the expectations of higher education. For them, the pressure is off. However, the need to achieve remains strong for Kimberly, Justin, Cindy, Melanie, and Dusty. They have to work hard and do well, not only for themselves, but also for their families, the ones who have encouraged their move toward higher education even though their families may not fully understand or appreciate what that move entails. The pressure is often more than they can bear.

University professors, particularly those working with first-generation students in their first two years, can help ease the pressure once we acknowledge that cultural issues play into first-generation students' success. The first step is to acknowledge that “literacy sponsors affect literacy in two powerful ways[,] [helping] to organize and administer stratified systems of opportunity and access, and [raise] the literacy stakes in struggles for competitive advantage” (Brandt, 1998, p. 567) and to understand that sponsorship changes once students enroll in the university. The sponsorship that first-generation students enjoy before coming to college may not be enough to sustain them once they get to college. They have entered a new arena, one which their former sponsors neither know nor fully understand. Their sponsorship has carried them far and

provided them with the “I can do it” attitude that Drew envies, but that attitude is often tempered quite quickly as students come to realize that attitude alone will not be enough. Brandt (1998) added that certain populations may “have less consistent, less politically secure access to literacy sponsors—especially to the ones that can grease their way to academic and economic success” (p. 559), and I completely concur. In fact, I argue that most first-generation students in our classrooms have lost what sponsorship they previously enjoyed. Once they are in college, they must find new sponsorship if they are to make significant progress. First-year faculty need to be aware of this need and be willing to assist and encourage students accordingly.

Drew did not find a new sponsor when he first enrolled in college in the 1970s. Therefore, despite doing well during the time he was there, he left without graduating when faced with the crisis of his father’s death. However, when he returned to Georgia Southern years later, he found almost immediate sponsorship in one of his writing professors, a man who encouraged Drew both as a student and a writer. Sandra also found almost immediate sponsorship when she enrolled at Georgia Southern. Because of her non-traditional status, she received one-on-one academic counseling and advisement which provided for her specific needs. She was not only allowed to take fewer classes; she was encouraged to do so. Her advisor also helped her find ways to manage the academic and familial demands on her time. When her husband was injured during her last semester of enrollment, her non-traditional advisor intervened, and Sandra was allowed to take incompletes in her classes rather than withdraw from school completely. Given the time that she needed, Sandra was eventually able to complete those classes and

maintain her high GPA. Kimberly also found a sponsor early in her academic career through a faculty advisor to a minority student organization that Kimberly joined. When she changed her major, Kimberly found increased sponsorship when that same faculty member was appointed as her academic advisor. That these three students have the highest GPAs of all my participants and two are closer to graduating than the others defies coincidence. Instead, their success reinforces the importance of sponsorship, especially in first-generation college students from working-class families.

Given that working-class populations exist in all areas of the country, additional studies need to be conducted to determine how cultural attitudes and beliefs affect these students when they enter higher education, particularly when they are the first in their families to do so. While my study focuses on the rural South, additional research could help determine whether or not similar problems arise for first-generation students from other regions of the nation where large numbers of working-class families live.

Providing first-generation students from working-class backgrounds access to the academy alone does not assure success, especially if cultural beliefs conflict with the goals of higher education and the ideologies expressed in college classrooms. Future studies need to further our understanding of how working-class values affect success if we as teachers are going to do more to help our students succeed. As compositionists' working with many students from the working class in their first semesters of college, we must initiate the research and begin developing effective methods for not only developing students' literacy skills but also encouraging the enculturation of first-generation students from working-class lives into the academy.

## Implications for Teaching and Learning

Bloom (1996) argued that freshman composition exists in college curricula as a token to middle-class values. According to Bloom, middle-class qualities, namely self-reliance, industriousness, responsibility, moderation, reasonableness, are assumed requirements for academic success, and first-year writing teachers are responsible for ensuring that students attain these qualities so that they can succeed in the academic community. However, many of my participants' comments indicate that they have not yet internalized these qualities, suggesting that first-year writing teachers may need to do more to evaluate the impact of class ideologies on learning and to define values in the classroom. My working-class participants are self-reliant; they are industrious; they are responsible. However, they are also reliant on their families for having supported their educational goals; they work hard, but their idea of work embraces more than academic accomplishments. They are responsible, but their responsibilities are often far broader than those of their middle-class peers. Therefore, first-generation students need opportunities to explore the ideologies of their class and their culture, especially their ideologies' impact on success in the academy. Otherwise, dominant, middle-class values go unchallenged as the social norm, and working-class students are left feeling inadequate simply because their social realities give added definition to the same values their middle-class peers respect.

Writing assignments in the first-year classrooms need to offer all students opportunities to explore social class and the impact class values have on students and learning. As this study reveals, first-generation students from working-class

backgrounds—particularly in the rural South—are raised to believe that hard work is all that they need to be successful. As a result, first-generation students suffer when hard work alone does not translate into their idea of academic success. The first-year writing classroom provides the perfect opportunity to bring working-class and middle-class students together so that they can learn about the power of class and develop a better awareness of themselves and their own class assumptions. Rather than assuming that all students have middle-class values because they are in our academic classes, first-year writing teachers need to use writing as a way for students of all classes to establish connections with each other and each other's beliefs. Introducing students to social class theories in college writing classrooms allows students opportunities to re-think experiences and to discover more about themselves as learners and thinkers; in turn, teachers can learn more about how social class impacts students and suggest policies that will enable more students from all classes to succeed.

All incoming freshmen at Georgia Southern University are guaranteed a seat in first-year writing and first-year experience classes. In addition, enrollment in these classes is limited to 24, and many specially focused sections are kept even lower. In many cases, these classes are the only ones where teachers know the students by name. Therein, first-year teachers are better poised to recognize and meet the needs of our students, particularly first-generation students who are navigating new waters. This study has offered insight into specific ways that social class influences first-generation students from rural, working-class families in the South. Increasing that understanding is important because most first-year curricula require composition classes, and composition

teachers are among the first faculty to help students practice or learn literacy strategies necessary to succeed in the academy. In the process, first-year writing teachers have the ability to ease first-generation students' transition into the academic community. To that end, I offer several observations to help us help think about our pedagogies and develop writing opportunities that will enhance our students' and our own understanding of what it is like to grow up working class.

First, the confidence so many first-generation students exhibit today does not translate into an easier academic career. Despite their having been encouraged to attend college for most of their learning lives and despite their verbalizing more self-confidence than the generation that preceded them, my younger participants are demonstrating a pattern of behavior quite similar to my older participants when they first enrolled in college. While none of the younger group has withdrawn for long periods of time as did Drew and Bettye, they are withdrawing from classes on a regular basis and taking more frequent, shorter periods of time off from classes. And although my younger participants have not expressed the self-doubt that my older participants recall feeling when they began college so many years ago, their records indicate that they experience similar doubts while in college but are less likely to give into those moments, knowing that doing so might invalidate the sacrifices that their parents have made to get them to college in the first place. In other words, they would be disappointing their mothers, fathers, and siblings in the process. Therefore, my younger participants are less likely to give up on a class or give up on themselves, even though they may have to withdraw from the course

for that semester, and resolve to apply themselves more and work harder when they take the class again.

Second, early sponsorship is key to first-generation students' overall academic success. Every single one of my younger participants expressed disappointment in classes or grades that they had earned to date; however, they also felt that by working harder, applying themselves more the next time, they could be successful in both the class and in college. So even though their parents' sponsorship ended at the college admissions process for these young people, their parents' working-class influence continues to sustain them in their pursuit of their college degrees. Therein I share their confidence that the majority of my younger participants will eventually earn their degrees. But I also acknowledge the role that sponsorship can play in their success and will look for ways to provide them that sponsorship. Since I teach first-year writing and first-year experience classes and coordinate academic advisement for our writing major, I am in a position to work with students in forming potential sponsorship connections. As coordinator of my college's undergraduate research office, I will encourage my colleagues to do the same by acting as mentors for our students' research initiatives.

Third, first-generation students from working-class families in southeast Georgia are working at a disadvantage as they enter college for the first time. Despite the fact that they come into the university with high school GPAs and SAT scores that indicate success, they lack the experience or competence to navigate seamlessly through the system. Georgia Southern has acknowledged the needs of certain marginalized groups on campus, namely non-traditional students, disabled students, and poor, mostly black



students who have qualified for Upward Bound and other university programs for students from underprivileged backgrounds. Unfortunately, the underprivileged status that gains so many students the support they need is based solely on financial need, and many first-generation students do not qualify. Yet my participants' stories reveal that first-generation, working-class students have other significant needs—the need for better academic counseling; the opportunity to take fewer classes and make slower progress, despite SACS and financial guidelines establishing reasonable academic progress; the opportunity to talk about the psychological impact earning a degree might have as it pulls them away from their families and their cultures.

Therefore, acknowledging diversity among student populations must also include recognizing first-generation and working-class statuses of students. These students have worked hard to get into college; their families have often sacrificed as well. And these students are proud of both their accomplishments and their culture. First-year writing and first-year experience teachers must be aware of these students' connections with their culture and create assignments that allow students to think about their futures in terms of their pasts. These students are coming to us as writers and as readers and as individuals committed to learning. Perhaps the first place for these students to face their fears and expectations about college is in the first-year classroom, particularly classes where student-to-teacher ratios are small and self-expression can be nurtured through reading, writing, and talking. However, first-year faculty should also petition administration to acknowledge the role that class plays in student success. As Lubrano (2004) argued, “[U]niversities have been always in the politics of self-awareness, teaching the Holy

Trinity of Identity—race, gender, and class. While race and gender have had their decades in the sun, however, class has been obscured and overlooked” (p. 4). In my roles as academic advisor and faculty senator, I will challenge Georgia Southern University to give class the same consideration it currently offers other identities through such programs as Women and Gender Studies and African-American Studies.

Immediate moves to serve first-generation students can be implemented better on a smaller scale. Those of us who teach first-year classes, particular first-year writing and first-year experience classes where student-teacher ratios are small, should look for reading, writing, and learning opportunities to help students acknowledge their fears or uncertainties and develop skills that will better help them face the educational challenges that will come their way over the next few years. Teachers should also acknowledge that confidence in one’s ability can be both empowering but might also mask hidden fears about one’s ability. As my younger participants’ stories revealed, they are not only working to achieve their own goals, they are also working to achieve their parents’ goals for them. While my younger participants were less likely to hone in on the underlying pressure, Kimberly admitted that she wants to be strong like her mother and achieve where her two sisters have failed. Melanie talked about her father’s always asking her how she’s doing in school and telling her how proud he is. The constant need to prove themselves academically and live up to their parents’ expectations must be more difficult than they acknowledge or we can imagine. Interviews with my older participants revealed how parents can affect subtle pressure without ill intentions. Sandra talked about “helping” her youngest son get into college and find the classes that he needed, but

also admitted that by doing so she was “not letting him grow up.” Bettye revealed how she “pushes” her sons to do well in school. As educators who readily acknowledge the challenges that face most first-year students, we should also be aware of the hidden challenges that first-generation students face when they are working as hard to please their parents as they are to achieve for themselves. Our first-year classes should include pedagogically sound ways for students to acknowledge and perhaps overcome these hidden challenges through reading and writing.

#### Limitations of the Study

Through my study, I have found more indicators than specific answers to my research questions. To that end, my research has obvious limitations. In reviewing my initial pool of participants and selecting eight for in-depth study, I had to decide whether to select a diverse group, representing various ages and sexes, or to select a less varied group, giving more insight into a particular sex, age group, or race. I opted for the more diverse group, which ultimately led to some interesting findings, findings that indicate the need for further study among more focused groups of first-generation college students. A detailed study of any one group—younger white females, younger black females, older white males, older white females, etc.—might lead to more specific answers regarding a particular group’s life and learning experiences and provide a more detailed picture of life and learning for a particular gender or generation. Because none of my participants had yet graduated at the time I interviewed and observed them and most are still young, I felt that my second research question— What impact does having attended Georgia Southern have on first-generation students’ professions or jobs?—

yielded rather weak findings because most of my participants have not yet begun their professions. Only Drew spoke of himself in terms of a profession; he was a writer. The others had jobs, not careers. Most had started those jobs about the same time they started college. None planned to continue working in their current job after graduation. Therefore, I should have adapted the question to better account for pre-profession status of most of my research participants.

### Final Reflections

When I travel the back roads of rural, southeast Georgia, I cannot help but think of stories Flannery O'Connor penned over half a century ago, stories that unfold on dirt roads framed by small, clapboard houses. In many cases, the scenes she described then still exist today; however, many scenes have changed as I drive on paved roads framed by large, newly constructed brick homes. One O'Connor (1962) essay stands out most in my mind:

The anguish that most of us [Southerners] have observed for some time now has been caused not by the fact that the South is alienated from the rest of the country, but by the fact that it is not alienated enough, that every day we are getting more and more like the rest of the country, that we are being forced out not only of our many sins, but of our few virtues. ("The fiction writer and his country," pp. 28-29)

Juxtaposing the scenes of the past with the scenes of the present provides a snap-shot of the many changes that have occurred in the South over the past fifty years. Flannery O'Connor also believed that the "country that the writer is concerned with in the most

objective way [is] of course, the region that most immediately surrounds him, or simply the country, with its body of manners, that he knows well enough to employ” (p. 28). When I stumbled upon my grandmother’s journals over twelve years ago, O’Connor’s words rang most true. My grandmother was a writer, one who found a need to record the events of her life in her journals. Yet within her journal entries, she captured so much more; she captured a way of life that was beginning a slow, arduous process of transition even during her lifetime. Her share-cropping, mill-working life was dying out as small farms began to grow into large businesses as a result of mechanization, and garment factories were forced to pay a decent, working wage, leading to increased costs and a need to search, once again, for cheaper labor.

The change in the South did not happen quickly; in fact, the change was subtle and slow, almost unnoticeable to its inhabitants. Change continues today. Yet I had never reflected on change until I came upon my grandmother’s journals after her death. Only then did I begin to reflect on my life and the many changes that had occurred in my family’s way of live over the years. When I began writing this dissertation, I drew on my concern for a place and a people that I know intimately, a place that continues to change faster than most of us want or like, but with a force that none of us can control. My concern led me to want to know more about others who saw education as means to move easily into a different socio-economic class and how such a move might impact their lives. My research questions, I hoped, would provide insight so that first-year writing teachers can better help first-generation students from working-class families who make their way into higher education.

I know that I have gained insight that will help me work with first-generation students more effectively and to find more pedagogically effective ways to validate my students' heritage. My participants' stories indicate that they have been silenced by English or writing teachers at points in their pasts, and even though only one participant told a similar story about being silenced as a writer/student in college, none told stories which indicated that their college experiences in their first two years had helped heal their wounds. Yet Kimberly and Drew both acknowledged that they had found validation through their writing at later points in their academic careers, experiences which indicate that those who teach first-year composition have the capability of helping students heal. Hearing my participants' stories, especially the stories of those who have found literacy sponsors in the university, has humanized me and made me think more seriously about my role as advisor and first-year writing teacher. I have also become a literacy sponsor and academic sponsor for Drew. Despite his maturity and academic success, he has continued to face barriers. And while I have not been able to eliminate those barriers, I have been able to listen to him and to help him find ways to overcome the barriers. As a result, he should complete his degree requirements this summer. Therefore, the most significant finding in terms of my original research questions relates to "What advantages and/or disadvantages do first-generation college students recognize as a result of attending Georgia Southern, and how might teachers of first-year composition build upon them?" Sponsorship is critical to the success of first-generation students' success, and compositionists have the power to help first-generation students acknowledge this need

and, in some cases, to provide access. I challenge my colleagues to validate their students' heritage and help their students find the sponsors they need.

I did not find concrete answers to my other research questions, perhaps because my participants are still in transition, pursuing educations that may help them in their quest for middle class and all that a rise in class may signify. I guess in some way, I too still have a "long row to hoe." Perhaps the field of Composition Studies has a long row to hoe as well. Therefore, I conclude with an overview of southern life—the love of family, the belief that hard work will get one through, the idea that education is the key to success—that might help those of us who teach these first-generation students from working-class families as they enter the university and our classrooms for the first time.

My final thoughts begin with the family and the proverb that one's moving away—physically or intellectually—from family is to have "gone back on your raising." I begin with this adage because it most clearly shows the strange irony that both leads first generation students to campus and simultaneously pulls them away from the changes they need to make to fully realize a position in the middle class. What I have found in my participants' stories ties into Freire's (1997) theory of freedom from oppression:

The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility. Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an idea, which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest of human completion. (p. 29)

The oppressors for many first-generation students from working-class families in southeast Georgia as they enter college for the first time are the very families they love most. For my older participants, the role of the family as oppressor was most evident. Making the decision to go to college was clearly a step beyond what their families knew or understood. The conflict was most clear between Drew and his grandmother, a woman who felt that college would corrupt him and lead him away from his Southern Baptist upbringing. Nevertheless, Drew's parents gave him the permission that he needed to begin his quest, even though they had no idea how to support him in that quest. Likewise, Bettye had her mother's permission. But like Drew, she did not feel that she had what she needed to attain a goal so different from the goals of her parents. Both Drew and Bettye found their first experiences in college challenging. Even though they had both been good students in high school and had always dreamed of earning a college degree, they found college to be different, a place where they felt unable to compete, despite earning respectable grades. For them, permission to try did not give them enough freedom to succeed. Both found that they needed more.

After withdrawing from the first experience and moving on with their lives, they both managed to find their way back. In Drew's case, his father died and he spent years moving around the country in an attempt "to find himself." He eventually did find himself, but only after he returned home to the very family he had left behind. Bettye's move away from her need for family support was not physical, but it has been significant nevertheless. In Bettye's case, she had to see the necessity in making the move, a fact that she saw most clearly when she had children of her own and began wanting more for



them. In that respect, she became a sponsor for her sons' education and recommitted herself to earning her own college degree. But she still feels a strong bond with her mother and siblings, which has led Bettye to encourage her mother to pursue a GED and to change her major to finance, a major she can use to help those around her. Rather than give into the oppression that threatened her, Bettye has taken the initiative to not only improve herself but to also encourage those around her.

In their struggle to overcome their own oppression and to find self-worth, Sandra and Bettye highlight the pivotal generation, the ones who reflect Sowell's (2005) "cross-currents at a given time" (p. 13). While they, along with Drew, had to find literacy sponsorship outside of their families, Sandra and Bettye have become literacy sponsors for their own children. Having a sponsor within the family rather than outside of the family has led to a stronger sense of self and purpose among my younger participants, most of whom have found sponsorship within their own families, particularly their mothers, reinforcing Brandt's (1998) theory that literacy sponsors are necessary for success. My younger participants have not had to seek permission to go to college after graduating from high school; they have had that permission all along. Their families have done all that they can to make sure that they could easily move into college. Once in college, they are working to achieve both their own educational goals and the goals their parents have for them. Yet their parents' sponsorship is not enough to sustain them once they move into the college arena. Therefore, their families move from being sponsors to being oppressors in a very real way in that first-generation students achieve as much for their parents as they do for themselves.

Perhaps a subconscious resistance to moving away from the ones who have given them so much has led to my younger participants not recognizing or accepting the need for new sponsorship. When I look at the three participants who have been most successful, at least in terms of GPA, I see Drew, Sandra, and Kimberly. All three have found support from someone within the university, someone who has helped them succeed while simultaneously validating who they are: Drew's faculty mentor in the Writing Department who has helped Drew accept his past as part of who he has become; Sandra's academic advisor, once a non-traditional student herself, who specializes in working with mature students; and Kimberly's minority-student organization faculty sponsor, a black woman who was herself a first-generation student from a rural, working-class family. Their success in college indicates that first-generation students need sponsorship beyond the admissions door; they need people who can help them negotiate the system and feel as though they belong, but they also need sponsors who understand them in very meaningful ways.

Pratt (1991) proposed that the university is a contact zone, a place "where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power [. . .]" (p. 34). As educators, we have to acknowledge that first-generation students are not only moving toward college degrees; they may also be moving away from their families and their cultures, intensifying the "contact zone" Pratt described and isolating them in a more significant way than students who come from families with previous experience in academia. To that end, acknowledging the needs of first-generation students from working-class backgrounds in the South in this dissertation

has been a step forward, hopefully a step that will lead to changes that will help move first-generation students closer to their degrees and the opportunity to move toward middle class lives.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Tentative Interview Questions

##### General Questions:

1. What schools did you attend?
2. How long did you attend Georgia Southern University?
3. Who or what played a role in your decision to attend college?
4. Who or what played a role in your decision to stop attending college?
5. What jobs did you hold prior to attending college? What jobs have you held since attending college? What is your current job or occupation?
6. In what ways do you use reading and writing in your work?
7. What were your parents' levels of education? What were your parents' jobs or careers?
8. What were your parents' attitudes toward learning and education?
9. Can you tell me a story about school or learning that you remember from your childhood?
10. Do you now or have you ever kept a journal about your daily life? What might a typical entry in your journal say?
11. Do you consider yourself a reader? What kind of reading do you do?
12. Do you consider yourself a writer? What kind of writing do you do?

##### Questions relating specifically to learning in everyday life:

1. What role does reading and writing play in your current life?

2. How do you use reading and writing at home, at work, or in your community?
3. What value has education had in your life to date?
4. What value will education have in the lives of your children?
5. What are your children's attitudes toward reading, writing, and school?
6. What school experiences did you have that have had an impact on your attitude toward learning?
7. How did your learning experiences in college differ from your learning experiences in public school?
8. What do you tell your children about education and learning? In what ways are your children's education and learning experiences similar or different than yours?
9. How are your opinions about learning and education different than your parents'?
10. Has being a mother had an impact on your ideas about education and learning?

Questions relating to class status and education:

1. If someone asked you to define your social class, how would you respond? How would your parents have responded?
2. Has there been a time when you felt as though your class helped you or hindered you in terms of your learning or education?
3. Has there been a time when you felt as though you have succeeded in terms of your learning or education? Can you tell me about those times?
4. Do you believe that living in the rural South has had an impact on your education and learning? In what ways?

5. What impact did the people you went to school with have on your own education?
6. Do you believe your class status had anything to do with how you were perceived as a student in public school? In college? Do you think your gender had anything to do with how you were perceived as a student?

## Appendix B

### Informed Consent Form

Life and Learning for Working-Class Women in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Rural South

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study for my doctoral dissertation, a requirement for the Ph. D. program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. The following information will help you decide whether or not you would like to participate. If you have questions, please feel free to ask them.

The purpose of this study is to examine the attitudes toward learning and education of first-generation college students from rural, working-class families in Georgia today. I will use narrative to tell the life stories of my participants in order to better understand what their stories reveal about their learning at home, school, work, and in the community in the rural South today. I am particularly interested in the themes that relate to social class and the everyday lives of my participants.

Participants in the study will be asked to participate in an initial interview session in which they will be asked questions about their educational background, their educational level, current jobs or occupations, family background, and cultural attitudes toward education and learning. After the initial interview, I will select five to eight people from a pool of twenty to participate in two further in-depth interview sessions and observations. As a case-study participant, the people I choose will be interviewed at home, at work, or in the community so that I might consider how learning and attitudes toward education affect them in real life. I will tape record the interviews and take detailed notes of each observation.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose to not participate further at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with me or people we know. If you decide not to participate, all data that I have collected from you will be destroyed and not used in my final dissertation should you request. If you choose to participate, your identity will be protected by providing anonymity. Your name will not be used in the findings; together, we will decide upon a pseudonym to be used in my telling about you and your experiences. I will do my best to omit all identifying information in the report of my findings. The findings of my study will be published as a dissertation in fulfillment for the Ph. D. in English at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. In addition, the information obtained may be published in scholarly journals and book publications. Your identity will remain anonymous in all work resulting from the study. Three years after the study is completed, all information gathered will be destroyed.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign the attached statement and return it to me in the envelope provided. Keep the extra unsigned copy. If you choose not to participate, please return the unsigned copies in the envelope provided.

Researcher: Ellen H. Hendrix  
510 J. A. Hart Road  
Statesboro, GA 30461

This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania and the Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Boards for the Protection of Human Subjects.



Informed Consent Form

(Continued)

**Voluntary Consent Form**

I have read and understand the information on the form, and I consent to volunteer to be a participant in this study. I understand that my responses will remain anonymous and that I have the right to withdraw at any time. I have received an unsigned copy of the Informed Consent Form to keep in my possession.

Name (Please Print) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number or location where you can be reached \_\_\_\_\_

Email address (if available) \_\_\_\_\_

Best days and times to reach you \_\_\_\_\_

I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits, and possible risks associated with participating in the research study. I have also answered any questions that have been raised and have witnessed the above signature.

Date \_\_\_\_\_

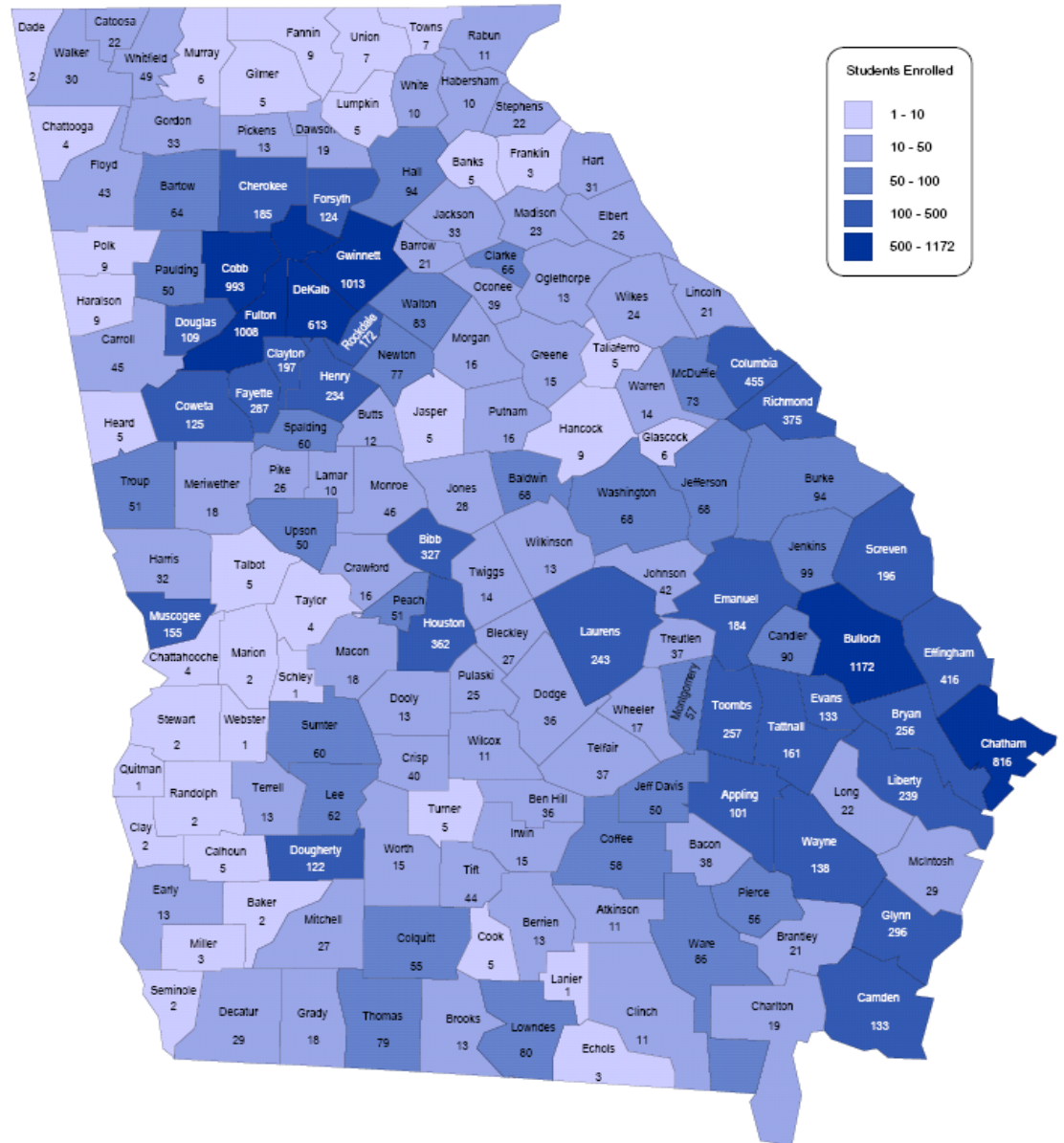
Researcher's Name (Print) \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature \_\_\_\_\_

# Appendix C

## Georgia Southern University Enrollment by County

### Map of Enrollment by Georgia County of Origin, Fall 2006



(Georgia Southern University Fact Book 2006-2007, p. 29)