UNDERSTANDING THE ACADEMIC LITERACY EXPERIENCES OF ADULT UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT A FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

Adult undergraduate students (age 25 or older) now make up 28% of the undergraduate student population at four-year public institutions. Using a sociocultural perspective of literacy, which posits that literacy and language are inextricably tied to identity, this qualitative multiple case study explores the adult undergraduate student experience with academic literacies: the specific languages of the university, both of its culture as a whole and the academic disciplines. Additionally, this study examines how the out-of-school literacies that adult undergraduate students acquire throughout their lives compete with, complement, or challenge their experiences with academic literacies. Eight diverse cases were studied, and data collection included interviews, classroom observation, and analysis of student writing. The study found that collisions between academic and out-of-school literacies were sources of both discovery and anxiety, and that anxiety was primarily associated with writing. The study also found that the adults displayed a desire for deep learning, and benefited in many ways from a lack of social relationships on campus. Relationships with professors could classify professors as teachers, colleagues, or supervisors and that high levels of social competence helped adult undergraduate students navigate these relationships and other academic challenges. As the undergraduate student body changes, and more "traditional" students begin to share the characteristics of adults, if faculty and administrators can better understand how AUS learn and engage with the language of the university, they will be able to develop pedagogical and institutional practices that can better support all students.

Keywords: adult students, undergraduate students, academic literacy, case study, qualitative research

DEDICATION

This dissertation is about language, but I do not have language big enough to express the gratitude and love I feel for my family. This dissertation is dedicated to them. My parents, Joe and Laura Saraco, have been sources of unfailing love and support, and were at times more confident than I was that I could get this done. They were always encouraging, and looking for ways to support this adult student, especially by providing plenty of puppy babysitting so I could go to class. My sisters—Cara, Dana, and Christine—have been sounding boards for ideas (especially Cara, who has been through this process before), and willing travel buddies when it was time to take a break and go down the shore. My dog, Melly, gave me a little taste of the childcare responsibilities that many of my fellow adult students have to figure out every day, but also provided the unconditional love that only a dog can. I am also lucky to have a large and supportive extended family, and I do not take for granted our closeness and affection for each other.

My family's success has been built on generations of adults going back to school later in life. My maternal grandparents, Jerry and Theresa Hopkins, both earned their bachelor's degrees as adults, while raising eight kids and working. While it could not have been easy—"I think I'm in the wrong class"—their example of hard work is still rippling out through our family generations later. As Lin-Manuel Miranda once wrote, "Legacy—what is a legacy? / It's planting seeds in a garden you never get to see / I wrote some notes at the beginning of a song someone will sing for me." While Jerry, along with my paternal grandparents, Joe and Lorraine, are not here to see me graduate, I dedicate this dissertation to all four of my grandparents. I feel their love for me every day. I'm singing the song they wrote.

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I would like to thank my classmates, many of whom provided feedback on drafts at various points and helped illuminate aspects of the hidden curriculum of Ed.D study for me. I only hope I can return the favor for as many of them as possible.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Ten years ago, I tried to lead one of my first-year writing classes in a discussion of Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990), a collection of short stories based on the author's military service during the Vietnam War. Every story is about choosing whether or not to dodge the draft, fighting combat missions, struggling with the boredom and the carnage of war, and grappling with feelings of responsibility for the deaths of civilians and fellow soldiers. A recurring idea in the collection is the eponymous protagonist's attempts to distinguish between "story-truth" and "happening-truth," and how an embellishment can feel truer than the objective reality. Was it even possible, we talked about, to tell a personal story as an objective reality? Could any of us ever experience anything outside the framework of our own identities?

Jacob was an adult student who sat in the back, dead center. I didn't yet know him well; it was early in the semester and *The Things They Carried* was the first text on our syllabus. But in the short introductory paper I had asked everyone to write, he had disclosed that he was a veteran and had served several tours in post-9/11 conflicts. The discussion, which Jacob actively participated in, revolved around why O'Brien gave the main character his own name while insisting that all the stories were fiction, and whether a "true war story" could be something that never happened at all.

The goal of the course was to introduce students to academic discourse and to give them some practice in conveying observations, analyses, and arguments in academic writing. Jacob was the only one in the class—me included—who had any firsthand experience of anything like what O'Brien writes about. He was in a unique position to consider these ideas, and recognized O'Brien's language and experiences as similar to his

own. In one way, he was the authority in the room. However, he struggled to get his academic language and literacy skills to where they needed to be to earn a passing grade. The experiences Jacob had in the military motivated him to read O'Brien's work, but the skills he had acquired there could only help him so much in fulfilling the requirements the university had set for him to examine the text in an academic way. The tension between his expertise in the workplace literacy and culture of the military, and my expectations for what constituted fluency in academic language and literacy clashed. Though Jacob read this text through the lens of his personal identity and experiences, Jacob was in the world of the university now, and his old languages weren't enough to make his way in it.

Adult Undergraduate Students and Their Academic Needs and Challenges

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), an estimated 28% of undergraduate students at public, four-year institutions are age 25 or older (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The NCES identifies these adult undergraduates as one type of "nontraditional student" because they do not pursue postsecondary education immediately after high school, often study part-time, and typically "have family and work responsibilities as well as other life circumstances that can interfere with successful completion of educational objectives" (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). For the purposes of this study, adult undergraduate students (AUS) will be defined as any undergraduate student who is 25 years old or older, while traditional-aged undergraduate students (TAUS) will be defined as any undergraduate student who is 18 to 24 years old.

While much of the existing research on undergraduate students focuses on younger students, other literature specifically on AUS stems from two major

assumptions. The first is that age differences make AUS a fundamentally different student population as opposed to TAUS due to different life experiences and purposes for attending college. The second is that extended gaps between formal education experiences mean that AUS are likely to struggle with academic work, and that struggle, combined with the external pressures of work and home responsibilities, could lead to decreased achievement and persistence, increased levels of anxiety, and decreased sense of belonging.

Over time, the literature has demonstrated that the first assumption is relatively true. Though the AUS population is undoubtedly diverse within itself—and these students bring myriad identities and life circumstances with them to the undergraduate classroom—AUS as a group face unique obstacles to pursuing higher education. They are more likely to hold multiple identities beyond that of "student," including but not limited to parent and employee. Holding multiple identities simultaneously can place significant demands on an AUS's time and attention (Dill & Henley, 1998; Fairchild, 2003; Lin, 2016; Stone, 2008; Willans & Seary, 2011), as well as their finances (Prins, Kassab, & Campbell, 2015), which can impact their ability to pursue higher education at all (Bean & Metzner, 1985). However, when AUS make the intentional choice to pursue higher education, they often do so with a clear purpose (Kasworm, 2008; Samuels, Beach, & Palmer, 2011-2012).

The second set of assumptions looks at the AUS student population from a deficit perspective, assuming that this group will need intensive remedial academic support. The literature does not necessarily support this view. Several studies have examined academic performance among AUS and have found that AUS achieve the same (Carlan, 2001;

Steinberg, 2006) or better grade point averages (GPAs) than their TAUS classmates (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Kasworm & Pike, 1994; Sheard, 2009). Others find that AUS are more likely to employ high-level metacognitive strategies (Cleary, 2013; Justice & Dornan, 2001). Strong academic performance among AUS is linked with higher levels of motivation or commitment to their studies (Kasworm, 2008; Samuels, Beach, & Palmer, 2012; Sheard, 2009; Steinberg, 2006).

This increased motivation can help AUS persist towards degree completion—but motivation is just one factor that influences AUS persistence. Bergman's (2012) theory of adult learner persistence in degree completion programs situates motivation among a group of variables called "student entry characteristics," which also include age, previous college credit, educational goals, and socioeconomic status. Other factors that influence AUS persistence are those related to external environment (including finances, work, and family support) and those related to the academic environment (including institutional responsiveness, flexibility, and prior learning assessment). A later study using Bergman's model found that higher educational goals (as defined by level of degree sought) were linked to AUS persistence, along with both the institution's ability to understand and meet AUS needs and an AUS's level of family support (Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014). In other words, an AUS is more likely to persist if they aim for a bachelor's degree as opposed to an associate's degree, but only in an educational environment that understands and accommodates their unique educational needs and only if they have family support to help balance their other responsibilities outside of school. Other studies confirm the importance of AUS setting educational goals (Samuels, Beach,

& Bierlein Palmer, 2011-2012), feeling understood and accommodated by the institution (Wyatt, 2011), and having family support (Plageman & Sabina, 2010).

Though AUS do well academically and, in the right circumstances, are likely to persist towards a bachelor's degree, they do experience unique struggles in pursuing their educations. Research conflicts on the intensity and sources of anxiety that AUS are likely to experience. For example, Yarbrough and Schaffer (1990) found through multiple surveys that, while AUS are more vocal about their test-taking anxiety, their anxiety levels are actually about the same as that of TAUS. Yarbrough and Schaffer suggest that prior success with life experiences may equip AUS with better coping skills. However, some case studies that interviewed individual AUS find that they are likely to experience significant anxiety about their academic abilities and their place in the university community. The "alien culture" of the higher education environment can lead students to feel uncertainty about knowing the rules of the game (Askham, 2008) or fitting in (Mallman & Lee, 2016). They may also worry about having the necessary skills to succeed in the classroom (Askham, 2008; Willans & Seary, 2011), especially in modern educational environments that require facility with digital technologies (Barr, 2016; Karmelita, 2018). The guilt they experience for prioritizing their own education above their other responsibilities, and the struggle to access support networks (Fairchild, 2003; Stone, 2008) can also create challenges along the way to earning a bachelor's degree. Ross-Gordon and Brown-Haywood (2000) find that adults are likely to have more academic anxiety at the beginning of their college experiences, but it then passes as they become more comfortable and confident.

Additionally, though AUS experience identity shifts through the pursuit of higher education (Bamber & Tett, 2000; Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Kasworm, 2010; O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007), changes in the well-formed, complex identity of an older adult are different from changes in the more fluid identity of TAUS with less life experience. When AUS enter the higher education environment, their newly-assumed student identity must negotiate a place among all of the other distinct and separate identities they bring with them to the classroom. This jockeying and attempted intertwining of identities may create tension both in the student's sense of self (Barr, 2016; Stone, 2008) and in between commitments to family and work and academic responsibilities.

This tension increases if AUS are made to feel like they do not belong on campus (Keith, Byerly, Florechinger, Pence, & Thornberg, 2006). This is a common problem for AUS, who may feel that the curriculum (Bailey & Marsh, 2010), pedagogical techniques (Cleary, 2012), or the institutional structures and policies (Bowl, 2001; Fairchild, 2003; O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007) do not meet their needs. AUS may feel particularly isolated because professors may (wrongfully) assume that they do not need any support, and TAUS classmates may stigmatize and punish AUS for being too enthusiastic, behavior they perceive as annoying (Mallman & Lee, 2016). The isolation worsens for AUS because institutions often try to engage the undergraduate student body as a whole in extracurricular identities that develop and engage their identities. However, the demands on adult undergraduates' time mean that the time they spend in the classroom is often the only time they spend on campus (Panacci, 2015) and they never actually participate in those activities designed to build community and sense of self. In their model of college

outcomes for adults, Donaldson and Graham (1999) identify the "connecting classroom" as the primary place where AUS learn, engage with other students and their instructors, negotiate what it means to be a college student, and incorporate what they are learning with their prior knowledge. Samuels, Beach, and Palmer's (2011-2012) later narrative study of AUS confirmed the importance of the connecting classroom in students' ability and willingness to persist.

While individual instructors can employ strategies to mitigate feelings of isolation, anxiety, and frustration, such as engaging AUS in the work of developing relevant syllabi and assignments (Bailey & Marsh, 2010) or providing feedback on multiple low-stakes assignments to build confidence (Cleary, 2012), only institutional shifts can make bigger changes to welcome and accommodate AUS on campus. Without shifting campus culture, AUS struggle to develop a critical sense of belonging (Barr, 2016; Kasworm, 2008; Willans & Seary, 2011).

In summary, much of the existing literature on AUS contributes to a singular narrative about this student population: they are likely to achieve at high levels, if given the right support, but they are prone to anxiety and feelings of being out-of-place on campuses and in classrooms not designed for them. Because they also must negotiate other demands on their time and attention outside of school, how these variables intersect can place tremendous pressure on their intrinsic motivation to persist and achieve.

Statement of the Problem

The marked differences between the AUS population and the traditional-age undergraduate student population mean that models for undergraduate student success, which are often designed with traditional undergraduates in mind, are not adequate to

support and measure AUS needs and success. For example, Kasworm and Pike (1994) found that prior models of measuring academic performance were not able to predict success among an AUS population, and Bean and Metzner (1985) found that models of student attrition are also not appropriate for adult undergraduates because they prioritize institutional variables like academic advising (which are more likely to affect traditional undergraduates) more than external variables like family responsibilities (which are more likely to affect adult undergraduates).

These differences also mean that ways of engaging students in the academic work of the university may not be adequate for adult undergraduates, who have different educational goals and different learning needs than their traditional-age classmates. Because adults returning to school may have interrupted formal educations, negative previous experiences with schooling, and inadequate academic skills, much of the traditional thought on adult learning focuses on remedying adults' academic "deficits" (Strucker, 2013). However, adults bring rich life experiences to the classroom, which can actually help them engage with academic material.

Studies on the AUS population (and adult education in general) strongly recommend utilizing students' prior knowledge and life experiences in the classroom (Bragg, 2013; Gleason, 2004; Hayes, Fry, & Cummings, 2018; Karpiak, 2000; Panacci, 2015; Strucker, 2013). Moreover, paths towards the bachelor's degree that give academic credit for the knowledge and experience students obtain outside of school can help adult undergraduates persist in a degree program (Brown, 2002; Conley, 2013; Pokorny, 2012). However, many institutions that serve predominantly TAUS do not do either of these things.

The disconnect may cause AUS to feel like they cannot read, write, or speak the language of the university. In other words, AUS may have trouble acquiring and using academic literacies. By academic literacies, I mean not only "the ability to read and write college-level texts" but also "multiple approaches to knowledge" that are shaped by the identities, experiences, and interactions of everyone in the classroom (Zamel & Spack, 1998, p. ix). The definition of academic literacies is further complicated not only mean 1) the ability to read, write, and speak the language of the university community, but also 2) the ability to read, write, and speak the language of a particular field of study and to know how and when to switch between the languages required by different fields of study (Lea & Street, 2006).

This holistic definition of academic literacies stems from a theoretical framework of literacy that situates all literacies in their sociocultural contexts (Gee, 1996; Street, 1984). This framework extends the definition of literacy beyond the cognitive ability to read and write to include the ability to navigate worlds and ways of being that call for specific "social languages," i.e. culturally- and socially-specific types of language that vary in vocabulary choice, syntax, and style (Gee, 2004). A complex view of literacy that is tied to culture and identity necessitates that literacy become *literacies*. AUS, who must learn academic literacies, may already be fluent in other literacies which I will collectively refer to as out-of-school literacies. This is a broad definition that could include professional literacies from the workplace, the military, or elsewhere—or other literacies that may be racial, cultural, or even generational.

This way of thinking about literacies means that anyone can possess multiple literacies (for example, academic literacies and workplace literacies) at the same time,

and that being fluent in a certain kind of literacy conveys belonging to a particular culture (Gee, 2004). Therefore, because literacies are related to identity, and because identity is inextricably tied to power, the question becomes what kinds of literacies (and thus what kinds of identities) are valued on a college campus. Higher education tends to privilege its own language and ways of doing things (Bartholomae, 2005; Tapp, 2015) to the exclusion of other "everyday" forms of knowledge and ways of viewing the world that students already possess. Therefore, the ability to acquire and use academic literacies is critical to student success in college.

Little is known about how AUS perceive the experience of learning and using academic literacies, i.e. the learning to speak, read, and write the particular social languages of the university. A significant gap exists in the literature in understanding the intersection between the academic literacies the university demands and the rich out-of-school literacies, acquired through life experience, that AUS bring to campus. It is unknown how these two kinds of literacies compete with, complement, or challenge one another, and how those collisions impact AUS academic experiences in college.

The Current Study

AUS are a substantial and diverse student population in the higher education system, but the typical higher education institution is designed for TAUS who matriculate into a bachelor's degree program directly following high school. Faculty and administrators must work together to advance the educational missions of their institutions, and to support students in achieving their academic goals. However, when little is known about how nearly a third of all undergraduates develop and employ their ability to speak, read, and write academic language, it is difficult to fully understand the

students we serve, let alone identify and implement effective academic support services or a culturally relevant curriculum. Without this understanding, AUS' abilities and willingness to persist in a degree program may be negatively affected. Fluency in academic literacies, which are valued in the university setting, along with the university's ability and willingness to recognize students' out-of-school literacies are dual access and equity challenges in a diverse, 21st century higher education classroom.

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study is to explore how the academic literacies and out-of-school literacies of AUS intersect as they pursue a bachelor's degree at a four-year research university that primarily educates TAUS. The study will seek to address the following research questions:

1) How do AUS at a large, public research university perceive the experience of learning and using academic literacies?
2) How do the academic literacies of AUS intersect with their out-of-school literacies both in and out of the classroom?
3) How do AUS perceive academic challenges, and how have they approached these challenges?

The research site is a four-year undergraduate institution that will likely have few AUS who matriculate without any previous higher education experience. With this in mind, exploring how the academic literacy experiences of AUS may require, for some research participants, learning more about both their previous experiences in higher education, perhaps at a community college or for-profit institution, *and* in their transition to a four-year institution. Additionally, the exploration of the use of academic literacies may become more nuanced depending on the identities of the students who are selected

as study participants. For example, students who are just beginning a four-year degree program may need to use academic literacies in the context of general education courses, while other students who may have transferred into a four-year degree program with some previous higher education experience may think of academic literacies in terms of their academic major. In addition, because the AUS population is so diverse, the out-of-school literacies that participants bring to the university will vary and may shape their experiences in different ways. As is typical with the emerging design of qualitative inquiry, these research questions may also change, or additional questions may be added during the data collection and analysis process.

Definitions of Terms

Academic Literacy

Academic literacy is the ability to recognize, read, write, and speak the language of the university. Academic literacies may be the general ability to recognize, read, write, and speak the language of the university culture as a whole, or the more specific abilit(ies) to recognize, read, write, and speak discipline-specific languages, e.g. those of STEM fields or the social sciences or the humanities. Fluency in academic literacies also means the ability to switch between discipline-specific languages as needed (Zamel & Spack, 1998; Lea & Street, 2006).

Adult Undergraduate Students (AUS)

Adult undergraduate students (AUS) are students ages 25 or older who are pursuing their first bachelor’s degree. For the purposes of this study, no further stratification based on age will be imposed on this group, and study participants will not be limited by gender, race, first-generation status, employment status, whether or not they

have children, or any other characteristic that may otherwise be attributed to adult or "nontraditional" students.

Community Cultural Wealth

Community cultural wealth is "knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts" that, while not necessarily valued by society as a whole, can help minority groups "survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Community cultural wealth is a critique of Bourdieu's ideas on cultural capital.

Cultural Capital

Bourdieu (1984) defines cultural capital as learned abilities acquired over time that can give the possessor social advantages if they are valued by others.

Literacy

Literacy is the ability to recognize, read, write, and speak the language of a particular social group or context. Literacy extends beyond cognitive ability; to be literate in a particular context can imply belonging to a particular group or culture.

Literacy Events

A literacy event is an "[activity] where literacy has a role" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 8). While literacy practices are not observable, literacy events are.

Literacy Sponsors

Literacy sponsors are "agents, forces, and institutions that stimulated people's literacy for their own economic or political or cultural advantage" (Brandt, 2009, p. 10). Literacy sponsors may include people, workplaces, governments, and economic conditions.

Literacy Practices

A literacy practice is defined as “the general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives” which may “also involve values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 7).

Multiliteracies

Multiliteracies (Cazden et al., 1996) can be understood as not only reading, writing, and speaking academic language, but also recognizing visual and cultural signs in the academic culture—and incorporating other literacies, such as digital literacies, workplace literacies, and other out-of-school literacies.

Out-Of-School Literacies

Out-of-school literacies are, collectively, the literacies that students acquire outside the university. Out-of-school literacies are inextricably linked with student identities and therefore are brought into the university classroom. Out-of-school literacies may include literacies of the workplace, family, military, culture, generation, or other facets of student identities.

Social Language

A social language is a culturally- and socially-specific type of language that vary in vocabulary choice, syntax, and style. To know a particular social language is to know how to “do” the particular identity associated with that social language (Gee, 2004).

Traditional-Aged Undergraduate Students (TAUS)

Traditional-aged undergraduate students (TAUS) are students ages 18 to 24 who are pursuing their first bachelor’s degree.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of theories of literacy, which situate literacy in social and cultural contexts. I will then describe in more detail one type of socially-situated literacy, i.e. academic literacy or the literacies of both the university and the various academic fields taught therein. No student comes to the university without being shaped by various facets of their identities, but AUS in particular have long life experiences and have learned other literacies in the workplace. I collectively will refer to these non-academic literacies as “out-of-school literacies,” and will explore some of the tensions that exist between both academic and out-of-school literacies in this chapter both through relevant literature and through a theoretical frame that links academic literacies with Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital (1984) and that links out-of-school literacies with Yosso’s theory of community cultural wealth (2005). Finally, I will situate the current study in the gap of literature on the academic literacies of adult undergraduate students.

Theoretical Perspectives on Socially-Situated Literac(ies) and Identities

The definition of literacy for the purposes of this study is informed by a sociocultural perspective, which argues that literacy is both more than the cognitive ability to read and write, and inextricable from its social and cultural contexts. Thus, literacy must become *literacies* to adequately understand and describe the myriad ways that reading, writing, speaking, understanding, and navigating are context-dependent. To understand what kinds of literacies AUS need to learn (and those they already know), and to explore how their literacies challenge or complement each other, I will first describe

two related sociocultural perspectives in literacy studies: New Literacy Studies and multiliteracies.

New Literacy Studies (NLS) argues for a model of literacy that situates literacy in varied social and cultural contexts. Because language varies among communities, being literate is contextually and culturally dependent (Gee, 1996; Street, 1984; Street, 2003; Street, 2009). For example, being literate in reading, writing, and speaking academic language is dependent on knowing, understanding, and successfully deploying the rules of academic culture.

Literacy that is situated in its social and cultural context may give rise to various literacy practices and literacy events. A literacy practice is defined as "the general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives" which may "also involve values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 7). A literacy event is an "[activity] where literacy has a role" (p. 8). While literacy practices are not observable, literacy events are. For example, a literacy practice in the context of this study of adult undergraduates in a university setting may be how a student approaches writing an academic paper, while a literacy event may be actually writing this paper, or even sending an email to a professor.

The New London Group argues that literacy must also expand beyond the "mere literacy" (Cazden et al., 1996, p. 64) of language alone. Though they still recognize that literacies are contextually and culturally dependent, and thus have varied "cognitive, cultural, and social effects," they also argue that the definition of literacy should be expanded to include images, videos, sounds, symbols, gestures, and more. The proliferation of new ways to communicate, especially through digital technologies, and a

global interconnectedness that brings “cultural and linguistic diversity” (p. 63) to the forefront demands that literacy must become *multiliteracies*. The New London Group argues that a pedagogy of multiliteracies is the best way to teach the modern community of diverse learners. For the purposes of this study, multiliteracies can be understood as not only reading, writing, and speaking academic language, but also recognizing visual and cultural signs in the academic culture—and incorporating other literacies, such as digital literacies, workplace literacies, and other out-of-school literacies (Street, 2009). Ultimately, a sociocultural perspective that recognizes multiliteracies means that literacy has to do with how we think about ourselves as people in particular environments (Street, 2009).

Gee (2004) argues that, if all literacy and language is socially-situated, then there can be no language that is not dependent on perspective. If all perspective is shaped by individual or cultural ways of seeing and being, then all literacy and language is inextricably tied to identity. Further, Gee argues that this is true for *all* language, both written and oral, in both our interactions with others and in our internal monologue. This is because identity is about more than recognizing oneself; it is also about being recognized by others (Gee, 2000).

Gee explores how identity is tied to language through his concept of the *Discourse*, which he defines as an “identity kit” (Gee, 1998; Gee, 2004) that provides someone with everything he or she needs to assume or perform a specific identity, an act that Gee calls “being-doing” (2004, p. 719). Components of Discourses include not only oral and written language, but also “deeds, thoughts, values, actions, interactions, objects, tools, and technologies” (p. 720) that allow someone to be-do an identity themselves, or

to recognize an identity in someone else (Gee, 2002). In this way, Discourses are performative in that, while they feel inherent to one's sense of being, they also require someone to continually speak, read, write, interpret, and relate in ways that members of that Discourse, over time, have collectively agreed are consistent with that identity. For example, the college student identity may be simultaneously inherent and also dependent on the ability to perform the college student Discourse in ways that others will recognize as part of a cultural model. Gee (2004) argues that belonging to a Discourse can only happen through immersion, not through direct instruction. In other words, to use the college student Discourse as an example, being socialized into the student Discourse is the only way to be-do the college student identity. This cannot be achieved through direct instruction.

While we all have what Gee calls a "primary Discourse" that becomes the base of who we are, we can all acquire multiple "secondary Discourses" as we go out into the community and are immersed in places like school or work (Gee, 1998; Gee, 2002). We are all socialized into multiple Discourses, often simultaneously, and Discourses can intersect to create new Discourses. It is the unique collection and intersection of Discourses in each individual that makes us different. If we consider the multiple roles that we know AUS have, especially when their primary Discourse may not be that of "student," then we can begin to understand how incredibly complex the experience of academic literacies can be.

A key part of any Discourse is its "social language," i.e. culturally- and socially-specific types of language that vary in vocabulary choice, syntax, and style. Social languages are part of every Discourse and they shape a Discourse's other components.

Therefore, to know the social language of a Discourse is to know how to “do” the identity associated with that Discourse (Gee, 2004, p. 718). In other words, becoming literate in one or more social languages by recognizing patterns in written and oral language can help us develop identities and belonging in one or more Discourses. The failure to learn to speak or recognize a social language is a major barrier to success not only in reading and writing, but also to the ability to claim a certain identity. For example, consider the Discourse of being-doing “college student.” If someone wants to be socialized into this Discourse, he or she would need to learn the academic, professional, and interpersonal social languages of college. The other social languages and Discourses this student already knows and recognizes and does may make it easier or more challenging to learn the social language of college and therefore easier or more challenging to socialize into the Discourse of “college student.”

Indeed, Gee points out that some social languages come more naturally than others. We may be fluent in some social languages, while stumbling in others and merely recognizing still others. Our success in becoming fully facile with a particular social language and being able to move beyond recognizing it to speaking, reading, and writing it, is dependent on the social languages we already are comfortable with. If we can connect a new social language to some aspects of social languages we already know, then we will likely have more success in learning the new social language (Gee, 2002).

It is through this challenge that Gee distinguishes between the authentic beginner and the false beginner. An authentic beginner is someone who has no ability to connect a new social language to one that he or she already knows. The authentic beginner may lack prior experience or frame of reference, which Gee notes make it extremely difficult

to be socialized into a new Discourse. Unlike the false beginner, who may be a novice user of a particular social language but has the frame of reference to understand it in relation to something else, the authentic beginner is unable to draw these important connections and therefore usually struggles to acquire new Discourses (Gee, 2002).

Adult undergraduates bring unique perspectives to the university, but to assume the Discourse of "college student," they need to learn the social language of the university. Little is known about how AUS experience this immersion in a new social language, or how the social languages they bring with them may provide them with a foundation to acquire a new one. In other words, to achieve academic success, AUS need to both acquire academic literacy and negotiate how that academic literacy fits in with the other literacies—and identities—that they already possess. Moreover, the power relationships between different kinds of literacies—academic vs. out-of-school—in the university setting is ripe for exploration in the AUS population. To illuminate this tension, I will next define academic literacies and out-of-school literacy.

Academic Literacies and Out-of-School Literacies

Academic Literacies

Lea and Street (1998) define academic literacy as literacy that is situated within the context of the university. They trace ways of teaching and acquiring academic knowledge, both generally and in specific academic disciplines, by first identifying two inadequate approaches. The first, a "study skills" approach, focuses on remediation, and on learning context-agnostic writing skills that can be applied in any academic discipline. The second is an "academic socialization" approach that focuses on "induct[ing] students into a new 'culture,' that of the academy" (p. 159). Though the second is more consistent

with Gee's idea of being socialized into a discourse, Lea and Street recognize the inadequacy of both of these approaches. Neither considers the student identities, or the discipline-specific knowledge and ways of writing that different academic areas require. They ultimately define academic literacy as ways of reading, writing, and acquiring new knowledge that are not only specific to higher education, but also specific to various fields, e.g. chemistry, literature, history, etc. (p. 158-159). They use the plural literacies because of these variations among higher education disciplines. Johns (2008) calls students' ability to appropriately switch how they speak and write depending on the academic context "genre awareness." While they acknowledge that students often have difficulty identifying what kinds of academic writing are appropriate in various disciplines, Lea and Street do not specify how acquiring and using academic literacies may be affected by student identities.

Zamel and Spack (1998) also acknowledge that academic literacies are context-dependent as both of the university *and* of the specific disciplines studied within the university. They, too, recognize that students must learn and employ the "unique conventions, concepts, and terms" (p. ix) of different fields of study. However, they go further than Lea and Street when they acknowledge that academic literacy must move beyond reading, writing, and even acquiring knowledge to also consider the identities and cultures that not only students, but also teachers and researchers, bring with them to the classroom. For Zamel and Spack, academic literacies are influenced by identities, are shaped by prior knowledge, and may involve "struggle and conflict" (p. ix) as different identities and ways of knowing collide in the classroom. Zamel and Spack ultimately arrive at the plural *literacies* as well, but not because of multiple discipline-specific

literacies within the academy. Rather, academic literacies also incorporate the complexities of the identities of those in the classroom. In a later study focusing on linguistic minority students in a UK university, Lea and Street (2006) recognize this added complexity and find that incorporating diverse cultural identities into the classroom allow students to not only access academic culture, but also to use "personal styles and learning strategies" (p. 373) in their writing.

Academic literacies are not always explicit. While there are certainly culturally-specific writing and language conventions in which students may receive direct instruction, many other aspects of reading, writing, and speaking academic language are never directly taught. Sambell & McDowell (1998) call these "implicit and embedded" components of academic culture the "hidden curriculum," which can only be learned through socialization and may even contrast with direct instruction or official ways of doing things. Navigating the hidden curriculum is another part of successfully engaging with academic culture and using academic literacies. The idea that the hidden curriculum can only be learned through experience is consistent with Gee's discussion of Discourses and social languages.

The complexity of academic literacies can make acquiring and using them feel exclusive, privileged, and out-of-reach. Without the ability to read, write, or speak not only the general academic language of the university culture, but also the discipline-specific language of a chosen field of study, students may feel as though they do not belong as members of the academic community and that their student identity is illegitimate. Tapp (2015) concedes that academic literacies are privileged, because those who are already members of a powerful academic community can define what counts as

academic literacies for those seeking to become a part of the community, i.e. students. However, Tapp also argues that acquiring academic literacies is still a worthwhile pursuit because writing in an "acceptable way" (p. 713) allows students to access the same power that comes with belonging to the academic community. Moreover, Tapp calls for educators to actively help students acquire academic literacies and to make the hidden curriculum, or what she calls "invisible pedagogic practices" (p. 715) apparent so that all students may participate.

However, for decades, academics have argued about what constitutes acceptable or adequate expression of the language of the university, particularly when it comes to academic writing. Rose (1985) acknowledges that many undergraduates (of all ages) struggle with the kind of academic writing that Lea and Street (1998) would later describe: sophisticated, discipline-specific writing. However, he argues that remedial writing instruction that teaches writing as an isolated skill will not fix the problem, and will exclude thousands of students from the academic community. Twenty years after Rose, Sullivan (2006) acknowledges that faculty across the disciplines still cannot agree on what constitutes "college-level" writing.

Because students are trying to please instructors—who cannot agree among themselves on what successful college-level writing is in the first place—student writing is often mere imitation of academic writing rather than original discovery (Bartholomae, 2005). That said, students are stuck between academic language that they cannot reach, or whose standards continually shift, and their everyday language, which is not valued by the university. Some have now argued that one way to begin to address this challenge is to treat writing as not an isolated skill but as an integrated part of academic discourse,

along with reading, speaking, and thinking that is informed by students' identities (Duncheon & Tierney, 2015; Sullivan, 2006).

Out-Of-School Literacies and Sponsors of Literacy

There are significant questions of power and privilege with which to contend in how student identities intersect with academic literacies, especially in writing. Williams (2006) argues that all writing is informed by the identity of the writer, but actually embracing one's identity in writing and writing about topics that feel relevant or interesting is a privilege that is not often afforded to students. Moreover, Frederickson (1998) notes that the AUS in particular may be stymied in the classroom, not due to insecurity about their abilities but due to their lack of power relative to their instructors and their TAUS classmates. Much of their classroom experience, then, depends on whether their identities, and therefore their intellectual contributions, will be valued.

Within the university setting, academic literacies are privileged. While the out-of-school literacies that AUS acquire elsewhere, perhaps at home, in their communities, or in their workplaces, may come more naturally to them, there is often not a place for these other facets of their identities in the classroom. The disconnect can happen at two levels: students feel that the language and culture of the university is disconnected from their "real" lives (Hamilton, 2006; Hull & Schultz, 2001) and the university continues to privilege its own language, denying access to the university community for those who cannot or will not adapt (Hamilton, 2001). Though the literature demonstrates that adult students value their previous experiences (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Kasworm, 2003; Kasworm, 2010; Panacci, 2015), and though studies of other student populations demonstrate the value of incorporating students out-of-school

literacies into the curriculum (Gutierrez, Morales, & Martinez, 2009; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), there are still challenges at both the institutional level and the classroom level in doing so, especially in institutions that are not designed specifically for AUS.

Brandt (2009) argues that access to literacies, especially for adults, are often mediated by literacy sponsors, which she defines as "agents, forces, and institutions that stimulated people's literacy for their own economic or political or cultural advantage" (p. 10). Literacy sponsors, such as one's workplace, dictate the kinds of literacy that are valued or not, especially because people are often obliged to their literacy sponsor for access to capital. While Brandt's definition of literacy is more limited to the ability to read and write, the overall argument that different literacy sponsors promote or suppress different kinds of literacy skills is well taken. Adults in the workplace, for example, write in ways that address company objectives or please their bosses. Not only may these literacy practices differ from those that are valued in the university, but they may also differ from workplace to workplace. As Brandt notes, when this variation is considered alongside the multiple identities that also affect literacy, the overall idea of what it means to be literate becomes exceedingly complex. Because literacy is a prerequisite in a knowledge economy, all literacy sponsors—the university, the workplace, or others—impact anyone's ability to acquire and accumulate wealth. Though the student struggle to acquire and use academic literacies at the university level is fairly common among most undergraduates, it may be that TAUS, whose most recent literacy sponsor was likely the high school academic environment, experience a less jarring culture shock than AUS, whose most recent literacy sponsors are likely not academic in nature.

Cultural Capital vs. Community Cultural Wealth

A useful way of thinking about the tension between academic literacies and out-of-school literacies is to consider the related concepts of cultural capital and community cultural wealth, especially as they pertain to language. Bourdieu (1984) defines cultural capital as learned abilities acquired over time that can give the possessor social advantages if they are valued by others. Because cultural capital is what is valued by others, it can ultimately be exchanged for economic capital.

There are several types of cultural capital that are relevant to the discussion of AUS and their academic literacies, including institutionalized cultural capital, embodied cultural capital, and linguistic cultural capital. Institutionalized cultural capital is cultural capital that is recognized by others as legitimate, such as the bachelor's degree credential. Embodied cultural capital are skills inherent to the individual that, once they are learned, cannot be taken away (Bourdieu, 1986), such as the ability to read. Linguistic cultural capital is the ability to speak, read, and write in ways that are culturally and contextually appropriate and therefore conveys a sense of belonging to a community (Bourdieu, 1991).

Cultural capital is privileged because it is desired and validated by the broader community. Therefore, much of the examination of cultural capital in educational contexts deals with who has it and who does not—and how those who do not have it may acquire it. Yosso (2005) challenges Bourdieu's ideas about cultural capital by critiquing them through a critical race theory lens. She argues that because cultural capital is defined by what is valued by others, communities of color are always considered "culturally poor" (p. 76) despite their possession of other forms of "knowledge, skills,

abilities and contacts" that help them "survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" which she terms "community cultural wealth" (p. 77).

I am in no way arguing that the position of the AUS in the university community is equivalent to, on its own, the experience of communities of color in a racist society. However, I do think that some of Yosso's ideas about the unique strengths that groups of students who do not have academic privilege bring with them to the classroom can add value to the understanding of AUS and their relationship with academic literacies. Namely, Yosso identifies linguistic community cultural wealth as "intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style" (p. 78). Yosso cites facility with storytelling, tonal switches, dialects or code switches, the ability to translate for others (e.g. their parents), and the ability to communicate through other modes like art and music as some examples of linguistic capital. While Yosso has bilingual children in mind when conceptualizing the term, she does mention "real-world" literacy skills (p. 79), which could be argued to be consistent with adult students' out-of-school literacies that they acquire in other settings. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that AUS share the characteristic of age, but are otherwise a diverse group with multiple other identities playing out within each individual. The undoubted intersection of age, race, gender, and social class in the AUS population complicates the idea of privileged languages and can make the experience of academic literacies that much more complex.

Literature Gap on Academic Literacies and Adult Undergraduate Students

AUS are a diverse student population whose identities as adults in a predominantly youth-centric educational environment leads to specific educational

challenges, particularly in the acquisition and use of academic literacies and in the negotiation of a place for out-of-school literacies in the undergraduate classroom. Despite having a sociocultural framework to understand the relationship between literacies and identities, and despite a theoretical understanding of the privileged academic literacies of the university, few empirical studies have explored these concepts, especially in AUS.

Some studies have explored reciprocal influence of identity on literacy, and of literacy on identity, in the context of ethnic background in TAUS, or even younger, student populations. In particular, Hungerford-Kresser's qualitative study (2010) of the relationship between identity and academic literacies is particularly strong in exploring the reciprocal relationship between the two concepts. Her case study of first-generation Latinx students found that students' identities as first-generation students affected their abilities to acquire academic literacies, but the acquisition of academic literacies also affected how they thought about their identities. At times, these students adopted a deficit perspective about their abilities and likelihood of academic success, while at other times, these students used academic language to challenge negative stereotypes about their academic potential. This study illuminates the relationship between academic literacies and identity, but because the study focuses on traditional first-year students whose identities are in flux, it does not help to understand this relationship among older students who already have well-formed identities outside the university.

Additionally, community cultural wealth in higher education has been well addressed among undergraduate students of color and/or first-generation students in terms of their participation in college access programs (Jayakumar, Vue, & Allen, 2013) or transition to college programs (Bourke & Jayman, 2011), their classroom experiences

and academic work (Huber, 2010; Jehangir, 2010; King, 2016), their participation in mentoring programs (Dodson, Montgomery, & Brown, 2009; Rios-Ellis, Rascón, Galvez, Inzunza-Franco, Bellamy, & Torres, 2015), and their preparation for graduate school (Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2016). However, all of these studies examine community cultural wealth among TAUS and none specifically tie the concept to academic literacies. Moreover, there are few studies that examine community cultural wealth among the AUS population.

Another body of work explores the acquisition of academic literacy, again among younger student populations. These studies found that learning academic literacies was easier when the curriculum incorporated culturally relevant knowledge and examples (Klos, 2006; Trueba, 1990). While these two studies focused on younger student populations, their findings are consistent with research on adult education generally and the importance of finding ways to incorporate adults' prior knowledge (Bragg, 2013; Gleason, 2004; Hayes, Fry, & Cummings, 2018; Karpiak, 2000; Panacci, 2015; Strucker, 2013).

Other studies have attempted to develop tests to measure students' baseline academic literacies upon matriculation to the university (Palmer, Levett-Jones, Smith, & McMillan, 2014; Van der Silk & Weideman, 2008; Weideman, 2003; Weideman, 2006). These tests, developed outside the U.S. (e.g. the TALL in South Africa or the MASUS in the UK and Australia), are intended to measure ability to read, write, evaluate, and process information at high levels. However, these tests pose several challenges. The first is that, though the tests say they measure academic literacy, their definition of literacy is not multimodal, i.e. it does not consider forms of literacy beyond printed text (e.g. oral,

aural, visual, etc.). The second is that, though the impetus for developing some of these tests, particularly in post-apartheid South Africa, was to identify and provide relevant academic literacy support for students who previously could not access higher education (Van der Silk & Weideman, 2008; Weideman, 2003; Weideman, 2006), the measures of literacy themselves do not necessarily consider the identities and sociocultural context of the student test-takers. Third, none of the instruments or studies specifically consider AUS, or any American student population. Most importantly, none seek to understand students' academic literacy experiences or ways of learning, and only seek to measure abilities. They are used only to determine whether academic intervention or remedial education is needed, or whether access to higher education will be granted in the first place, similar to how American universities often that students take the SAT as a prerequisite to university admission, and/or placement tests before they matriculate as first-year students. The content of these "academic literacy" tests are not much different than the SAT or other standardized tests, which some critics have argued is statistically biased against students of color (Freedle, 2003) and an inadequate way to assess student writing capabilities (Estrem, Shepherd, & Sturman, 2018; Isaacs & Molloy, 2010).

A related body of research evaluates how interventions or particular curricula can help students develop academic literacy skills. The consensus, consistent with a sociocultural perspective of literacy, is that academic literacy skills cannot be effectively taught in a way that is removed from the academic disciplines themselves. Rather, these skills must be embedded in the curriculum across the university (Bergman, 2016; Defazio, Jones, Tennant, & Hook, 2010; Lea & Street, 1998; McWilliams, 2014; Wingate, 2012), and intertwined with discipline-specific academic languages. Still, other

studies of TAUS literacy practices found that TAUS struggled to adapt to the academic writing expectations and requirements of different disciplines (Anderson, Best, Black, Hurst, Miller, & Miller, 1990; Bergmann & Zeppernick, 2007; Elbow, 1998; Lea & Street, 1998; McCarthy, 1987), but that prior knowledge could help them decide on an approach for a specific writing assignment (Nelson, 1990; Robertson, Taczak, & Yancey, 2012).

In summary, much of the existing literature examines academic literacies in terms of how much of it undergraduate students have, how they can get more of it, and the barriers that stand in the way. These studies are important, because possessing academic literacies has been empirically linked to preparedness (Phillips & Giordano, 2016), good grades (Donohue & Erling, 2012), persistence (Penrose, 2002), degree attainment (Holder, Jones, Robinson, & Krass, 1999), and sense of belonging (Marshall, Zhou, Gervan, & Wiebe, 2012; Tapp, 2014). However, all of these studies focus on the TAUS population. While they provide a foundational understanding of academic literacies at the undergraduate level, because of the differences in the amounts and types of prior experience and the differences in educational goals between TAUS and AUS, these studies do not provide an adequate understanding of the same concept in AUS. Studies that explore these concepts specifically among AUS are even more limited and focus on AUS classroom experience, the development of academic literacies in AUS, and the intersection of identity and academic literacies in AUS.

Some studies on AUS have focused on their experiences in the classroom more generally. For example, Kasworm (2003) found that AUS use five distinct “knowledge voices” to construct academic knowledge and situate this knowledge among the

knowledge they have acquired outside the classroom. Each of the five knowledge voices values different kinds of student knowledge. The "entry voice" student values academic knowledge, but experiences significant confusion and stress when actually attempting to participate in the academic community. The "outside voice" student values real-world knowledge, which they view as having much more relevance than academic knowledge. This creates tension in their academic pursuits, which they view as simply the means to a desired end in the real world, especially when academic knowledge conflicts with their real-world knowledge. The "cynical voice" student exposes the tension between the two, questioning the worth of academic knowledge in the real world, especially because they perceive the academic environment to be "judgmental" (p. 93). Finally, the "straddling voice" student values both academic and real-world knowledge, and actively tries to make connections between the two, while the "inclusion voice" student ultimately seeks create new knowledge in both the academic and real worlds, displays strong metacognitive capabilities, and may want to pursue even further education. This is a strong case study of a large (n = 90) diverse population of AUS. However, the study itself acknowledges that much remains to be understood about how academic knowledge is acquired. Moreover, it does not explore variances in types of either academic or real-world knowledge and, because it is more than 15 years old, cannot account for changes in the student population since then.

A small body of research identifies strategies to engage AUS in developing academic literacy practices. For example, Gleason (2004) found that asking her AUS to write what they know—specifically ethnographies about their workplaces—these students were more engaged with their writing and she as the instructor realized that these

"workplace literacies" could be used to help develop academic literacies. Additionally, Karpiak (2000) found that asking AUS to write autobiographies allowed them to explore their own identities, which could later lead to more successful exploration of the world around them through other academic pursuits. However, these two studies are limited to the researcher's own experiences and practices, to courses that allow for more personal types of writing.

Still other studies demonstrated that the use of peer review (Hayes, Fry, & Cummings, 2018), frequent feedback on low-stakes assignments (Cleary, 2012); and the incorporation of prior knowledge and lived experience could all help adult undergraduates develop confidence and acquire academic literacies (Larotta & Moon, 2016; Marschall & Davis, 2012). Still other institutions are finding ways to give academic credit and thus a sense of legitimacy to students' lived experiences and knowledge acquired outside the university through the submission of portfolios that document relevant links between workplace literacies and academic literacies (Brown, 2002; Pokorny, 2012). While all of these pedagogical approaches are interesting and worthy of exploring, they are not always widely applicable. For example, specific writing assignments may not be relevant in all academic disciplines and institutions that primarily serve traditional-age undergraduates may not have mechanisms in place to evaluate prior knowledge through a portfolio review process.

Other studies focus on the same central relationship between academic literacies and identity, but do so among adult student populations who are not pursuing a bachelor's degree. Compton-Lilly (2009) explores the emerging reading identities of ten adults and finds that though they struggled with "official" literacy, they were enthusiastic

about out-of-school literacy practices. However, the students in Compton-Lilly's study were pursuing their GED. Similarly, Appleby & Hamilton (2006) explore the relationships and tensions that exist between adult students' academic and out-of-school literacies, but their study participants are in adult basic education (ABE) courses. The literacy skills and practices required to succeed in a GED or ABE program, compared to an undergraduate program, are not the same. McDowell's study of adult undergraduates pursuing higher education in a prison environment (2014) found that these students chose to use more formal, academic language in their writing, even when assignments could have accommodated more personal language, because they desired to be recognized by others as legitimate members of an academic community, not as prisoners. The use of specific language choices needs to be more broadly explored among a more diverse population of adult undergraduates who are pursuing their educations on a campus among a broader academic community that can recognize AUS as members of the community. Finally, Hart & Thompson (2016) explore best way to engage the workplace literacies of military veterans in the writing classroom. Though the concept is an important one to explore, the workplace literacy of the military is only one type of out-of-school literacy. This study neither looks at the veteran experience from the student perspective, nor accounts for ways to engage other kinds of AUS in the classroom. All of these studies limit academic literacies to writing skills.

In summary, little is known about the intersection of the AUS identity with the development of holistic, multimodal academic literacy, especially at the level of the bachelor's degree. Michaud's (2011) case study of a single AUS seeks to better understand the "reverse commute": the transition from the professional literacy of the

workplace to the academic literacy of school. This is a transition that many AUS make but that many instructors do not know how to address in the classroom. The study focuses on two components of the reverse commute: 1) the ability to compose new texts based on "genre knowledge," or familiarity with various writing conventions (p. 247), and 2) the way students write new texts through "assemblage composing," or putting pieces from existing texts together to make a new text (p. 251). Through data collected from one AUS, Michaud finds that: 1) the student uses knowledge of a genre common in his workplace to produce texts for school, which is often not entirely appropriate for the assignment, and 2) the student relies heavily on assemblage composing in the workplace, and also uses it as a "crutch" (p. 255) to complete school assignments due to insecurity with his writing ability. The article suggests that supporting AUS writing may require a pedagogical approach that incorporates their prior knowledge—a change that may only be implementable on a local level because every AUS is different.

In a similar study of 22 AUS, Lea (1998), like Michaud, finds that many students are either trying to mimic the academic writing of their source material or respond to assignment prompts using prior knowledge or experiences that may not be appropriate for the assignment. She calls these approaches the reformulation approach and the challenge approach, respectively. While students may receive positive feedback on assignments in which they take a reformulation approach, Lea contends that they are not really engaging with the course content. However, when they try the challenge approach, they often get negative feedback on their writing because it does not meet the expectations of the instructor. Through further exploration of one student's case, Lea explores the disconnect between student instinct and ability, and instructor expectations.

While these two studies focus specifically on writing, one other study—again, a narrative case about a single AUS (Orgnero, 2013)—focuses on the student's experience of reentry to the university in a course specifically designed to ease the transition. The student's experience is consistent with other more extensive research on common AUS experiences: he felt anxious about his own abilities, and out-of-place in a modern educational environment, but highly motivated to succeed. The transition course did help the student acclimate to the educational environment, but did not help the student socialize into academic discourse.

These studies all share a few significant limitations. First, they each focus on one student. Single case studies, especially when all are more than five years old and one is more than 20 years old, are not sufficient to understand a population as big and diverse as the AUS population in the United States. It is unknown if there are any commonalities in the academic literacy experiences of different kinds of AUS. In addition, the single case studies are primarily based on student interviews and/or artifacts. Without observing the students in their educational environments, the data does not include in-the-moment accounts of student's perceived ability to speak academic language and participate in the academic community.

Second, though each of the studies cited here address components of the acquisition and use of academic literacies, none fully address the research questions at hand. That is, none look at academic literacies holistically and seek to better understand the AUS's ability to read, write, *and* speak *multimodal* academic language (i.e. language that may be written, spoken, visual, print, digital, and more). This is a requirement in the modern college classroom and therefore the ability to do these things well is a form of

linguistic cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). However, the linguistic cultural capital needed to succeed in today's higher education environment is rapidly changing. Indeed, while the New London Group (Cazden, et al., 1996) cited the rise in digital media and cultural interconnectedness as some of multiliteracies' *raison d'être* when they coined the term in 1996, even they could not have possibly predicted the profound technological changes that have happened since, and how those changes have both impacted traditional literacy practices and given rise to new ones.

While some studies address the digital literacies of AUS and find that lack of experience or comfort with technology can be a barrier to success in online courses (Miller & Lu, 2002; Shinkareva & Benson, 2007), even they are not enough to shed more light on the problem. Because digital technologies and their uses in education are constantly shifting, studies on digital literacies can quickly become almost irrelevant. Importantly, Frank & Castek note that it is time for all education to shift its thinking beyond basic digital literacies and competencies towards digital problem-solving, or using digital tools to "locate, evaluate, create, and communicate information" (2017, p. 66). However, this shift is impossible to plan for when little is known about the digital literacies of today's AUS population. Simply put, being a college student today is not the same as it was even five years ago. Constant changes demand the constant evolution of literacies. It makes sense that, for AUS, who may have been away from school for years or even decades, these changes may make it more challenging to acquire and use academic literacies in all their forms.

Third, despite all that remains to be understood about the relationship between adult undergraduate' identities and their academic literacies, even less is understood

about the other literacies these students may bring with them to the college classroom, i.e. out-of-school literacies. More must be done to understand how the out-of-school literacies of adult undergraduates are (or are not) included and valued in the university classroom.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Study Design

To develop an understanding of the AUS experience of learning using academic literacies, and how their out-of-school literacies compete with, complement, challenge their academic literacies, this study uses a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for concepts or populations that are not well understood (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018); in the context of this study, the intersection of the concept of academic literacy and the AUS population is not well understood at all. The few studies that address the two factors together are limited in scope and do not consider a more holistic definition of literacy that extends beyond the cognitive ability to read and write at the college level (Lea, 1998; Michaud, 2011; Orgnero, 2013).

These gaps in the existing literature further necessitate the need for a qualitative inquiry. This approach lends other strengths to develop a better understanding of the research questions. First, qualitative inquiry focuses on a specific context in a "natural setting" (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This is important because most other studies of AUS take place in the community college setting, not in bachelor's degree programs, and because few other studies have explored academic literacy acquisition in the classroom, which other research has indicated is a critically important site of engagement with the university for AUS (Dill & Henley, 1998; Panacci, 2015; Samuels, Beach, & Palmer, 2011-2012). Second, a qualitative approach also allows the voices and experiences of the participants to come to the forefront; this rich data and understanding of their perspectives is critical in studies where little is known about the concept or the

population. Third, because a sociocultural view of literacy is a complex view that extends the definition of literacy beyond the cognitive, a qualitative approach to understanding academic literacies is useful. Sociocultural factors are often not easily measured, and because this particular population is not well understood, we do not yet know what factors beyond cognitive ability could be measured in the first place (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This employs a multiple case study design to better understand the academic literacy experiences and practices of certain types of adult students. Case study research is the most appropriate design to explore a problem through the lens of specific examples that are bounded by place and time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All cases are individual AUS who are earning their bachelor's degree at the research site and are enrolled during the 2019-2020 academic year, thereby bounding each case by individual experience, setting, and the timeframe of two academic semesters. AUS share only one thing in common: they are age 25 or older. Otherwise, AUS are a diverse group, and a multi-case study design can provide rich, in-depth understanding of both the commonalities in the AUS experience with academic literacies, and highlight some of the key differences among a diverse student body. Cross-case analysis of student experiences in the same institution can mitigate some of the methodological challenges with the aforementioned single case studies (Lea, 1998; Michaud, 2011; Orgnero, 2013).

While a sociocultural view of literacy has been well explored, and a definition of academic literacies is available, there had been no existing theoretical framework through which these research questions can be understood. By focusing on specific cases of AUS with specific backgrounds and out-of-school literacies and engaging in cross-case

analysis, combining both types of design can illuminate important understandings about what the experience of being socialized into academic literacies is like for a significant portion of the undergraduate student body.

Study Site and Participants

The research site is a public, state-related R-1 university located in a major city in the Northeast region of the United States. The university has an undergraduate student body of nearly 30,000. Incoming first-year students have an average GPA of over 3.5, while incoming transfer students have an average GPA of over 3.0. This information is relevant because, though grades are only one measure of academic literacy, these figures provide a baseline understanding of student capability when entering the university environment.

The research site is of particular interest because it has a long history of serving adult students and was founded more than 100 years ago as a night school for working adults. While this history and mission of access persists today, over the last century and particularly within the last several decades, the university has transformed from a night school for working adults to a striving research university that primarily serves traditional undergraduates. This growth has led to some tension between the university's roots and commitment to adult students and its desire to emerge as a premier research institution that is a destination for traditional undergraduates.

Participants in this study are adult students pursuing their first bachelor's degree from this research site. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize the importance of choosing a purposeful sample to best represent the idea to be studied, especially in a multiple case study so that different perspectives on the same idea can be understood. The literature on

AUS cites work and family obligations as some of the defining pressures on AUS. With this in mind, the AUS who have participated in this study include:

1. Students who are seeking to enter a field that requires learning a new type of discipline-specific academic literacy (e.g. business, STEM, etc.)
2. Students who are seeking to advance in a field that requires a type of discipline-specific academic literacy to which they have already been exposed in the workplace
3. Students who are returning to school after raising children, or while raising children
4. Students who are immigrants and for whom English is not their first language
5. Students who are formerly incarcerated returning citizens

Participants were not selected because of their race, gender, or socioeconomic status. However, because this study takes a sociocultural view of literacy, I recognize that these factors may complicate the five profiles described above, and that some of these profiles overlap with each other. For example, one participant is a formerly incarcerated returning citizen who is raising a child and seeking to advance in his field. The complexity of the adult identity makes fitting each participant into only one of these profiles impossible.

AUS tend to fall into one of three categories in terms of level of academic experience. While some students begin their course of study as adults with no prior academic credit earned, every participant in this study had some prior postsecondary academic experience. Some began their postsecondary education at a four-year institution immediately after earning a high school diploma or GED, but dropped out shortly thereafter without earning a credential. Prior to studying at the research site, all of these

participants spent some time at a community college. Others earned an associate's degree and took a long break before returning to attempt the bachelor's degree. Still others could be categorized as classic "swirlers," or students who earned credits at multiple institutions, swirling in and out of two- and four-year institutions in a nonlinear fashion (de los Santos & Wright, 1990). Two of the participants in this study are technically considered to have re-enrolled at the research site, because they initially matriculated as 18-year-olds and dropped out. Despite sometimes decades-long gaps, the research site did not consider them to be new students.

Data Collection and Analysis

To recruit participants, I first identified a list of courses that offered multiple sections each semester and were thus likely to have at least a few AUS enrolled. I excluded any courses that I believed unlikely to require at least some writing assignments and ultimately finalized a list of 945 faculty teaching art, business, communications, education, engineering, film, liberal arts, music, STEM, and theater courses at the freshman or sophomore levels. I also identified the primary contact of the office that serves students who are active military or veterans, and all academic advisors (n = 80) across the university for a total list of 1,026 gatekeepers. These gatekeepers were emailed some information about the study and asked to forward a link to a screening survey to all students in their introductory courses. In order to not put anyone in a position of having to try to identify students' ages, they were advised that the screening survey's first question disqualifies anyone who responds who is under age 25.

This participant recruitment method protects FERPA-protected sensitive information because I did not have direct access to student characteristics or contact

information until the students themselves disclosed that information in the screening survey. A separate email address for the sole purpose of this study was created so that participants could reach out to me directly after they receive the initial outreach email.

The screening survey collected the following information on a voluntary basis: participants' ages, current fields of study, credits earned to date (including any credit earned at other institutions), veteran status, whether the student has ever worked outside the home, and if so, for how many years and in what industr(ies); whether the student is currently working and in what industry; and whether the student has children. This data was collected in a SoGoSurvey account created for the sole purpose of screening participants for this study. The account login information was not shared with anyone. At the end of the survey, students were asked if they were willing to participate further through interviews, observations, and document collection, a purposeful sample that represents a diverse multiple case study will be selected. At the conclusion of the study, the screening data contained within the SoGoSurvey account was deleted and the account was deactivated. Anyone who indicated that they were not willing to move forward was not asked for any personally identifying information, such as their name or email address. Their data was discarded.

There were a total of 68 survey respondents. Of these, 30 indicated that they were between ages 18-24 and were immediately disqualified. Of the remaining 38, 29 indicated that they were willing to move forward with interviews and observations and provided names and contact information. I reviewed each of the 29 responses and split the group approximately in half based on age, gender, fields of study, childcare responsibilities, and industries in which they currently or have previously worked. As

expected, because the research site has a robust online bachelor's degree in business administration, many respondents were business students. In the first round, I selected only business students who were also diverse in age, gender, and previous industries. Initially, I reached out to 14 people, then did some additional outreach to the other half of the list. Ultimately, eight respondents were willing to be interviewed and to allow me to observe them in the classroom and read their writing. Below is a table that provides basic biographical information about each of the participants, including their age, major, gender, and race. The table also indicates whether they were seeking to advance or change their careers, whether they had childcare responsibilities, and any other notable characteristics.

Table 1

Participants by Age and Demographic Characteristics

Name	**Age**	**Major**	**Gender**	**Race**	**Career**	**Parent**	**Other**
John	48	Civil Engineering	Male	White	Advance	Yes	
Walter	36	Geography & Urban Studies	Male	White	Change	No	
Ciana	31	Business Administration	Female	Black	Advance	No	International, but living in an English-speaking country; Online-only
Trebor	43	Adult & Organizational Development	Male	Black	Advance	Yes	Formerly incarcerated returning citizen
Zoe	29	Actuarial Science	Female	Asian	Change	No	Immigrant (English is second language)
Patrick	26	Social Work	Male	White	Change	No	
Kevin	29	Business Administration	Male	White	Advance	No	Online-only
Misha	36	Media Studies	Female	White	Change	No	

Best practice in case study research recommends collecting multiple sources of data to provide an in-depth understanding the idea being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Sources of data for each participant included two individual interviews (approximately 45-90 minutes each), as well as classroom observation and artifacts. The rationale for each data source is explained in the table on the next page.

The data was collected during one academic year, so each case was bounded by both time and student identity. The data for each participant was collected in the following order: 1) first interview, 2) observation, 3) second interview. Documents were collected from both the fall and spring semesters as students drafted and completed writing assignments, experienced the university, and communicated with faculty and staff. For each participant, the first interview focused primarily on personal academic history, goals for after college, and their perceptions of academic literacies generally. These interviews were semi-structured and sometimes veered off topic into other aspects of the participants' lives, but were important in building rapport and a sense of trust, before transitioning into a more formal classroom environment for observation or asking for students' graded work. The second interview asked students to reflect on the fall semester and to discuss the new topics they were learning in their spring courses. It also asked students to walk through their writing processes for specific documents, reflect on the classroom environment I observed, and asked them to look ahead to their plans post-college. The table on the next page summarizes the types of data collected for this study, and the rationale for each.

Table 2

Types of Data Collected and Details and Rationale for Each

Data Source	**Details**	**Rationale**
Individual interviews	Two interviews per participant, ranging from 30-90 minutes, to discuss academic history and future goals, life experiences, literacy practices, and other classroom experiences at the college level. One interview occurred at the end of the fall semester, and the other occurred at the beginning of the spring semester.	All literacy is socially and culturally situated, so developing an understanding of each participant's identity is critical, as is hearing from participants in their own words about their literacy practices and perceived challenges.
Classroom observation	Seven of the eight participants participated in one classroom of a typical course in their major. Most observations occurred in the spring semester. One was completed in the fall semester. Trebor was not observed because he graduated at the end of the fall semester and was not able to proceed directly to graduate school as expected. Each participant provided a syllabus for the course in which they were observed.	Academic literacies extend beyond reading and writing to also include speaking, listening, and understanding. Observations of classroom dynamics and participation add richness to the student's own perceptions of academic literacies and literacy practices.
Documents	Each participant submitted at least one piece of their writing, either from the fall or the spring semester. Most participants were able to submit a writing sample from the course I observed, but not all were able to provide instructor feedback and a grade.	Student writing provided evidence of student facility with written academic language. Analyzing writing assignments allowed for possible comparison of different academic literacies. Assignments where grades and feedback were provided also allowed for comparison between the writing that was expected and the writing that was produced. Documents overall can be a direct source of information, and can also prompt questions for later interviews or things to be aware of during observations (Patton, 2015).

Best practice for case study research is the examination of four or five cases (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Because AUS are extremely busy, I ultimately tried to collect as much data as possible for all eight participants in this study to account for potential participant attrition. Below is a summary of the total amount of each type of data collected for each participant.

Table 3

Participants by Amount and Types of Data Collected

Name	**Age**	**Major**	**Interviews**	**Observations**	**Documents**
John	48	Civil Engineering	2	1	2
Walter	36	Geography & Urban Studies	2	1	4
Ciana	31	Business Administration	2	1	1
Trebor	43	Adult & Organizational Development	2	0	6
Zoe	29	Actuarial Science	2	1	3
Patrick	25	Social Work	2	1	4
Kevin	29	Business Administration	2	1	3
Misha	36	Media Studies	2	1	5

Cresswell and Cresswell (2018) recommend pursuing data collection and analysis concurrently in a "data analysis spiral" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 185-186). A data analysis spiral allows for continual analysis and inductive reasoning, even while new data is being collected, as the researcher can circle back through the same step in the process before moving on. As I completed the initial data collection and analysis, I consistently created "memos" as data is collected to document my experiences and perceptions of the data in the moment (Creswell & Poth, 2018); these memos served as an additional source of data along with those sources contained in the table above. I have, as Eisenhardt (1989) recommends, consistently asked myself, "What am I learning?" and "How does

this case differ from the last?" during the memoing process and added some additional interview questions to the second interview protocol as the first interviews were completed.

Observation and document data, and their corresponding memos when applicable, were used to inform the second interview protocol. By completing the observations before the second interviews, I was able to customize each interview slightly to ask about the classroom experience I had just observed and their writing samples, which later shaped the sub-themes and themes. During each observation, I tried to be conscious of "[separating] detail from trivia" (Patton, 2015, p. 331) and used my laptop to be able to capture more accurate notes quickly. Since most observations were completed early in the semester, when students didn't yet know each other, I was able to blend in to the classroom environment. I look young and regularly carry a backpack, and I do not think most of the students in the class realized I was there. In fact, in one case, one of the study's participants was surprised to learn when we met for our second interview that I had in fact been in his class the day before. Being a "nonparticipant" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 168) allowed me to achieve my goal of observing a typical classroom environment for each student.

During each observation, I primarily focused on terminology that was introduced in class or that students were expected to already know, writing or other assessment requirements that were either discussed explicitly or not, overall pedagogical style (e.g. lecture, discussion, etc.), and the participants' engagement in the class. I kept track of how many times they raised their hands, how professors responded to their comments, where they sat, if and how they engaged with other students, and if they took notes.

During each observation, I had to be conscious of my own positionality and academic background in the liberal arts. For example, just because I felt overwhelmed by the material presented in physics or actuarial science didn't mean that the participants would be. Just because I felt somewhat bored in a lecture-style course did not mean that the participants would be. I immediately wrote a memo after each classroom observation, but in reviewing each observation, I also recognized that I was not as consistent on describing how the classrooms (and the people in them) looked and felt. I was much more concerned about capturing the language of the course. Finally, I read each course description prior to attending, but obtained the syllabus for each course only after the observation had concluded. While each syllabus was ultimately helpful in contextualizing what the students were learning, how they would be assessed, and ultimately where the class period I observed fit into the overall structure of the course, it would have been more helpful to have known that context beforehand.

Most interviews were recorded using the Otter.ai smartphone app, which both recorded the audio and transcribed the interviews in real time using artificial intelligence. The quality of the auto-transcriptions varied depending on the amount of background noise, the speakers' closeness to the microphone, and the speakers' tone and style of speaking. For example, the app often had trouble accurately recording the speech of students who spoke with an accent, or of the student who spoke in African American Vernacular English. Initially, the accuracy of the auto-transcription was, on average, about 80%. I then used oTranscribe.com to replay each interview at slower speed, checked against the transcript (or generating the transcript from scratch when Otter.ai

was not used) to achieve nearly 100% accuracy on each transcription. There are very few places where the audio was unintelligible, and they are clearly marked on each transcript.

Once each interview was transcribed, I put each transcript in Microsoft Excel and assigned some open codes, line by line. Each of the first interviews were stored in the same workbook, and each of the second interviews were stored in a separate workbook. Throughout the data analysis process, I used the filter functions to look for commonalities among the data. The filter function also allowed me to look at a raw list of every open code, and to clean up the data by reviewing text that was coded with identical or similar terms side by side. This close comparison led to some recoding and the elimination of some codes whose meaning was adequately captured in other codes.

I initially developed a list of 88 sub-codes. In examining the sub-codes, I grouped together those sub-codes that were frequently assigned to the same blocks of text. This was an iterative process that underwent several revisions until I funneled the 88 sub-codes into 22 codes. I repeated this process again with the codes, looking for places where they occurred together, and arrived at eight sub-themes. The sub-themes were then grouped together to form three emerging themes that addressed the three research questions.

Because each case was studied simultaneously, it was impossible to avoid cross-case analysis and comparisons between cases throughout the data collection and analysis process. After the first round of interviews, I developed a list of expected, surprising, and unusual codes for each case and then began to identify commonalities through cross-case analysis. I then repeated this process after the observations and second interviews, and incorporated data from the writing assignments the participants supplied as well. Chapter

4 of this dissertation provide rich description of each of the cases, and of the themes that emerged from the data.

Throughout the data collection and analysis processes, steps were taken to protect the identities of the participants and secure their data. All participants provided informed consent before participating in any interviews, allowing any observations, or providing any documents. The audio files and transcriptions, along with field notes from observations and student artifacts, were saved on a secure Google cloud unaffiliated with the research site. To protect the anonymity of the participants, each chose their own alias, which is used here in all reporting of the data. The identities of the student participants are known only to me.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Several steps were taken to ensure the validity of the study. First, I triangulated the data through collecting multiple data sources from multiple participants. All data was analyzed both within each case, and through cross-case analysis to identify patterns and look for disconfirming evidence. The simultaneous data collection and analysis procedures contributed to an inductive reasoning process that ultimately arrived at the key themes. When disconfirming evidence was found, it was constantly compared to existing and new data as it is collected.

Second, I engaged participants in member checking to ensure that their thoughts and experiences were accurately represented. Member checking happened at two stages: soon after each interview, when they were provided with a transcript to review, and later in the data analysis process as open codes and the core phenomenon emerged. Each

participant had an opportunity to clarify or add to the data they provided, which contributed to the iterative case study process.

Third, extensive field notes and memoing allowed for "rich, thick description" of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to emerge as opposed to broad generalizations that may not apply in other contexts, allowing other researchers to determine whether the data collected is transferable to other scenarios. The rich qualitative data that highlights and draws connections between concepts can help ensure internal validity (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Finally, because participation in this study was voluntary and no financial incentives were offered, I select more than four students to participate in this project to guard against potential participant attrition. While no participant dropped out of the study, and six of the eight completed all of the requirements, some intended data (observations, additional documents) were not able to be obtained.

Role of the Researcher

I am a college-level English instructor and university administrator who has taught many AUS in various levels of first-year writing (FYW), literature, and professional writing courses over ten years of teaching at different universities. Though I would argue that most students have difficulty at some point with academic language, my firsthand experiences with AUS have caused me to become interested in their literacy practices both in and out of school, how they approach their academic work, and how both of these things are different from their TAUS classmates.

My own experience as a college student was likely very different from the experiences of this study's intended participants. Upon reflection, I would not identify myself as someone who has struggled with developing or navigating academic literacies

as evidenced by my successful completion of a bachelor's and master's degree in English literature. I also pursued my bachelor's degree as a TAUS, and had very few concerns at the time about how to balance competing out-of-school responsibilities. However, I am now an adult student myself, and am simultaneously working full-time and pursuing my Ed.D. I have significantly more life responsibilities and demands on my time now than I did when I was an undergraduate student. As an instructor, I have developed a stronger understanding of the sacrifices adults make to go to school, and having to make those sacrifices firsthand has shaped how I engage with adult students.

While I have taught numerous AUS, I have still taught only at universities that primarily serve TAUS. My personal experience, especially because it is limited to one academic discipline, is not enough to fully understand the academic literacies of adult undergraduate students. My position as an instructor and an administrator demonstrates that I, like many others in a university setting, privilege academic language and value credentials from universities. While I share these stories to show some of my own experiences in engaging with and validating adult students' out-of-school literacies, I do approach this study believing in the value and importance of acquiring and using academic language, and the relationship between these skills and academic success.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter addresses the findings from 16 semi-structured interviews, seven observations, and multiple writing samples from eight AUS ranging in age from 26 to 48 and representing seven different fields of study. The data was analyzed for commonalities and points of divergence, and though each AUS experience is unique, the data did produce three emerging themes. These three themes will be discussed here, and will be supported by seven sub-themes.

Overview

This analysis is rooted in a sociocultural perspective that says that to be literate is dependent on varied social and cultural contexts in which different social languages are used (Gee, 1996; Street, 1984) and that to be literate requires not only the ability to read, write, and speak a particular language but also the ability to recognize the visual, oral, and social signs of a particular culture (Cazden et al., 1996). This is to say that literacy is inextricably tied to perspective, the expectations and customs that calcify over time into a culture, and sense of belonging.

In particular, this analysis explores the AUS experience with academic literacies, which are both the ability to read, write, and speak the language of the university, and the ability to do the same in particular fields of study (Lea & Street, 2006). Informed by the theories of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), this analysis also explores collisions between students' academic literacies and their out-of-school literacies and seeks to understand how the two may bolster or undermine each other. For example, actuarial science and media studies are two different

types of what I refer to as "discipline-specific" academic literacies. Discipline-specific academic literacies deal with knowing and using specific terminology, writing in particular styles, etc. A student majoring in one field or the other is seeking to become fluent in one of these academic languages, but may never use, or even encounter, the other. However, both students need to understand and use what I refer to as "general" academic literacy, or knowing and using terminology related to universities in general, navigating academic spaces and relationships, etc. Every student's out-of-school literacies are different and shaped by myriad facets of each student's identity, life experience, work history, interests, and more.

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do AUS at a large, public research university perceive the experience of learning and using academic literacies?
2. How do the academic literacies of AUS intersect with their out-of-school literacies both in and out of the classroom?
3. How do AUS perceive academic challenges, and how have they approached these challenges?

Participant Profiles

Within the emergent themes of this study, I will describe specific examples from each of the eight AUS's stories. Every student's experience—especially every AUS's experience—is unique. Many may assume that AUS are working traditional 9-5 jobs, have kids at home, and go to school at night. While this was the case for some of the participants in this study, most participants were millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) who had no children and were working evenings and weekends in the hospitality

industry. Many had some of the "traditional" adult student characteristics and some of the more unexpected characteristics. Below are brief descriptions of each participant in this study.

John

John was a 48-year-old white male majoring in civil engineering. He was a part-time student at the time of this study who is was also working full-time in the local government's streets department. Over a 20-year career, he worked his way up from a day laborer to a management position. John is seeking to earn a bachelor's degree to cement an eventual promotion to a director position, which requires a degree. The job description specified a preference for an engineering degree, which is why John chose his field of study. John is married with an 11-year-old daughter, who he is very proud of and says is doing great in school. John initially enrolled at the research site as an 18-year-old as part of a tuition remission program with his first job, but had to drop out when he lost that job. He since earned an associate's degree as an adult, and then re-enrolled at the research site to complete his bachelor's degree. John has an estimated 55 credits remaining to graduate.

Walter

Walter was a 36-year-old white male majoring in geography and urban studies. He was a full-time student at the time of this study and was unemployed after a varied career working mostly in restaurants and sales (beer and cars). Walter is married and is expecting his first child this year. Walter is seeking a career in urban planning, specifically in transportation, following in the footsteps of his late father, who was also an urban planner. Walter is deeply curious, with a broad and deep well of prior

knowledge and interests in geography, sustainable agriculture, economics, and social justice. He was initially accepted to the research site as an 18-year-old, deferred admission for a year, and then attended for one semester before dropping out. Since then, has earned credits at a community college and another four-year institution before re-enrolling at the research site to complete his bachelor's degree. Walter was on track to graduate in the academic year in which he participated in this study.

Ciana

Ciana was a 31-year-old black female majoring in business administration. She was a part-time student at the time of this study and was also working full-time in auditing and compliance, after previous experience working in a bank. Ciana is pursuing her degree entirely online as a citizen of a foreign country. She recognizes that an undergraduate degree, or even an MBA, is required to advance in her field, or to move into other business-related fields of interest, but also cites other credentials issued by external groups as important. She values the flexibility of learning online, but struggles with time management and the pressures of balancing a full-time job with schoolwork. She earned an associate's degree immediately after high school, and started her career in business, working for 10 years before deciding to go back for her bachelor's degree. The academic year in which she participated in this study was her first coming back to school.

Trebor

Trebor was a 43-year-old black male majoring in adult and organizational development. He was a part-time student at the time of this study, and was also working full-time as an academic mentor for high school students in a dual enrollment program. He is passionate about helping others navigate and utilize educational systems, and about

mentorship, as he has benefited from similar help when he returned to community college as an adult to earn his associate's degree. After dropping out of high school, he served a long prison sentence, earned his GED and associate's degree, and now has plans to not only complete his bachelor's degree but persist through a doctoral degree. He has one 16-year-old son, and hopes that he, too, will earn at least a master's degree. Trebor graduated halfway through the academic year in which this study took place, with the intent to matriculate directly into a master's program (also at the research site), but ultimately had to defer for a semester due to administrative challenges related to obtaining clearances to work with minors and his prior criminal record.

Zoe

Zoe was a 29-year-old Asian female majoring in actuarial science. She was a full-time student at the time of this study, and was also working part-time as a bartender and server. After learning English as a child growing up in a Central Asian country, she immigrated to the United States alone at age 19 to seek greater access to opportunity. Zoe self-identified as an underperforming student, but was adept at forming relationships with other students and faculty to get academic help, and at leveraging her out-of-school network to help find employment in her field after graduation when it appeared that her in-school network may not be able to provide this kind of help. Zoe was on track to graduate in the academic year in which she participated in this study.

Patrick

Patrick was a 26-year-old white male majoring in social work. He was a full-time student and part-time bartender at the time of this study. Patrick earned his GED and completed two years of service in AmeriCorps, where he discovered a passion for serving

others and working with people. He was seeking to earn a bachelor's degree to facilitate a career in teaching abroad and/or in community organizing and activism. He had previously attended some community college, but did not earn an associate's degree. He has an estimated 75 credits remaining to graduate.

Kevin

Kevin was a 29-year-old white male majoring in business administration. At the time of the study, he was a part-time student who also worked full-time in property management, after previously working in retail. Kevin was earning his degree entirely online despite living in the same city as the research site. He identified as a self-directed student, and enjoyed the flexibility of online learning, which allowed him to work ahead when possible and continue to travel regularly. He was passionate about aviation and his dream job would be to work for an airport or for port authority. He was previously enrolled at a four-year institution as an 18-year-old, but dropped out after a year after suffering from depression. He then moved to a new city and enrolled in community college before dropping out shortly thereafter. He re-enrolled in community college five years later, earned an associate's degree, and immediately transferred to the research site to complete his bachelor's degree. Kevin was on track to graduate in the academic year in which he participated in this study.

Misha

Misha was a 36-year-old white female majoring in media studies. At the time of the study, she was a full-time student who also worked part-time as a bartender. Misha was an avid cinephile whose depth of knowledge about film and television started as the child of an executive in film distribution. She also had extensive firsthand experience of

the film and television industry, starting from her time as a child actor. She moved to Hollywood after high school when she booked a role in a film during her senior year, and lived in Hollywood for more than a decade while she tried to make it as an actor, supporting herself with a job as a bartender. Initially, she promised her parents that she would enroll in community college when she moved to Hollywood, but quickly dropped out. After leaving Hollywood, she re-enrolled at another community college and earned an associate's degree before transferring into the research site to complete her bachelor's degree. Misha was deeply connected with the student identity and was seeking to go to graduate school for film analysis, but would work for a year or two first, ideally in film distribution, first. Misha was on track to graduate in the academic year in which she participated in this study.

Emergent Themes

Theme 1: Literacy Collisions as Sites of Both Discovery and Anxiety

Imagine two magnets trying to connect. One represents academic literacies and one represents out-of-school literacies. When the correct poles face each other, the magnets snap together. When incorrect poles face each other, the magnets repel each other. In the following three sub-themes, I will share examples of times when the two magnets repelled each other, when the students' out-of-school literacies or intuitive problem-solving skills could not connect with what they were being asked to do in the classroom. I will also share examples of how the students in this study were able to use their out-of-school literacy skills to help turn repelling magnets around—to make them snap together.

Academic Writing as a Site of Literacy Disconnect

Types of writing requirements. From the interviews and syllabi review, I counted at least 22 different types of writing assignments that students were routinely expected to complete. Syllabi, rubrics, and course websites provided drastically different levels of detail on what was expected in terms of assignment content, length, formatting, and assessment criteria. While some assignment instructions and rubrics went on for pages, with requirements explicitly stated on everything from the number of sections the assignment should have to the name the file should be given when it is submitted. Others were more general, asking for assignments to be “complete,” “show a reasonable level of thought,” on a “relevant topic,” “clear,” and “fully develop[ed].” This, of course, leaves a fair amount open to interpretation. Most commonly stated were explicit length requirements and citation style. Some syllabi made use of bold, underline, and uppercase font to draw students’ attention to requirements of particular importance to an instructor, e.g. “VERBALLY EXPLAIN YOUR PLAN, no numerical calculations in this step!” and “DO NOT COPY AND PASTE THE ABSTRACT.”

Of course, the assignments the participants talked about or that were mentioned in the syllabi that I collected represent assignments from only one course in each field and cannot be taken as a generalization of these fields as a whole, or a representation of every possible type of writing assessment in a particular field. However, for students who only take one course in a particular field, the uniqueness of a particular instructor’s requirements or quirks would be difficult to understand. On the next page is a brief table listing the types of writing assignments discussed or reviewed as part of this study and the fields requiring them.

Table 4

Types of Writing by Disciplines Assigned

Types of Writing	**Assigned In**							
	Act. Sci.	**Adult & Org. Dev.**	**Business Admin.**	**Civil Eng.**	**General Educ.**	**Geo. & Urban**	**Media Studies**	**Social Work**
Annotated Bibliography						x		x
Autobiography		x						
Business Case	x		x					
Case Study			x			x		
Competitive Analysis			x					
Concept Map					x			
Corporate Analysis			x					
Current Event Analysis			x					
Group Project or Presentation		x	x	x				
Individual Presentation	x	x	x		x	x	x	
Interview and Analysis								x
Issue Analysis			x					
Lab Report				x				
Literary Analysis					x			
Media Analysis							x	
Position Paper								x
Problem Set	x		x	x				
Reading Notes							x	
Reflection, Journal, or Response		x	x		x		x	x
Research Proposal						x		
Speech					x			
White Paper		x						

With only eight participants in the study and 22 writing assignments, it was clear that each student is expected to produce multiple types of writing assignments each semester, to meet the requirements of widely disparate disciplines and myriad professor expectations and requirements. Students in this study were acutely aware of how they would need to shift their language to suit different course requirements, write with sometimes obscure or unique grading systems in mind, learn new types of language for new coursework, and develop their own voices. They also knew that the written language they were using in school would likely have little relevance to their careers.

Switching between multiple literacies. Zoe, a graduating senior, had been deeply immersed in the language of business and actuarial science for several years. Each time we talked, she spoke clearly about what kind of writing was acceptable in her business courses, and how challenging she found these requirements to meet, even with years of experience.

As a requirement for graduation, Zoe took a business communication course that provided her with direct instruction and practice on how to write for a business audience. Thinking back on that course, she said, “I did well in the class. I did my best. I did ok. I think I got a B+ in it. So, I took it as a good sign of me managing a new style of writing.” Even here, though, as she talked through her experience in the course, she began with saying she did well, a more objective measure of performance. She then quickly shifted to subjective (“I did my best”) and then back to something a bit more objective (“I did ok”) before finally stating the grade she earned in the course, the sign of how well her instructor believed she adapted to this style of writing.

Zoe repeatedly said in our interviews that writing was difficult for her. It was hard for her to expand on her ideas and to get something down on the page at all. Even with short assignments, like business cases, Zoe knew exactly what needed to be written but still struggled to actually write it. She could rattle off the requirements: background, problem statement, alternatives, recommendations, implementation, metrics, and summary—in three pages, double-spaced. And "you can't play around with margins because they check that." Even for someone who identified as a concise writer, Zoe found these assignments to be extremely challenging to complete. She estimated that just one of them could take her 20 hours of work. Despite being familiar with the requirements and exactly what kinds of mistakes will lose her points, she still often made those mistakes. Each of the writing assignments she provided as part of this study showed that. She continued to put background information in the alternatives section, or use half her space writing about the background, leaving only a page and a half to complete the other sections. On several of these assignments, her instructor corrected her on APA format and word choice (e.g. "Do not use contractions in business reports"). The format of this assignment, and even the language itself, was not intuitive to her. Reflecting on what it was like to write this way, she said:

> It's ridiculous, like it's so much to… so a lot of times I misplace things, and I'm like, 'It makes sense to explain why and introduce a new piece of information in the alternative, because you're leading the reader through it.' But it cannot be.

Though Zoe was a senior, she was also still completing some of her general education requirements, and was frustrated by the starkly different requirements in her courses. She thought it was because general education "tests your thinking" while her actuarial science curriculum tested her knowledge of the subject matter. But it still

shocked her that she could write a general education paper in a fraction of the time it took to produce a business case of the same length, and that she earned better grades on her general education papers:

> I've been getting full points for like 'expert language' and 'great understanding of a concept,' and I'm like, 'I whipped it out… I came from work, and I whipped it out in two hours without even rereading it and you're telling me that's expert language?' When I go back and reread, I'm seeing the mistakes that I've made. I'm cringing on the inside. I'm like, 'Oh, this is so bad!' They gave me 100%! Unbelievable.

Though the business cases seemed more formulaic, Zoe recognized that each one needed to be a new idea, and that she would be assessed on both the quality of the idea and the quality of the writing. On her general education papers, she perceived the assessment to be based on her ability to put "some thoughts" on the page. Regarding one paper on gender inequality, she said that all she had to do was rephrase the ideas in two short source readings. "None of that was my original idea," she said, but she got full credit.

Both styles of writing were things she had to learn both through direct instruction and practice, while she was enrolled as a student. Her previous experience as a bartender and server gave her no frame of reference for the writing assignments she needed to complete in school. The oral language she used at work could not help her, except to provide an example of what *not* to do in business writing:

> Business writing is very concise…. You jump straight to the point…. [But] it's not what I do for my verbiage at work. It's definitely more, like, liberal artsy. Does that make sense? I have to make a sale. You have to describe something so it sounds appealing. 'That's a great choice.' 'That's my favorite.' 'I recommend that to my friends and family.' Like things like that… Just say that to make a guest confident in their choice. I think it's a bit of a psychology play, but that's what happens when you depend on gratuities for a living.

When Zoe imagined graduating, and hopefully leaving her career in the hospitality industry for a career as an actuarial scientist, she was not sure that even these discipline-

specific writing assignments would be relevant. Unless she went into consulting, she was not necessarily expecting to write any more business cases.

Learning a new academic literacy and pleasing new gatekeepers. John struggled every day in his physics course. He could do the math, and even found doing the calculations to be almost enjoyable sometimes. But every problem set, and every question on every test, had to be submitted in the IDEA grading format. He had never heard of it prior to this course, and he continually lost points for failing to follow the format.

An overview of the IDEA framework was provided as a one-page summary at the end of the physics syllabus. Though this was not stated in the syllabus, the IDEA framework is from *Essential University Physics, Vol. 1* (Wolfson, 2014). This was not the required textbook for the physics course, and so it was likely that the only information students had about this course requirement was from this one-page summary. IDEA stands for interpret, develop, evaluate, and assess. In the short summary provided in the syllabus, the framework required John and his classmates to do the following (I have eliminated the additional text under each item here for the sake of brevity):

1. Interpret the problem by identifying applicable concepts and principles.
2. Represent the problem in terms of symbols and figures.
3. Develop a plan for solving the problem. (Here, it says on the summary sheet that all students must "VERBALLY EXPLAIN YOUR PLAN, No numerical calculations in this step!")
4. Evaluate your answer.
5. Assess your answer.

For John and his classmates, “each portion of the question was worth a given number of points, and having the right answer was only worth two out of 10 points. The rest of it was all in how you wrote it.”

John shared an example of how he struggled to see the relevance of this problem-solving strategy to both the course content itself and to his career. He described one problem for which he earned almost no points:

> One question, I remember, you had a metal bar of two different materials. Half of the bar was copper and the other half was iron. And the two metals conduct heat at a different rate, so this end is at 0 degrees and this end is at 100 degrees, and you had to calculate what the temperature would be in the middle with both halves of the bar being the same size but different materials…. And part of my problem on that particular test is I didn’t put the symbol for heat conductivity in the right area, even though I used those numbers in the next area. Even though I used the information, because I didn’t write it down in the right section, I lost points. I was close [to the right answer]. It was 83 and I had 87. But I also could not remember the correct formula, so I kind of made one of my own, which got close.

John was not arguing he should get points for getting the wrong answer, but he was frustrated by the professor’s unwillingness to recognize his problem-solving skills and creativity. This frustration was underscored by John’s knowledge that he would never use this framework again, and would never even make these calculations again:

> Very little of this will have relevance to my work. I actually work as a manager. I manage the guys who fix potholes and ditches and plow snow and salt the streets. When I get training at work, it's all about sexual harassment and traffic control, and stuff like that. The college degree will have very little actual effect on my work. Except for being the credential I need to get promoted.

Even students who identified as strong writers still worried about meeting the requirements of exacting professors. Misha said that others have always told her that she was “a fairly decent writer” who has a “pretty good understanding of how to construct something.” She likened writing a paper to putting together a jigsaw puzzle and figuring

out where different bits of information should fit best. However, even in her last semester, when she said she had felt the most confident about her academic abilities as she ever had, she still worried about how to adjust to a new professor and new standards. She gave an example of an assignment for which the content was easy: read an article, summarize it and incorporate a few quotes, and react with a question. She had been writing papers like this for years. The hard part, she said, was meeting her professor's formatting requirements, which were detailed as part of a 19-page syllabus. The syllabus included seven reasons for which a paper would receive a zero, including "the file is titled incorrectly—this includes an extra word(s), missing word(s), reversed last and first name, the incorrect reading notes number, etc." In reviewing the requirements, Misha said:

> [It was] like super, super, super specific. So that was, like, three hours last night for a very short article, just making sure that I was—now that I've gotten the first one out of the way, once I get her feedback and I kind of know that I'm on the right track, I know I'll be ok. But this first one, I was sweating it.

While these were requirements for everyone in Misha's class, not just the adult students, Misha and other students had to display an attention to detail that, to her, seemed excessive. In the syllabus, the professor justified these formatting requirements (and willingness to fail students automatically for not following them) for the following reason:

> You will be expected to adhere to many stipulations in your careers, whether you are in media, finance, nursing, engineering, teaching, or anything else. Clients are picky, especially when you are handling millions of their dollars or sticking a needle in their arm to take blood.

This is true. However, Misha's prior career in bartending did not require any writing whatsoever. The only stipulation she could think of as it related to her career was that "when they say, 'Jump,' you don't say, 'How high?' You just jump."

Developing your own voice. When Walter registered for a course on food studies, he had no idea he would become so passionate about it. He had had a prior budding interest in aquaculture, which stemmed back to his time living in a tiny apartment in Brooklyn, when "anything that you did with your hands that was vaguely outside and space efficient just occupies your brain as a fascination." But once he was immersed in the curriculum of the food studies course, which blended a geographical perspective on food systems with a perspective on economic justice, he became almost obsessed. Walter is someone who identifies as "sort of a socialist," but the sort of socialist who is interested in figuring out "what works in the US." The majority of our first conversation was about food studies: learning about sustainable food systems, recalling that he would sometimes get so excited about what he was reading that he had to stop and tell his wife about it, and, most importantly, worrying intensely about how to write about it.

At the same time, Walter was also enrolled in a research design course and he was trying to make the two courses work together. In this research design course, the final assignment was a qualitative research report on neighbors' perceptions of some aspect of their local environment. The project was broken down into 10 shorter assignments throughout the semester, but would ultimately coalesce all of those assignments together as one report, the 11th assignment. Walter chose to research people's eating habits in the neighborhood in which he currently lives, and chose to focus specifically on fish.

“I’m sort of spinning my wheels here trying to figure out what I’m actually saying on this thing,” he told me when we met towards the end of the semester. He had developed a research question that sought to better understand people’s perceptions of eating fish and the local food movement. As we talked through what he was working on, he repeatedly expressed anxiety about completing the assignment successfully:

> I’ve been doing—reading a lot of academic articles and they all have their own tone and style. I have to produce—I have a rough draft of an academic paper due on Thursday that I have not found a voice for. So that’s been a challenge. I actually don’t know that I’ve really found that voice. [General education] and writing the five-paragraph or, you know, writing an argumentative essay or something like that, that’s much easier. Writing about a book is much easier than writing about my own research.

Walter had shown me a sample paper from his general education course, on which he had just received feedback. It was full of effusive praise: “flawless,” “amazing,” “a total pleasure to read - I can’t imagine how it could be better or more interesting.” Walter seemed almost embarrassed to show it to me and called the feedback “gratuitous.” Now that he was staring down a deadline for a paper he found to be much more difficult, and much more reliant on his own voice, he felt like he didn’t know where to go or how to put words onto the page.

We walked through the steps he had completed so far. He had interviewed three people: his wife, his friend, and his friend’s wife. He had noticed some interesting or unexpected things that were said in the interviews, had thought about what they might mean, and was using the right vocabulary (coding, samples, etc.)… and had gotten stuck. He talked about interviewing his neighbor’s wife, whose fish of choice was catfish and who still felt closely tied to her Southern heritage, despite living in a northern, East Coast city for more than 20 years. He recognized that a local food movement would mean

something different for her than it would for someone born and raised in the area. "There is something interesting here," he said, "And I don't know how to write it."

The professor provided a format for the assignment in the syllabus, and provided an opportunity to revise. Walter ultimately produced a 16-page paper for this assignment, but, even with this help, he received negative feedback from his instructor about its quality:

> [Walter] you have lots of good data in here but this report really needs focus and much better organization, including attention paid to transitions and more signposting. Most importantly, you don't include herewith a final statement of what your research question actually is, which means that though you present lots of interesting findings, it doesn't hang together as a single interlocking argument. Additionally, you never discuss or justify the use of cognitive maps over and above your interviews, which I think is a missed opportunity for spatial thinking here. And of course, this is missing a literature review.

Walter knew the paper was not his best work, and when I reminded him that, while he was writing it, he had said that he didn't know what he wanted it to be, he replied, "Yeah, I still don't." The complexity of the idea he was grappling with was compounded by having five other courses to worry about and no frame of reference for what the assignment should look like, beyond the academic articles he was reading by PhDs and professionals in the field. Walter felt more hopeful about his next course's assignment—a research proposal, not a small study—which would not require him to distill large amounts of original material and to speak in an academic voice that was all his own. "It's just going to go a lot more smoothly, I think," he said.

Even then, he still felt disconnected from the writing itself. He asked his new professor if, instead of a research proposal, he could write a project proposal, or at least "all the steps that are as many as is feasible for a student to do." With no immediate plans to go to graduate school, he would have rather done something that would relate more

closely to his future career in transportation planning, like a proposal for how to improve a public transit station or improve traffic flow on a major highway. "Have you gotten to do a project proposal in other classes?" I asked. "No," he replied, "Which is why I was hoping I can do it before I left school."

The Feeling of Learning a New Language

Other students in the study also experienced feelings of inadequacy when it came to learning new academic literacies, even if they expected to use those academic literacies frequently in a future career. For example, Misha, who aspired to go into film distribution or on to graduate school, struggled with conversations in class about various online media spaces. While other students intuitively understand Reddit, Twitter, and other online venues for discussing and sharing media, Misha considered herself to be "definitely behind some of the other kids." As someone with no social media presence, she knew that as she approached graduation, she would need to establish one—she was thinking about getting a Twitter account—to help her career. She recognized that she was at a disadvantage compared to her younger classmates:

> Most of my fellow students are digital natives. They just grew up with all this stuff, and it's like, yeah, you can learn, but it's kind of like speaking with an accent. You can learn English if you're from Guatemala, but you'll have an accent, and that's kind of how it is…. Like, sure, I can learn, but I'm never gonna be as natural as someone who's been doing it their entire lives.

Misha hoped she would be able to learn quickly, especially because she knows that many job prospects may ask her to do things like market their brand through social media. She worried that employers who would look at her resume and see that she was a recent graduate might assume she was young and able to easily or even instinctually do things like make memes, write viral tweets, or communicate on WhatsApp. While a professor

told her she would probably be okay, and that a lot of this is something she could "master… over a weekend with some Red Bull," Misha was quick to distinguish to me that she could probably do it "functionally, maybe not perfectly."

Similarly, Ciana likened learning statistics to learning "a new language." She remembered some of the relevant algebraic calculations, and could memorize the formulas—but what she was really being assessed on is how she interpreted the answers to problems. This was a whole new "way of thinking" and while she could recognize the language when she encountered it, she couldn't use it. It was challenging for her to interpret what different graphs meant, or figure out which numbers were relevant to solving a particular word problem. When we spoke for the first time, while she was enrolled in the course, she said, "It's not making me feel very intelligent right now."

Compounding this feeling of inadequacy was the need to acclimate to a new grading system. As an international student, Ciana did not realize the disparity between the American grading system and the grading system of her home country, which assigns letter grades approximately 10 points lower than the American system. For example, when she earned an 83 on one of her statistics assessments, she thought she had gotten an A-. When she discovered she had actually earned a B-, it only contributed to her feeling that she was not grasping the material and perhaps wasn't as smart as she thought she was.

Learning a new language, and trying to write in that new language, was often a stressful experience—but mastering that language is a critical part of ultimately claiming the professional identity that a degree in business, or media studies, or any other field may open up. Learning and using the social language of various communities is,

according to Gee, is how we can be recognized by other members of those communities (2004). The trouble is that it is often possible to recognize new social languages before we are able to use them ourselves—if ever—and that this level of fluency often comes through immersion rather than direct instruction. For example, in Misha's case, it was difficult for her to talk about modern digital media without actually using it; she could recognize it, but it was all conceptual to her, and no amount of direct instruction would make her feel more capable.

Particularly when it came to learning academic writing, many participants felt like total novices, even if they were relatively confident in the general literacy skills of committing words to the page. The assignment types, and even the concepts, often had no connection to anything they had learned previously. Still, some participants had some advantages in learning the social languages of their fields. Some were what Gee (2002) calls false beginners; while they appeared to be novices in learning new social languages, they could connect the new social language in question to one they already knew well.

Out-Of-School and Academic Literacy Intersections

While academic writing can often feel foreign or irrelevant to past work experiences or future career aspirations, AUS still have opportunities to readily or even immediately connect the academic literacies they are acquiring in school to the out-of-school literacies they have developed in their professional or personal lives. Recall the image of two magnets snapping together after the correct poles finally face each other. Using theories from the classroom to facilitate hiring processes at work, immediately taking software learned in the classroom to the internship site, and feeling the sense that

worlds are coming together and everything is clicking are all examples of literacy intersections.

Using academic theories to improve real-life practices at work. Every year, Trebor and his colleagues needed to hire a team of undergraduate students to serve as mentors for high school students participating in a summer bridge program. Without a human resources professional to support the hiring process, Trebor and his colleagues needed to do all the recruitment, interviewing, training, and evaluation of these temporary employees themselves. The program had been running for years, and every year, they had personnel problems:

> We had to fire one girl because she was cursing in front of the kids... . Then, sometimes we have people working and they're just not vested. They don't bring no energy, they won't greet the kids, they're sitting in groups themselves.

Trebor was dreading hiring a new staff for the upcoming summer, and needed to find a way to hire an engaged, competent staff.

While he was dealing with this challenge at work, he was given a new assignment in one of his organizational development courses: a white paper. He had never written one before, but when it was explained to him, he learned that he would have to write about a problem an organization was having and recommend a solution, based on current research, on how to fix it. He chose his own organization's challenge—how to hire employees effectively without an HR department—and started brainstorming. Using his own experience, he identified the major issues with this problem: advertising the position, interviewing candidates, and training the new employees.

During the research process, Trebor discovered the concept of behavioral interviewing. He had never heard of it before, but once he read more about it, he realized

that he and his colleagues were not interviewing their prospective employees effectively. He recalled previous interviews, in which they asked prospective employees hypothetical questions, e.g. "what would you do?" In doing some research as part of a class assignment, he learned that, according to behavioral interviewing, the question he should really be asking is more specific: "what *did* you do in a similar situation in the past?"

Trebor realized that by asking these kinds of questions, and by being consistent with each candidate, he would hopefully solve one of his own organizational challenges. As he imagined the upcoming interview process, he talked to be about how he wanted to teach his colleagues about behavioral interviewing, and make it "a staple in the process." To be clear, Trebor never needed to use the actual white paper. The writing was just for his professor. When he told me he would send it to me as a writing sample for this study, he said I would probably read it and think he didn't write well. But he was highly engaged in completing the assignment, and used his out-of-school experiences to enrich his academic experiences.

This moment of connection was enlightening for Trebor, and, he said, just one example of when he tried to apply what he was learning in school to his work because he saw such close relationships between concepts from school and tasks at work. He said that this happened often, with other courses and other new ideas. "Whatever my project is in there," he said, "I can come right here [to work] and get it done." However, Trebor was sometimes disappointed with how his new academic knowledge was received at work:

> I spent all this time learning about all the different theories and this, that, and the other, and I'll be trying to say, 'We should apply group theory here. We should do this.' And they'll be like, 'All right. What's next?' So, I think because I

> got my feelings hurt, I think I was trying to show somebody something and they were like, 'Ain't nobody got time for that.'

Trebor often thought about ways to apply what was discussed in class to improve practices at his organization. These close connections between academic work and professional work were one of the reasons he was happy with his choice of major. However, interactions like these with colleagues taught him that there was more nuance to how to incorporate the information he learned into his work. Sometimes, he felt like colleagues perceived him to be a show-off or a perfectionist. While he never lowered his standards, he was less inclined to share what he learned with others, even if he would look for ways to apply it himself:

> I was like, 'All right, well, I'll just keep it to myself and use whatever my skills are to enhance my productivity and my work.' Somebody told me today, 'You're always trying to be perfect.' If that's what it looks like. I'm just trying to be—I like doing stuff, and I like doing it good.

As a second example, Trebor was also assigned a professional development paper. The task was to research a field he wanted to work in and write about how he would get into that field. Because Trebor was already working in the field in which he wanted to stay, the assignment actually became more complex, and more fulfilling, for Trebor. Instead of a personal reflection, Trebor's paper evolved into a proposal to his current boss on creating a new position within his organization that would expand his job function. Essentially, it was a request for a promotion. This was an exciting opportunity to bring his two worlds together, and Trebor was easily able to evolve the idea—but only in his mind. He drafted the paper, turned it in for a grade, but still felt deeply insecure about actually showing it to his boss and wasn't sure if or when he ever would. "I don't want to present it to him unless it all makes sense and I got all the elements of it," he said.

The person he normally would go to for help in thinking through an idea like this was his boss, and without anyone else available to help him, the idea languished. He wanted his boss to be "impressed." He wanted to be sure what he was going to talk about was in line with the mission of his organization. He was not sure the idea was there yet. Ultimately, Trebor said, it was not even about the promotion itself. He just wanted to show his boss the kinds of skills he learned at school—"research, presentation, foresight"—that would make his boss want to keep him around. "I'm trying to cement my worth," he said.

Adding depth and nuance to an existing job, or providing context for academic work. Few of the writing assignments in the business administration curriculum actually affected Kevin's current job managing a condominium. The case reports he spent much of the semester working on? "That's probably something that in the real world, a consulting company would do," he said. He didn't expect that he would be writing many of those in the future.

However, Kevin hoped to either continue his career in property management or even switch fields entirely and work in transportation logistics, especially in aviation. He consistently finds found what he learns in school fed back to his work, and what he did at work helped him understand new concepts at school. As someone who had already been working in business environments for seven years, Kevin said that he had a "practical edge" that helped him situate new knowledge appropriately and tie it back to what he already knew. Moreover, he had been able to go from knowing how to perform certain tasks, to better understanding why he was performing those tasks and knowing how to recognize when a process was going awry.

For example, the accounting classroom was not the first time that Kevin ever saw balance sheets, income statements, and charts of accounts. As a property manager who looked at financial documents all the time, he had already seen them before. He was not the accountant in his office, though, so he never had to develop more than a surface-level knowledge. Kevin's job helped provide him with context and specific examples to help him make what he's learning in class stick. There's a "greater understanding," he said. "Like what is actually happening and why is that working." He sees work and school "kind of complementing each other."

This prior experience even helped him with the soft skills of being part of a class. At work, Kevin was part of a small team that had to coordinate closely and share responsibilities. When he was assigned group projects, he immediately took charge of the group, breaking down the project into manageable tasks and delegating responsibility. He treated his classmates like colleagues and "[knew] how to say that without being like a dictator."

Other participants in the study reported similar experiences of being able to apply what they learned at work almost immediately, but only with concepts or hard skills, not with writing. Ciana, who found her statistics course to be extremely challenging, was able to find some examples of how she could use her professional work to understand her coursework. As an auditor, part of her job is assessing companies' risk. Thinking of those assessments helped her to better understand the concept of probability. "We might not go as far as to say it's a one in 10 chance" of a company being exposed to a risk based on the findings of her audit, but "it is still somewhat probability. We're just not putting a number to it."

Similarly, Walter learned to use GIS software for the first time in one of his classes. In the very next semester, he was asked to complete a project using that software at his internship site. The following semester, he needed to use the software again in another course, and could draw on his real-life experience completing a project with it. These moments of literacy intersection were few and far between for the participants in this study. The other participants were not working in their chosen fields, and did not have regular opportunities to apply related concepts. Instead, participants had more success leveraging the soft skills developed through work and life experience to enhance their ability to learn new things and navigate the university.

Theme 2: How the Adult Identity Impacts the Acquisition and Use of Academic Literacies

A Desire for Deep Learning

Academic success as depth of knowledge. The AUS who participated in this study often displayed a genuine joy for learning and a strong sense of intellectual curiosity. Because all of them came to higher education later in life, all recognized their pursuit of a bachelor's degree as a very intentional next step in their lives as opposed to a matter of course after high school. Of the eight students, all had significant demands on their time outside of their studies. Half were working full time while pursuing their degrees. Three more were working part-time. Two had children, and one's wife was pregnant.

While, like most undergraduates, all were concerned about grades and were usually tired and stressed, seven of the study's eight participants would not consider themselves to be academically successful if they had only earned good grades and passed their coursework. Instead, these students would consider their undergraduate education to

be failed or flawed if they never thought about anything they learned in the classroom again. Kevin said:

> So on the surface, [academic success] means getting good grades. But I think really deeper down, it means being able to walk away from that class having actually learned something, like *truly* learned something. Not just pass the test. Taking away an experience or a deeper meaning or understanding the content of the course I think is really important. And whether or not that goes specifically towards where you're at, like I said, with that one elective [in art history], I walked away with a better appreciation of some of those religious things that, the mythology or whatever, like an understanding of all of that. And that was cool.

Ciana's answer was similar:

> For me, it would be not just passing my courses but actually learning. Because it's easy to get through something and get a good grade, but at the end of the class, you really don't retrain much of the information you were supposed to learn. So I actually want to learn in my undergraduate degree so that I can utilize the information.

Both Kevin and Ciana separate earning good grades from learning itself. While grades are a marker of someone else signifying that you have "learned," these students suggest that earning a good grade in a particular course is a fleeting measure of knowledge and that true learning requires something more long-term from the student. Each of these students alludes to possessing a depth of knowledge about the material that Webb (2002) calls "extended thinking" or "extended reasoning." This is the highest of four levels of Webb's depth of knowledge, and requires the student to think about the material in a complex way over an extended period of time, figuring out ways to connect what they've learned to other concepts both within and outside of the curriculum, including in his or her real life. Merely recalling the material is not enough; one must synthesize and apply the material to solve problems, including problems that occur elsewhere.

Joy in the student identity. While achieving this high depth of knowledge was certainly challenging, this study's participants genuinely enjoyed going to school and having the opportunity to learn. "Look at academics not necessarily as, like, 'these are the things that I have to learn,'" said Patrick, "but, like, 'these are the things I get to explore.'" Additionally, Misha thought of her time in the classroom as "a luxury," albeit an "intimidating [and] daunting" one when she considered the scope of her field and what she still had left to learn. "I feel like I look at water and I see the surface," she said, "… But it's also like, 'Cool. There's more. Dig deeper.'"

This intellectual curiosity and joy of learning extended beyond these students' chosen curriculum. Conversations often shifted towards their personal passions, which were usually only tangentially connected to their fields of study. A conversation about urban planning could easily shift into one about sustainable seafood and aquaculture. A conversation about adult and organizational development transformed into one about digital maps and the Google mapping interface. Business management became aviation and airport logistics, and actuarial science became modernist literature. Students brought with them to the classroom—or discovered once inside—interests that sometimes could easily connect to their chosen fields and sometimes could not.

The choice to go back to school, to spend the time and the money and make the sacrifices required to earn a bachelor's degree, was intentional for every participant in this study. They made this choice without pressure from others and having already worked for years in other fields. More than half of the participants in this study first attempted to earn a bachelor's degree immediately or close to immediately after high school but dropped out for various reasons shortly thereafter. Feelings about that time in

their lives ranged from “my heart was never really in it” (Misha) to “overwhelmed” (John) to “sort of out of whack” (Walter) to “really, really depressed the whole time that I was there” (Kevin). Some have attempted multiple times to complete their degrees before now. Now that they are back in school, they want to make the most of the opportunity.

Even though learning the social languages of various academic fields often felt challenging, the study’s participants still seemed to feel that, despite this challenge, they were successfully performing the identity of “college student.” As Gee (2004) reminds us, a Discourse is not only comprised of language, but also of thoughts, values, and interactions with others. Most of the participants had been studying at this university for several years already, and so they had ample time to be directly immersed in university life and student culture, even if they at times felt somewhat separate from it. They could recognize the college student Discourse in themselves, not only by how they spoke about the subject matter of their fields, but also by how they thought about themselves. Gee acknowledges that everyone can have multiple Discourses simultaneously. For adults, the college student Discourse may not be the primary Discourse, but it is an important secondary Discourse.

Confidence in choosing the right path. Coming back to school later in life has allowed each of this study’s participants to feel extremely secure in their chosen field of study. Half of the study’s participants are pursuing degrees in fields in which they currently work, while the other half will be using their degrees to make what they expect to be permanent career changes. All expressed a strong interest in what they are studying and a sense of confidence that they are on the right path for a fulfilling career. Moreover, they have the benefit of hindsight. They can compare and contrast their intended career

with work they have done previously, and are aware of their own skills, interests, and shortcomings. At least one participant, Patrick, recognized that, had he gone to college as an 18-year-old, he likely never would have chosen his current major, a field about which he is extremely passionate:

> I don't think that we should expect people to decide what they want to do, as far as my undergraduate degree is concerned, at that age…. Who knows what I would have picked, you know? I don't know. I'm not confident enough to say that I would have picked something that I would be ok with today.

Knowledge of how they learn best and how to bounce back from setbacks. Beyond knowing themselves enough to know what they want to study, these participants also know themselves well enough to know what they need to be successful in school. Their sense of perspective and ability to draw from a well of prior personal, professional, and academic experiences help these students set realistic expectations for themselves, know how they learn and study best, and get back on track quickly if things go awry.

John struggled with math—but as an engineering student, he needed to take more math than most students. To earn his bachelor's degree, he'll have to pass calculus 3—but during the time he was participating in the study, he was struggling with calculus 2. The pressure to pass weighed on him, but he was able to set a realistic expectation that worked for him on what he would be able to do. "I had to take calculus 1 twice, and it looks like I'll be taking calculus 2 twice," he told me in our first interview, towards the end of the semester in which he was enrolled in calculus 2 for the first time. "You just have to keep at it until you get it done." Later, when we met again, he confirmed that he did fail calculus 2, but was undeterred and would be taking it again. He viewed this failure as a step he needs to take to eventually pass, and that using the math tutoring services on campus was still ultimately a benefit to him, even though it didn't help him

pass. “I feel a lot more prepared,” he told me when we met again a few months later. The tutoring center helped him develop “familiarity with the material” and to understand what he didn’t know. Failing a course had not been the end of the world, or even a significant derailment of his academic career, but rather a learning experience in itself.

Kevin was pursuing his degree entirely online. He had previously spent a year as a traditional undergraduate at a large, residential campus before dropping out due to depression. Later, he re-enrolled at a community college and started attending classes in person, but he continued to struggle in the in-person environment and dropped out again. It was not until he was able to go back to school online, in an environment that he was more confident would work for him, that he was able to overcome the challenges he faced.

> I didn’t have to interact with anybody. I could do my schoolwork. I could see everything on Canvas…. I enjoyed the ability to… I’m visual, with that kind of stuff. I like to see everything laid out for me. Canvas showed me all the assignments, all the due dates, it showed everything. So I was able to work at my own pace. If I knew I was going to be out of town for a week or so, I could jump ahead a little bit as long as the assignments were unlocked…. It was, I wouldn’t say fun, but it was somewhat enjoyable. I felt like I was accomplishing things. I could run through it and see, ok, this is done, this is done, this is done. And, you know, I started looking forward to seeing all those little checkmarks.

Later, Kevin experienced the start of what could have been a major academic setback. At the beginning of a new semester, he missed a class and immediately felt like he was falling behind. Feelings that reminded him of previous failed academic experiences started to creep up, but Kevin had since developed not only the skills to get himself back on track but the knowledge that he could be academically successful and that he had rebounded from setbacks before:

> I was having these weird flashbacks to the whole [original freshman year] situation, but then I said to myself, like, ‘No, that’s not it. Let’s just do this.’ And

> I got back on it, and got myself to catch up, and I did, and I'm successful and I'm really succeeding in that class. So I think the barrier was really my own self-doubt, and as long as I can keep in front of that, I've been good.

Benefits and Drawbacks of Being Peerless

Removing the pressure to make friends facilitates classroom engagement. This study suggests that adults do often feel disconnected from other students, but it is not always a source of anxiety or frustration. Rather, the students in this study reported experiencing academic benefits as a result of being older than their classmates. No student in this study reported a desire to connect with other students socially, or a feeling of disappointment that this did not happen. While they formed short-term relationships with younger students in class for the purpose of learning new material and working on group projects, they recognized that others in the class were in a different place in life and did not try to force a social connection. Instead of feeling lonely or awkward, they reported feeling freer in the classroom to participate, ask questions, try new things, and be wrong because there was no pressure to make friends or keep up relationships.

Additionally, while everyone had multiple demands on their time from their lives outside of the university, the university did not add any additional demands on their time beyond the curriculum. Without any desire to participate in campus life, "There's no FOMO, fear of missing out," Walter said, recounting how "torn" his younger classmates could often feel between their academic obligations and their social obligations. Having created satisfying networks outside the university and having already had many of the life experiences other students were currently having, school could be a place for unafraid and unabashed engagement with their curricula. This was true for AUS who looked

noticeably older than everyone else, and for those who could have passed as traditional-age if they had wanted to.

Patrick, at 26, was the youngest participant in the study. He wore his hair on the longer side and dressed casually. He could have easily passed as a traditional student, and it was not clear whether instructors or classmates even knew he was a few years older than most other students. However, Patrick himself felt free of the pressure to try to fit in, and this freedom allowed him to take intellectual risks in the classroom:

> When I first started taking classes here, I definitely felt like I was talking a lot more than anybody else, which was kind of weird for me, because I've never experienced that before. But, I don't know, very early on I felt, like, competent, knowledgeable, I guess…. I just feel like because of where I'm at in life right now, I'm not as nervous about making mistakes as other people, so I'm more inclined to speak up. I'm not like—socially, I don't have those blocks that I know that I did when I was, you know, a traditional freshman, sophomore age, individual. A child. Like, what are they going to think if I say something wrong? Or like, I don't want to look stupid. Or like, I want people to think I'm cool.

When asked for an example of him speaking up in class, he offered a recent experience in his economics course in which he took a position counter to others in the class about income taxes. "I feel like I see those [tax brackets] as people rather than just statistics. And so, I definitely say, like, 'Hey, shouldn't this maybe happen instead? And then other people are like, 'That's not rational.' You know what I mean? So, I definitely have put myself out there as going against the grain." While Patrick chalked some of this up to perhaps being the only aspiring social worker in a room full of students studying business and economics, his instinct was not to go along to get along. Instead, he felt comfortable enough to raise his hand and voice a minority position because, he said, "I'm not nearly as nervous as everyone else around me."

Trebor, 43, had a bit of gray in his beard and unlike Patrick, there was no way he could have passed as a traditional student. On the first day of his classes in adult and organizational development, he has always noticed that his classmates—mostly younger white students—gravitated towards each other when choosing a seat, rather than towards him. He wondered if it was because he was older, because he was black, or because they already knew each other and he was the stranger who was always the first one in the room—but he didn't let it bother him. In fact, he just used it as another opportunity to engage young people, which is the core of his current job as an in-school mentor for high school students in a dual-enrollment program. He would not let himself feel ostracized. Instead, he said, he "always took it as an opportunity to engage people in listening to their points of views about stuff." Aside from these pre- and post-class opportunities to develop relevant professional skills, he also saw the curriculum as a place to explore, and test his arguments and abilities. He relished the opportunity to practice the skills he knew he needed to refine to be successful in his career. "I'm just at a point in my life where I don't have the opportunity to, like, take a backseat or be scared," he said. "So anytime we do anything that's remotely professional, whether stand up, speak, and say your name, or present, I'm always like, 'I'll go.'"

Without the pressure of trying to appear, at all times, confident and competent, several of the students in this study reported a willingness to admit what they don't know and get help from other students. Zoe, 30, self-identified as an "underperforming student" in actuarial science, but instead of closing up and worrying about appearing not to be smart, she learned how to put herself out there and found other students who were willing to teach her when she did not understand. While she had no desire to be friends outside of

school with the younger students, she saw them as “cool young people” who were “very good at teaching, like explaining. They take their time. Just, yeah, very nice, very nice people.”

Misha felt similarly about her classmates. As a self-avowed anti-social media and anti-technology person enrolled in a media studies program, Misha recognized early on that she was never going to find some of the technology her curriculum required her to learn to be intuitive. “Whenever I have an issue,” she said, “I always look for the youngest person in the room because I’m like, ‘They’ll know how to fix what’s going on.’”

John struggled not as much with the content of the physics curriculum, but with the way that his instructor required his students to report out and explain their answers to problems. His short-term relationships with the other students at his table, who sat with him the entire semester, allowed him to supplement his learning and get help from others who felt more confident. He estimates that he helped others maybe “three times” on these problems, but the rest of the semester, he was “coasting. Getting more help than I gave.”

Opportunities to be seen as an example, and to let others shine. Though some students eagerly sought help from others on the curriculum itself, others viewed being in a classroom with other students as an opportunity to model classroom engagement and project management skills. They also sensed times when they should hold back for the benefit of other students in these areas. For example, Trebor loved to practice his oral presentation and delivery skills because he knew he needed them every day in his job, but he also viewed his eagerness to participate as a mentoring opportunity in itself. He was always trying, he said, “to show other people it’s not that hard. You can do this.”

Zoe and Kevin also recognized that the college classroom may, at times, be doing things for other students that it was not doing for them. While this sense contributed to a feeling of disconnectedness with other students, there was no negative connotation to that disconnectedness. Rather, it was an opportunity for some students to model their own strengths, particularly with general education curricula or social expectations in the classroom that they felt like they have already mastered elsewhere. For example, Zoe said, in general education courses that did feel rudimentary for her, she purposefully tempered her participation because she "want[ed] to give everybody a chance to speak" and "[didn't] want to take the spotlight or the attention away from the younger kids that need to learn how to do that. They need to learn how to be put on the spot and form their thoughts." As a veteran of the hospitality industry, she recognized that she "can start a conversation with a stranger, no problem" and "is not exactly timid," but those were skills that took time for her to develop and she perceived participating too much in general courses as taking that opportunity away from others.

Frustration with younger students' perceived disengagement and feelings of being held back. While every student in this study felt invested in the academic work related to their major, even if they did not always see its relevance to their lives outside of school, this was not the case for experiences in general education courses. Additionally, even in courses related to their major, adult students had high expectations for the professors and reported feelings of frustration with other students who do not complete reading assignments or participate in class. "A lot of kids don't take it as serious as I take it," Trebor said, "because I look at this as my last opportunity." Misha reported similar concerns about "kids who are [always] on Facebook" and "talking with their friends."

She said that she can “see the professor’s frustration a lot” and was frustrated herself when other students appeared to show no understanding of the significance of the time they were wasting.

Among these adult students, there was a sense of being held back by younger students’ perceived disengagement, and a frustration, spurred by a hyper-consciousness of exactly how much they were paying to be enrolled in school and that they could be accomplishing more or progressing further in each course. Walter told one story about his food studies course. Over the course of the semester, he had become increasingly passionate about the topic and we spent much of one of our conversations discussing sustainable agriculture and aquaculture. However, by the end of the semester, he was “mad at [his] fellow students” over the quality of their final projects:

> I got really upset at the end of the food studies thing when everybody did their presentation and like five other students had done their presentation on food deserts. Which, a) isn’t a term that you should be using anymore, and b) we had also devoted, like, two weeks in that class to why that was a problematic way to look at things. It was like nobody had done any of those readings.

In another course, a general education requirement, Walter was annoyed at both the other students’ unwillingness to pay attention, and the professor’s inability to manage the class. He recounted a class period in which several students were chatting and not paying attention, and the teacher tried to get them to reengage. Walter described the teacher’s attempt to institute a new class rule: if you did not know the answer to a question when you were called on, you could pass the question to another student, if you knew the other student’s name. “He’s got to be the friendliest teacher I’ve ever had,” Walter said, but this particular strategy “just turned into, like, a comedy show as these two kids passed the

question back and forth" because they knew each other's names. "I mean, it's amusing," he said, "But I'm not here to be amused necessarily."

Kevin and Misha reported similar feelings of frustration in the classroom. For example, when I asked Kevin how the class period that I observed in his legal studies course was or was not typical, he said that it was typical but was not intended to be. The class period I observed was essentially a two-hour lecture, but Kevin knew that the course was supposed to be run as a flipped classroom:

> In theory, we're supposed to do all the learning and, not lecture ourselves, but do what the lecture would impart on us in our own time and then in class during those two hours, kind of go over some highlights and have a discussion or whatever... . I mean, honestly, most people clearly didn't read any of the material.

In Misha's case, she identified a professor who was trying to promote discussion in the classroom, but with little success. Misha found breaking into pairs repeatedly during a 50-minute class to be tedious. "I don't really know what you want out of this discussion with someone who might not have even done the reading," she said.

Few opportunities to connect with others who can relate. While AUS in this study were not seeking to form strong bonds with their classmates, and they perceived this mostly as a benefit or as a neutral reality of their situation, there were some challenges associated with being almost peerless on campus. While AUS often had robust out-of-school networks, those networks could not always fully understand what these students experienced in the classroom. There were few opportunities to connect with others who knew exactly what they were going through and could relate. For those who wanted that, there were fewer opportunities to find it. Zoe was the only one who identified another student with whom she had formed a close relationship. She reported that she and this

other student, age 33, are "the two old ladies in our class that take naps midday to function" and that they occasionally socialized outside of school. Trying to hang out with the younger students, Zoe said, was "like basically how you hang out with a younger cousin. You smile and you're like, 'Cool, cool.' I'm not gonna *share*." However, with a peer, she was able to be honest and open and say, "Oh my god. I'm so tired. I haven't showered in three days. How are you feeling? Do you need anything? Do you have that book? I have it if you need it."

Others in the study had people outside of school that they could talk to about what they're learning. Walter said that sometimes he gets so excited about what he's learning, that he'll stop reading or studying so he can tell his wife right away. Patrick recalled that he will often "be all excited about something that I learned and teach somebody else" but feels like they are "humoring" him when they listen. When Trebor tried to use what he learned about logical fallacies in a philosophy course to call others out in conversations, he said, "People think I'm an ass. Like they hate me. 'You swear you know everything.'"

Challenges when a one-size-fits-all bureaucracy does not fit you. Finally, some challenges may have been specific to adults and professors and administrators did not always have a frame of reference to understand them, or precedent to refer back to in order to solve a problem. Some of these challenges could be stressful, but were to be expected with adult students. For example, when John needed to bring his daughter to class when her school was closed, he asked each individual professor if it was ok, and knew that the answers could vary. While all of his instructors were accommodating, he knew that there was no university-wide policy to rely on in these situations.

However, some AUS may have so much life experience or history that policies and procedures that were put in place for undergraduate students are not flexible or expansive enough to deal with circumstances more likely to apply to adult students. Trebor's attempt to get admitted to graduate school was a good example of the university encountering a unique situation that was likely adult-specific and not handling it well. Trebor's educational history was different from that of most other students. After moving through four different high schools in less than four years, Trebor got into legal trouble and ultimately served more than fifteen years in prison. As a returning citizen, he enrolled in community college and simultaneously participated in a mentorship program to help him develop academic, emotional, and social skills. He built a career as an academic mentor who helped connect high school students in a dual enrollment program to resources that will help them succeed and mentored them throughout their high school careers. He was a hands-on program administrator, and always tried to go above and beyond at work. He seemed to view his role as a way to pay forward the help that he received.

During the time he participated in this study, Trebor achieved a lifelong goal: he earned his bachelor's degree. Highly motivated to succeed, he had planned to continue immediately to graduate school and had already applied to the master's program in adult and organizational development, also at the research site. During the application process, Trebor was subjected to months of run-around as the university tried to make sense of how to handle his criminal record. The record had already been disclosed as part of his undergraduate admissions process, and the government had indicated that he had a criminal background, but was not prevented from working with minors. Now, the

university wanted clearances to be submitted again—a requirement, they said, to do field work in certain courses. There were three problems, Trebor told me. The first was that his program did not require field work. Second, he viewed the request for information about his past to be an invasion of privacy and irrelevant to the admissions process, especially when he had already disclosed that information once before. No one else was being asked to preemptively provide clearances as a condition of admission. Third, no one working at the university seemed to actually know what the procedure was, and to him, it seemed like everyone was passing him from office to office, never giving him a final answer.

As someone working within an educational bureaucracy himself, Trebor was better equipped than most to navigate the situation. He could find the policies for clearances as written on the university's website, and pick them apart. He knew the types of job titles that were likely relevant to his situation, how to find the people in those positions, and what to say when he emailed and called them. He knew to show up in person when emails or phone calls were not returned. He knew to keep a paper trail. He asked his professors to help make introductions to those who may have been able to help. But even he could not figure out how to fix the problem. His situation did not fit into the pre-existing scenarios the university had imagined for graduate admission, and to him, it seemed like they were making up the rules as they went along.

Ultimately, he was finally accepted into his graduate program, but the chaos of the admissions process meant that nothing else was in place. With only a few days before the start of the new semester, his financial aid paperwork was not sorted out, he had not met with an advisor, he had not reviewed any syllabi, or planned a schedule. He emailed an advisor and asked to register for four courses. The advisor told him, "Nobody ever

takes four courses," and sent him a list of what was available to register on his own. In short, he had not had a chance to do any of the things he consistently made sure that all of the students that he saw did. The process had not worked for him in the way that he tried to ensure it always worked for his own students. Stressed out and already having missed the first two days of the first week of classes, Trebor decided to defer his admission to the next semester. While he was frustrated about how the whole situation had turned out for him, he was also shocked. As someone who worked in the same field, he could not understand how, as he saw it, so many people had fallen down on the job and failed to respond to basic concerns. "If this was my dean, you would get a PIP [performance improvement plan]. You'd be on your way out the door. He'd be so pissed."

The experience made Trebor realize that, if the university did not know how to handle his case and caused him this much stress, there were likely others in the same position:

> Essentially, as a, if you will, martyr for this type of stuff, been going through the things I've been going through, navigating systems, being oppressed, being discriminated against, all these things, it's not really about me no more. Because I know how to do it now. So essentially this is about every single person that comes behind me or all the people that we're never gonna know went through something like this and who were like, 'I know [education] wasn't for me.' Because had this been five years ago, that might have been me, being like, 'You know what, that's why I never should have went to school.'

As Trebor perceived it, this experience with the higher education system tried to show him that he did not belong in higher education at all. Had this been his *only* experience with higher education, he believes this could have had devastating consequences for him. He interpreted the experience as evidence that the administration was much more comfortable dealing with traditional undergraduate students without any previous legal

challenges. When you are the first or you are a unique case, policies and procedures that work for most others do not always apply to you.

Though Trebor was not able to continue on to graduate school immediately after completing his bachelor's degree, his ability to get himself accepted into a graduate program and to overcome the barriers put in place to make admission more challenging is an example of what Yosso calls "navigational capital." Navigational capital is the ability to "[maneuver] through social institutions" (2005, p. 80), particularly those created for groups in which you are not a member. Navigational capital is associated with resilience, especially in the face of racism and discrimination, and is a testament to one's individual agency, social, and psychological skills. Without navigational capital skills, Trebor would have been denied admission to graduate school, and would not have been able to even attempt recourse. Instead, whether it was his experience in working in other educational environments, his prior success in surviving other challenging environments (i.e. prison), his high capacity for resilience, or some combination of the three, Trebor was able to find his way to solving this problem for himself.

Relationships with Professors

The following examples help to demonstrate how some of the adults in this study were able to relate to professors as peers and navigate academic challenges. They understand the importance of communicating with professors, relating to them as people, being proactive when there is a problem, and building long-term relationships. Out-of-school communication skills, developed over what can be decades in people-focused industries like hospitality, local government, and education, help negotiate solutions to problems.

Building productive relationships with professors as a student. Misha found that being a contemporary of many of her professors allowed her to not only build rapport, but also to discuss her curriculum with them in ways that perhaps younger students would not have been able to. By being around the same age as some of her professors, she realized that they tended to consume, or at least be familiar with, the same media that she did. When her theory and analysis professor played Spice Girls songs before the start of class, Misha knew them. When her pop culture professor wanted to play trivia games with the class, she was the one who knew what the spin-off to *Golden Girls* was called. When her Shakespeare in the Movies professor criticized the 1996 Baz Luhrmann adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, she could debate him because she hadn't just seen the clips he showed in class. She had grown up with the film and seen it may times. "I remember what an impact that film had," she said. While the professor hated the two lead actors' performances, Misha could engage in debate about how the characters "aren't supposed to be eloquent speakers" because they're supposed to come off as dumb teenagers.

Misha also sensed the importance of building relationships with professors outside of class and she recognized that there is an interesting dynamic at play. She knows there's a power imbalance in that they are the teachers and she is the student, but that she can compartmentalize that and, at times, relate to them socially as a peer. "I try to [go to office hours], even if I don't have anything to talk about," she said, "Just because I'm always thinking, I'm going to have to ask some of these professors for recommendations down the line." There was enough social savvy there to recognize that a professor who knows her well, and knows her as a person, will be able to help her more than someone who just taught her for a semester or two. When she went to office hours, it

was really “just to say hi,” and to ask what they’re watching on TV or what they’re reading. These conversations outside of class have led her to discover that she and one of her professors have a mutual friend, someone Misha grew up with. When Misha expressed concern about getting a job after graduation as an older student, the same professor shared that her husband was in a similar position and that it worked out well for him.

Developing colleague-to-colleague relationships with professors. Unlike Misha, who had friendly relationships with her professors but still feels very much like their student, Trebor could often feel more like colleagues with his professors. This dynamic could be powered by the fact that Trebor was already working full-time in a position that many other undergraduates would likely aim for after graduation, but he also noted that there is a “generational connection.” Therefore, his ability to share his career experience actually could assist his professors in making their courses better for others. Even though he was in one capacity their student, he could also, at times, be an equal player in a mutually beneficial working relationship. For example, Trebor presented as a guest speaker in their classes, they wrote him recommendations. He considered his teachers part of his “network” and noted that “had [he] not made friends with [his] instructors,” it would be harder to go to them when he needed help.

Trebor viewed himself to be working in the same field as his professors, in that they were all helping to teach and develop young people. With this in mind, he was always looking closely at how they do their jobs, and was not afraid to criticize them directly when he believed they were falling short. When an instructor was failing to respond to emails in a timely manner, provide important details or feedback on

assignments, or even hold class on an important date, Trebor viewed this behavior in stark contrast to what he considered acceptable as someone who is in the same field.

> It was like he didn't care, so I was like, 'If you don't care, then I don't care.' But I do care, so that's what made it a problem…. And I had this instructor before, and I told him before that I didn't like how he managed his communication. So he said he would do better this time, but he didn't.

This kind of frank feedback is likely not typical for a student to give a professor, but it does feel more typical of teammates or colleagues checking each other on professional standards. Like Misha, Trebor realized the importance of good working relationships with professors and has the social skills to develop those relationships, but the key difference is that Misha had not been validated externally as a subject-matter expert, as a member of the profession, in the same way that Trebor had.

John, who spent more than 25 years working hands-on with construction materials and built environments, described a similar rapport with one of his professors. Despite taking a construction materials course earlier in his academic career at community college, he needed to retake it at the research site when those credits wouldn't transfer. "Concrete has not changed," he quipped to me, so a lot of the material felt like review, but the professor "seemed somewhat pleased and surprised that someone who had worked in the field was coming back to school."

At times, the dynamic between John and his professor felt a little awkward. John guessed that he was 20 years older than the professor. The professor did not have the experience that John had. Sitting through the lectures and the labs sometimes felt boring, and John was usually one of the quieter students in class. While the younger students were encountering the material for the first time, John could not help but think, "I've paved streets. I've laid thousands of feet of concrete. I've been involved in the process"

in ways that even the professor had not. However, the professor had experience in using concrete to construct buildings, which John did not. John described their in-class dynamic as conversational: “He’d ask me a question, and we’d discuss it.” Instead of the professor quizzing John, John could engage in a two-way dialogue with the professor and contribute real-life experience to the class.

Relating to and negotiating with professors as supervisors. In addition to these two relationship dynamics, two other students used their relational abilities as adults, learned over years in the workplace reporting to bosses, to obtain beneficial solutions to what could have easily turned into intractable academic problems. When I asked Walter to reflect on how his previous semester wrapped up, he told me he came very close to failing one of his courses. He felt pressed for time, taking 18 credits, and every week, something had to give. Unfortunately, it was the same thing every week: his urban GIS labs. The syllabus clearly stated that late labs would earn failing grades. However, Walter kept up close communication with his professor and was “honest” about his time constraints. He attended class every day, paid attention, and also proactively communicated a “plan for the week” several times to catch up on the work, which his professor accepted. In the end, Walter was able to turn in all of his late labs for credit, and he believes that he and his professor were able to come to a positive resolution because of his willingness to continuously and proactively communicate, and because he had developed the relationship elsewhere by taking the same professor for another course. Walter noted that he had an A in the other course, and the professor essentially told him, “All right, so you’re not a slacker and you’re not stupid. You’re an adult. I’m sure you’ll figure this out.”

Similarly, when I met John for the first time, he had recently failed a physics exam. The exam had three questions on it, each worth 100 points, and each question was scored not only on successfully getting the right answer but also on how the right answer was derived and how the answer was explained. On two of the questions, John earned a 5%. John was upset and wanted to talk to his professor about his score, but had to decide first how to approach the situation. He knew he "[couldn't] talk to this man like an equal" in his office, but he also knew he couldn't yell at him like one of the guys on his construction sites either. He decided to go with a forceful, yet respectful approach, and explained that he "thought [he] displayed more than a five percent understanding here" and ultimately got more than 30 points back. He viewed the whole interaction as a "negotiation."

In both of these interactions, John and Walter treated their professors much like they would a boss. They kept an open line of communication, and were assertive but respectful of the power dynamic. Each looked at the relationship as one between two adults, each with a job to do, which requires communication and give-and-take to be successful. Had they been more timid, or looked at the relationship as one with a defined superior with a top-down what-I-say-goes attitude, both John and Walter likely would have failed their courses. In this way, John explicitly recognized an advantage of his adult stance that both he and Walter took advantage of:

> I probably get away with more speaking to people like other adults. Speaking to them like an equal. I think I do that more and more naturally without thinking about it. I think professors accept that from me when they would not accept that from an 18-year-old, or a 20-year-old.

In neither of these situations did John and Walter accept that policies could never be bent. They knew enough not only to know that there was room to negotiate, but also to know that they had the skills to do so.

In these situations, the students displayed high levels of social competence, or the ability to behave appropriately in varied social situations and environments (Leganés-Lavall & Pérez-Aldeguer, 2016) and to be effective in social interactions (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). Prior studies have recognized that social competence is a key indicator in psychological development over a lifetime (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). Additionally, other research has recognized the importance of both the university (Leganés-Lavall & Pérez-Aldeguer, 2016) and the workplace (Murakami, Murray, Sims, & Chedzey, 2009) as sites for developing social competence among traditional-age undergraduates. While no research currently exists that specifically examines the social competence of AUS, social competence could be categorized for the purpose of this study as an additional type of literacy, which these students did not learn at the university but were able to leverage to their benefit while there.

Building relationships with professors, and using language skills in any capacity to help foster those relationships—is an example of developing and using linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005). Linguistic capital—or the ability to communicate with multiple audiences, including using “real-world” literacy skills (p. 79)—helped these adult students relate to their professors as fellow adults, no matter the power dynamic between the two parties. They were able to use the language skills they have acquired over years of work and lifetimes of real experience to present themselves to professors in ways that

humanized them, made them memorable, connected them to others, and allowed them to plead their case and negotiate when favors were needed.

Theme 3: Understanding That School Is Not "Real Life"

The AUS in this study were engaged and invested in completing their bachelor's degrees. All saw themselves as bona fide students. However, for everyone in this study, being a student was only part of their identity. While no student expressed explicit or ongoing tension between different facets of their identities, being a student was very clearly only one part of who they were as people. Three students used the phrase "real life" to describe their out-of-school identities, as though school was not equally real. This consciousness affected how they understood what going to school would do for them in real terms.

Curricula and Careers

The AUS in this study all believed that their current course of study will not completely prepare them for their professional and personal goals—but they didn't expect it to. They knew that some aspects of their coursework would prepare them for a career in a new profession—or advancement in their current field—but expected that they would need to acquire additional skills and credentials, build professional networks, and seek out other sources of knowledge to truly develop a career. They recognized the value of the university credential as a point of personal accomplishment and as a sign to others that they would be members of a certain professional and social class—but they were wholly reliant neither on the credential nor the university to propel them forward towards their next steps. Instead, they viewed the bachelor's degree as one part of an ongoing professional development path.

Some students knew that there are other credentials specific to their fields, and offered by non-university entities, which could have more influence in their abilities to get hired or advance in their fields. For example, Ciana was pursuing certification as a Certified Financial Services Auditor (CFSA), a credential offered by the Institute of Internal Auditors. As an internal auditor already, Ciana struggled with how to identify which qualifications were going to be perceived as the most valuable in her field. She had some certifications already, and was committed to earning her bachelor's degree, but thought she "may be doing it backwards right now." She was looking to achieve a "balance" between external certifications like the CFSA and a bachelor's degree, or even a master's degree.

Like Ciana, Zoe knew she would need to earn additional credentials from non-university entities to be able to advance in her chosen field of actuarial science. Her curriculum had given her some of the academic literacy skills she needed to be able to approach external actuarial science exams, but she did not perceive the curriculum itself as designed to help her pass these exams. In other words, her curriculum taught her calculus, data analysis, and business concepts like annuities, interest, loans, and bonds. However, Zoe expected to put in hundreds of hours of self-study over a period of years to prepare for and pass the required actuarial science exams to become an Associate of the Society of Actuaries (ASA). She had already tried to pass one of the exams, Exam FM (Financial Mathematics) once, and was jarred by how challenging it was. The university had told her that if she had done well in her coursework, she was likely to pass, but that was not the case:

I graduated with a 97% from that class. I was killing it. I got 100% on my

> midterm. Didn't do so well on my final, but overall grade was fantastic. I got the concept. I understood it. I reviewed all the material, and I went into take [the] exam, confident that I would pass, and I failed miserably.

Zoe did not perceive her case to be unique. She estimated that there is a 50% failure rate on this exam, and knew others who have had to take it more than once before they passed. This exam is one of more than 10 that people like Zoe will need to pass in order to become an ASA (Society of Actuaries, n.d.-a). She realized that her degree in actuarial science was not the only path she could have taken to prepare herself for these exams. Ideally, Zoe said she should have majored in math and then gotten a master's in actuarial science, so that she could have developed a depth of knowledge in math first, and then begun to focus on applying math to actuarial concepts like life insurance. Calculus, she said, is something that the Society of Actuaries just expects members to be "fluent" in when they take their exams. As an older student, though, Zoe didn't think she had enough time to get a bachelor's degree and a master's degree, and wanted to get started on a career path as soon as possible.

Despite the arduous path of years of test-taking after college, Zoe perceived credentials from the Society of Actuaries to be more important to her professional development than her bachelor's degree. The Society of Actuaries is a professional organization of more than 30,000 actuaries (Society of Actuaries, n.d.-b) and their certifications are the gold standard in her field.

Even though both Ciana and Zoe saw the certifications from other members of their field as extremely valuable, they both also saw the value of a bachelor's degree. They have tied earning the bachelor's degree very closely to their self-worth and ability to achieve their goals. Zoe was a senior when she participated in the study, and was on

track to graduate in just a few months. When asked about how she felt about graduating soon, she said:

> It's gonna be the best day of my life. I'll probably be sobbing, crying... . I've been in college when I was 16. I was going to college back home, and it was different. It was mostly to like meet new people and I needed that extra courage from my instructors to speak up in class and it was just—I was still finding myself. I know who I am at this moment. I just want to get it over. So, like, it's as exciting as a wedding day and like a first child. I feel like I'll be as excited when I give birth to my firstborn as I will be in May [when I graduate]. I'll probably cry.

Zoe was similarly excited about graduation and what it would mean for how she saw herself. Zoe imagined going to the bookstore to buy a cap and gown and thought about the actual graduation day. Trebor, who had graduated in between our first and second interviews, also saw graduation as the achievement of a personal goal. "I've been trying to get this since I came home from prison," he said. "There's nothing in the world that would have stopped me from doing this." But graduating mid-year meant he had not yet received his diploma, and had not yet participated in commencement exercises, and so he did not yet feel like a graduate. "I don't really feel anything yet," he said. "I haven't got my diploma yet."

Others looked ahead to what being a college graduate would mean for the way that others would look at them. For Walter, having a bachelor's degree means not having to constantly start over at every new job. It's a "building block" that will finally allow him to advance past entry-level roles and stay on one career path, to move up in one industry instead of move over into a new industry with every job change. For Ciana, even though she knew she needed to earn other credentials beyond the bachelor's degree, the degree itself was an important sign to others of her of competence. Ciana saw the bachelor's degree as something that others could easily recognize that marked her as a

legitimate member of the business community. Right now, she said, it felt like she knew her field very well but didn't have proof. The bachelor's degree is essentially validation from others, "something to show to say, 'Ok, you know what you're doing.'"

Ciana, Zoe, and others in the study perceived graduation as the end of a long personal journey with lots of starts and stops—but it was not a marked end to learning and it was not the guaranteed start of a career. Everyone fully expected that more hard work, more willingness to keep going, and even some luck were going to be required to get where they wanted to be. Misha, who anticipated beginning a job search a few months after our last interview, reflected on what it would take to secure that job and how much of it was still out of her control:

> You do all this work to get the degree and build up your skill sets and get this opportunity. You have to work your way up. And maybe, if you're lucky, you'll get to do what you really want to do. But there's just no guarantee.

Every participant in this study went into college with their eyes open about what it would take to succeed. However, these hopes and dreams for the future and the faith that they could achieve their goals are examples of the participants' aspirational capital. According to Yosso (2005), aspirational capital is neither wishful thinking or happy-talk optimism. It is simply the ability to maintain hope while recognizing very real barriers, and knowing how much further there remains to go.

Solving Academic Problems

AUS were aware of academic resources available within the university, but often chose to first utilize their robust out-of-school networks to solve academic problems. The university was there for problems that cannot be solved elsewhere, but AUS had a vast network of other resources they could call upon for help.

Help with curriculum. The adult students in this study were confident in their ability to access the resources they needed to get help with their studies. No one in the study reported using the writing center, or peer tutoring as provided by the university. For routine writing help, participants in this study instead used their out-of-school networks. While they may have talked through an idea for a paper with a professor, they worked with roommates, spouses, friends, and colleagues to have someone read drafts and provide feedback. For other assignments that required interviewing others, like Walter's qualitative research project or Patrick's project of interviewing two people currently employed as social workers, they found interview subjects through their out-of-school networks. Walter interviewed people in his neighborhood, including his wife, and Patrick used a connection from working in a restaurant to ultimately gain introductions to two social workers.

However, AUS were also willing to use the school for academic support when they recognized their out-of-school networks to be inadequate. Ciana thought she would be able to learn fully online, but quickly realized that she needed extra help in statistics. She hired her own tutor, who could work with her one-on-one, on her own schedule, and could relate each problem back to something that is relevant to her. Her statistics tutor helped her relate abstract concepts like the difference quotient to her job in auditing and compliance. Later, she hired a different tutor when she felt like the original tutor "knew what to do to solve the problems but they were not the best at explaining why I need to do this, or take a particular step."

Similarly, when Patrick needed to take an anatomy and physiology course as a required science elective to complete his social work major, he recognized that he would

need to think and study in a way that was different from what is usual for him and proactively decided to use the review sessions available to him outside of class to develop strategies to learn and memorize the material. When Walter needed specific help with GIS software, he also sought tutoring from the institution. John's previously described experience with math tutoring on campus is another example of knowing when out-of-school networks would not be able to provide adequate academic support. These examples, though, are the only examples that emerged in this study of adult students utilizing the academic systems set up within the institution.

Help with educational interruptions or transitions. Out-of-school networks were also key sources of support during times of educational interruption or transition. For example, John cited his wife as a critical person in his life who could help him find solutions to problems and keep a sense of perspective. This was true when he was struggling with calculus and he came home to tell her a story he had heard on the radio of a woman who had graduated from MIT with a 5.0 GPA. His wife reminded him that he did not need to be perfect; he just needed to pass.

More importantly, John's wife stepped him to help him problem-solve when his education was stalled due to problems at work. For the past few years, John had been taking courses part-time during the day, using a combination of flex time and vacation time to cover the hours he missed in the middle of the day. These were long days that required him to clock into the office at seven in the morning, occasionally stay late, and work overtime when available to make it all work.

During the winter break between our first and second interviews, John's employer started asking him some pointed questions. They wanted more details on his class

schedule than they had ever asked for in the past. They wanted copies of timesheets. They started copying human resources on email chains and asking for meetings. John could see that, for whatever reason, balancing work and school was going to be a problem, even though it never had been before. He had enough time to drop the courses for which he had registered in the upcoming semester and still receive a full refund, so he decided not to take any chances. After talking through the situation with his wife, they decided it would likely not be in John's best interest to continue pursuing his bachelor's degree at the research site—or in any program that would require him to be away from work during the day.

John's wife stepped into action, helping him to research potential online programs and calm his nerves about switching from in-person to online instruction. When we met, all of this disruption had only happened a week before and the shock was still fresh for John. But with his wife's help, he told me that he had already applied to an online bachelor of science in civil engineering degree program at another school, and was waiting to hear back. At no point did John indicate that he had talked to anyone at the research site to see what his options were. While the research site may have been able to identify alternatives for him, his first instinct was to use his out-of-school network, with whom he had much more trust.

The trust that adult students have built in their out-of-school networks, often developed over years, seemed to be a critical factor in adults' willingness to utilize these networks over those provided by the academic institution. While John's out-of-school connection to his wife is obviously personal, Trebor's use of his out-of-school networks shows that these networks are flexible enough to help adult students with challenges over

longer periods of time. At various points in our conversations, Trebor cited examples of how his out-of-school networks have helped him navigate academic challenges. He started building this network when he participated in a mentorship program as a newly returned citizen. Since then, he credits the network he has built over time with giving him various kinds of help over the years. The director of the mentorship program helped him commit to going back to school. His current boss helped him choose his major (his boss had already earned his degree in the same thing). He now has a network of colleagues who can help him think through work and academic problems, people who he "feel[s] like [he] could put something on their plate."

Most importantly, when Trebor was dealing with potential delay of his graduate study because of his criminal background, he went to his out-of-school network to help him figure out how best to handle the situation. Since his dispute was with the institution itself, he needed someone with outside perspective and experience to advise him and to validate or challenge Trebor's instincts on what to do.

Help with the next step after school. When thinking about next steps after graduation, none of the students in this study reported going to the career center within the university system. Instead, everyone either explicitly or implicitly stated an expectation that they would be navigating life after the bachelor's degree without the help of the university, not because they didn't want it but because it didn't occur to them to seek it. Only Misha and Patrick talked about pursuing a job search the way that younger students usually did: they would get an internship, and hopefully it would lead to something, but if not, they would apply for jobs and try to make connections elsewhere. Walter expected to leverage family connections, which also helped him get his internship,

for help in starting his career as a transportation planner. Others like Trebor, Ciana, John, and Kevin, who were already working in their chosen fields, expected to use their existing professional networks to advance.

Zoe, who had no professional network in her chosen field, but also did not perceive herself to have a robust academic network, tried to use other connections to help her in her job search. Initially, Zoe had started looking for a job the same way that every other student in her major did. She went to a career reception organized by the student professional organization representing her major. It yielded no promising leads. “That’s because I’m an underperforming student,” she said. “I don’t have anything to show for my aptitude and studies.” Her grades were not as strong as others. She had no internship experience because she traveled home to Central Asia every summer to visit her family. On paper, she did not look to be a competitive candidate.

As she started to dread the prospect of needing to continue on as a bartender after graduation, despite all of her hard work in school, she thought about any other connections she may be able to call upon and thought about one of her regular customers. This man worked for a Fortune 100 company with a major hub in the area. Zoe recalled how she got his business card:

> I was bartending. He was a guest. It’s a family restaurant type of situation. There are a lot of regulars, so we would just hang out and be friendly. So, when I was going into the program, we would talk about it, and I was like, ‘Oh yeah, I might be leaving soon because of school.’ And he said, ‘Oh, [Research Site] has a great program. Keep in touch. If you need anything, hit me up.’ I’ve had his number, [so I called him] and we were just kind of talking about it and I said, ‘Hey, I’m graduating. Is there anything open at [Fortune 100]?’ He was like, ‘There’s a business development program. I could squeeze you in.’

Zoe knew that this was not a sure thing. Her customer was not in charge of hiring, and she would still have to interview. But he could help get her resume to the top of the pile

for a job opportunity that students from all over the country compete for. He was willing to write a reference, and talk to the hiring managers. It was an advantage that few other students had, all from her time spent behind the bar and a willingness to follow through on an opportunity when it presented itself.

This job would be a two-year rotational program through the company. It would be a steady salary with benefits. The job would be in a field related to her major, even if it was not a perfect fit into an actuarial science position. Zoe was extremely excited about it. When this job became a possibility, Zoe still decided to talk to one of her professors about it, but was disappointed by the feedback he gave her. The professor advised her to try to hold out, to strive for a position that was firmly in actuarial science. While Zoe believed that this professor had good intentions, his advice struck her as totally out-of-touch with her situation. She thanked him for his advice, but what she really wanted to say to him was:

> You're a pessimist, bro. I need a job. I'm getting familiarized with the industry. And that time I can use to pass exams, and after two years, I can say, ok, three or four exams. And I can go into an actuarial program. And if they ask me in the interview [why I didn't start out with an actuarial job], I'll say, 'I'm 35. What do you want from me?'

Zoe knew that her professor may have been right, but it was too good of an opportunity not to pursue. She viewed this job as a means to an end, and as two years of stability that would allow her to continue her own professional development. While she had not yet secured a job after graduation, she believed her out-of-school connections to be much more promising leads to future employment than those she had made in school.

In each of these examples, the participants demonstrate strong abilities to cultivate and leverage their social capital, i.e. "networks of people and community resources"

(Yosso, 2005, p. 79). While the university has become part of each of their networks, the long, and often more personal, histories they have with other components of their networks has allowed each of these participants to call on those networks in times of need. When required, participants sought help from the university itself, but that help was more transactional in nature, and questions remain about the relationships participants will have with the university after graduation. With out-of-school networks, the relationships among spouses, mentors, roommates, and colleagues are more likely to last.

Summary

This chapter provided a detailed exploration of this study's findings. AUS see stark contrasts between academic literacies and out-of-school literacies particularly with academic writing, but can sometimes find other connections between the two in the workplace. AUS have a desire for deep learning, and can pursue this desire without fear because they are not trying to balance completing academic work with forming peer relationships with other students. They also are adept at using social skills to facilitate meaningful relationships with professors. However, some AUS struggle with feelings of frustration with younger students, or with a university bureaucracy not built for them. Others simply don't have many other students with whom they can relate. Despite this challenge, AUS are clear-eyed about higher education's place in their lives and its ability to launch their careers. They also understand the bachelor's degree's ability to change how they are perceived by themselves and others. Knowing that the university cannot be their sole source of professional, academic, and emotional support, AUS first use out-of-school sources of support before falling back on the university.

In what follows, I will relate these findings back to the literature and to the research questions that shaped this study. I will also explore some limitations of the study's methodology, analysis, and generalizability, and discuss some recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

In the fall of 2019, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reported that America's colleges and universities had approximately 250,000 fewer students than they did the year before. At the same time, 36 million American adults have earned some college credit, but have not earned a degree (Nadworny, 2019). More than a million of these adults are currently enrolled in college as "potential completers," or returning adult students most likely to complete a degree (Shapiro, Ryu, Huie, & Liu, 2019, p. 1).

The purpose of this study was to better understand the experiences that AUS have with learning and using academic literacies, i.e. writing, speaking, and thinking in the languages of the university as a whole and of the various academic fields that these students have chosen to pursue. Using a sociocultural perspective of literacy that views all literacy as wholly dependent on context and perspective, I wanted to better understand what this experience of learning and using these new languages felt like to this group of students and how their extensive life experiences—which all of the literature has cited as an asset of the adult identity—intersected with their academic experiences. In the context of the university environment, which privileges its own language, I used the theoretical frameworks of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) to think about these intersections. In this chapter, I will summarize the study's methodology and analyze its results in light of my research questions. I will then address the limitations of this study and provide some potential avenues for future research.

Summary of Study

This qualitative study used a multiple case study design to examine the academic literacy experiences of AUS all studying at the same institution during the same academic year. The goal was to examine a variety of experiences from students pursuing different courses of study and with different life experiences. While the original goal of the study was to complete four or five cases, with each case being a single student, I recruited eight students expecting that some would not complete the study. Instead, each of the eight students provided two interviews and at least one writing sample from a recent assignment. I observed seven of the eight students in a class that was part of their field of study (the eighth student had graduated mid-year, between our first and second interviews).

According to the National Student Clearinghouse, the average “potential completer” is younger than 30. Half are white, 22% are black, 16% are Hispanic, and 3% are Asian. Most have been away from school for fewer than ten years. Potential completers make up only 10% of the population of adults with some college, but no degree. The overall profile of an average adult with some college, but no degree is a 42-year-old who left school in their 20s or younger after fewer than two years of enrollment, and has been away from school for ten years (Shapiro, Ryu, Huie, & Liu, 2019, p. 3-4). While the purpose of this study is not to corroborate a national profile of a returning adult student or a potential completer, it is important to point out the ways in which my sample is similar to and different from the national average.

Three of the eight participants were under age 30. Two were older than 42. Five of the eight participants were white; two were black; one was Asian. Three were female;

five were male. The participants in this study were pursuing bachelor's degrees in seven majors: actuarial science, adult and organizational development, business administration, civil engineering, geography and urban studies, media studies, and social work. One was an immigrant to the United States for whom English was not her first language. One was a formerly incarcerated returning citizen. Only two had children. Of the eight, only two were studying at night. Both of these students were doing all of their coursework fully online, and one was an international student, pursuing her degree from her home country. The other six students were taking day classes. Four students were working full time and going to school part time. Three students were going to school full time and working part time. One was unemployed and a full-time student. All had some previous college experience, and half had previously earned an associate's degree. Five either graduated or were on track to do so during the academic year in which they participated in this study.

Discussion of Results

Much of the common wisdom, and even some of the research, on AUS approaches the population from a deficit perspective, suggesting that they need significant academic support, that they feel isolated on campus, and that they have outside commitments that make the pursuit of higher education more challenging. The findings of this study illuminate the assets associated with being an AUS. I will now address all three research questions in light of the findings of this study.

The Experience of Learning and Using Academic Literacies

The literature on AUS contests the assumption that they need remedial academic help. Instead, studies that measure the academic achievement of adult undergraduates have found that adults earn the same or better grades as their younger classmates do

(Carlan, 2001; Steinberg, 2006; Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Kasworm & Pike, 1994; Sheard, 2009). Moreover, adults are likely to be highly motivated to complete their degrees (Kasworm, 2008; Samuels, Beach, & Palmer, 2012; Sheard, 2009; Steinberg, 2006), and likely to employ metacognitive strategies when approaching academic work (Cleary, 2013; Justice & Dornan, 2001).

The findings of this study contribute to this established understanding of adult students' attitudes towards their educational experiences overall. While all of the students in this study experienced stress associated with completing schoolwork, the stress was also balanced with a genuine joy associated with both having the opportunity to learn and with pursuing a field about which they were passionate. The students in this study demonstrated a high level of awareness of how they learn best, and what resources they needed to facilitate the development of academic literacies. Students in this study also demonstrated a high level of confidence about the fields they have chosen to pursue. This was not a comparative study, so it cannot be said whether this sense of joy and confidence is more or less than that of a younger student. However, the adults in this study attributed these feelings to prior experiences working in jobs about which they were not passionate, prior experiences of personal or academic failure that they saw themselves as washing away, prior feelings of hard work with no intellectual rewards, and prior feelings of feeling less-than because they had not earned their degree.

Moreover, the study highlighted the marked differences between just some of the myriad academic literacies in which students needed to develop fluency. Of course, each academic discipline has its own subject matter to master, but each also had its own way of speaking, writing, behaving in class, and even interacting with faculty. A class that

plays Spice Girls music to warm up is different from one in which guest speakers from a corporate sponsor of a group project are there to present. A lab report is different from a media analysis, and both are different from a business case. The expectation for student participation varied from class to class; some classes were silent lectures; others were almost rowdy.

The framing of academic material varied from class to class. A conversation on the effect of gun violence on communities in a social work class is different from a conversation on the legal environment for business and trade in America, and both are different from the rapid-fire introduction of new physics concepts. Hypothetically, even if every single student in this study talked about guns in their classes, they would have done so from vastly different perspectives. The business class would have talked about guns in terms of manufacturing or business policies related to firearms. The physics class would have talked about how to calculate the rate of speed at which the bullet left the gun. Media studies would have analyzed the portrayal of guns in various films. Actuarial science would have examined the impact of gun violence prevalence on life insurance rates.

The students in this study were highly aware of the different ways of being and doing that could vary from classroom to classroom, and knew when they should adjust their own language, even if they were not always successful in doing so. Everyone knew, for example, that general education courses required different writing, different engagement, and different student-faculty relationships than other courses. And for each student in this study, the nature of those differences varied depending on which field they were comparing general education to.

Students in this study spoke easily and naturally about the concepts and theories relevant to their majors. During the course of our conversations, they taught me about the different kinds of analyses one could apply to a business to assess its relative strengths and weaknesses; they taught me about sustainable food movements and why we should not be using the term "food desert" anymore; and they taught me about the theoretical difference between spaces and places—just to name a few. Each student in this study demonstrated what can be categorized as oral fluency in academic literacies. However, while most students were able to speak in discipline-specific academic language, most also struggled with writing in discipline-specific academic language.

In particular, the literature on academic writing suggests that many students struggle with adopting the kind of voice and style that professors find acceptable, and ultimately most students only imitate the writing they read as opposed to producing something original (Bartholomae, 2005). Students need professors' approval to pass, and professors—already part of an academic community with standards on acceptable writing in their disciplines—assign their students the same types of writing assignments they produce. These types of assignments may or may not have any relationship with the writing that students have previously produced, or will produce, elsewhere. Moreover, students learn through experience that what is acceptable in one field is not acceptable in another, and that they need to genre-switch (Johns, 2008) from class to class, and from campus to work to home.

The findings of this study contribute to an understanding of how adult students perceive academic writing. The eight participants in this study represented seven fields of study, and the interviews, classroom observations, and writing samples underscored the

marked differences between each field in terms of what constituted typical or acceptable writing in each discipline. Most of the participants in this study were at least halfway through their undergraduate careers, and many were about to graduate. All students expressed in interviews that they knew what kind of assignments were expected of them, and at least half expressed a comfort that developed over time with writing for their particular disciplines, all expressed one-time or ongoing anxiety about actually fulfilling the requirements of one or more assignments, or submitted writing assignments for this study with instructor feedback suggesting they had not fully grasped the assignment's goals. While the literature suggests that adult students are more likely to experience anxiety at the beginning of their academic careers but that it dissipates after they experience some success (Ross-Gordon & Brown-Haywood, 2000), the students in this study expressed anxiety when asked to complete any new type of writing assignment, no matter how long they had been enrolled in school.

The Intersection of Academic Literacies with Out-Of-School Literacies

The consensus on how best to educate adults is that it is important that the curriculum gives them the chance to incorporate their prior knowledge and life experience. Finding a mental place for the new knowledge amidst prior knowledge can help create a frame of reference that makes grasping and retaining new concepts easier to do (Bragg, 2013; Gleason, 2004; Hayes, Fry, & Cummings, 2018; Karpiak, 2000; Panacci, 2015; Strucker, 2013).

The findings of this study provide additional nuance for Donaldson and Graham's theory of the "connecting classroom" (1999) as the primary place where AUS learn and engage with their instructors. As Donaldson and Graham's model suggests, the

participants in this study did not spend much time on campus outside of the classroom, with the exception of going to office hours. Only a few used academic support services outside the classroom. Few made meaningful connections with other students, and no one mentioned going to any social or extracurricular events on campus. More than twenty years on, the idea of the connecting classroom could be expanded to include digital classrooms or, perhaps, classroom-adjacent spaces like discussion boards and email inboxes.

However, the findings of this study suggest that Donaldson and Graham's theory of the connecting classroom as a place where adult students can "socially construct, for themselves and others, what it means to be a college student" is incomplete. For Donaldson and Graham, the classroom is the primary place where adult undergraduates can claim the student identity and negotiate (or not) connections between "in-class and out-of-class learning and knowledge structures" (p. 31). While this study provides additional support for this idea, it also suggests that the classroom is the first place for students who are changing careers to learn about professional identities and professional ways of being and doing in various fields. For adult students who are changing careers, the classroom is the place where baseline expectations for professional discourse, conduct, and ways of thinking and problem-solving are established. In this way, some adult undergraduates may be similar to their younger classmates; neither type of student has a professional frame of reference through which to view academic material.

This research supports the notion that leveraging prior knowledge is important to adult learners, and that access to literacies are indeed, as Brandt (2009) claims, mediated by literacy sponsors. Literacy sponsors are entities or cultural forces that encourage the

acquisition and use of some types of literacies over others, primarily for those entities' own benefit or advantage. The university and the workplace are just two examples of literacy sponsors, though everyone has myriad others, too. What this study helps to make clear is that a person may be beholden to multiple literacy sponsors, often simultaneously, and that those literacy sponsors may or may not have aligning goals. The constant need to adapt standards, change language and tone, and even strive to see relevance in one's work can all be sources of frustration.

Only some of the participants in this study had the chance to explicitly connect prior knowledge and experience specifically gained at work to their work in the classroom. Only Trebor, Kevin, and Ciana cited examples of immediately being able to apply knowledge from the classroom to the workplace, and vice versa. They are currently working in fields directly related to what they are studying. In their cases, the objectives of their literacy sponsors were often more or less aligned. The university was teaching literacy skills that could be immediately and directly valued in the workplace, and the workplace was requiring literacy skills that could be learned and contextualized at the university.

For this study's other participants, however, the connections between academic literacies and out-of-school literacies were more complex. John could situate what he was learning in class with prior related work experiences, but did not have the opportunity to immediately apply what he was learning. The university was preparing John, who manages people in an engineering-related field, for a job as an entry-level engineer, while John had already advanced beyond that role in the workplace through an alternative route and years on the job. Still, the "engineering degree preferred" marker on his dream job

description caused him to pursue an engineering degree anyway, though the objectives of a degree in business management or logistics may have aligned better with his current and aspirational job responsibilities. Indeed, much of the literacy disconnect that John experienced in school was caused by interest in the subject matter coupled with a knowledge it would never be used again.

Additionally, Misha, who spent years trying to make it as a working actor, primarily works as a bartender and had studied media only as a hobby. Despite a strong interest in the material, the daily requirements of her job gave her no outlet to reinforce or develop what she was learning in school. Patrick, who spent two years in AmeriCorps before resuming work as a server and bartender to put himself through college, saw his previous experience in human services as support staff. What he's learning in school will hopefully help him towards his goal of being "the brains of the operation," but he will have to wait for that opportunity. For students like Walter and Zoe, who had never worked in their chosen fields before, they had little frame of reference to bring into the university, and no immediate opportunities to try to apply their new knowledge outside of school.

These five cases demonstrate the complexity of literacy sponsorship in which the goals and objectives of the university as a literacy sponsor were not often directly aligned with the goals and objectives of the participants' current (or former) workplaces. Sometimes, participants were able to look back on prior workplaces to help contextualize their university-gained knowledge. Sometimes, they were able to think about prior or current workplaces and use the social literacies learned there to navigate aspects of university life. However, particularly when it came to writing, the workplaces' goals

were wholly disconnected from those of the university, and everyone had to learn aspects of academic writing and language for the first time. This disconnect between literacy sponsors, along with the aforementioned writing anxiety, challenges Michaud's (2011) idea of the "reverse commute," in which adults "transport" professional literacy experiences back for use in academic literacy environments.

An additional area of disconnect is the fact that the research site does not primarily serve AUS. For most of the participants in this study, they are typically one of only a few—if not the only—older student in each of their classes. While basic cognitive theory suggests that everyone learns better, no matter how old they are, when they can situate new knowledge within a framework of existing knowledge (Anderson & Perason, 1984), it appears from this study that when a class full of younger students is expected, the amount of prior knowledge that they will bring with them that is related to the field will be limited. This is not to suggest that the professors associated with this study, or any professor that primarily teaches younger students, does not try to make connections in the classroom to things their students might already be familiar with. I just mean to suggest that direct, magnetic-poles-snapping-together connections may be more difficult to make in specialized fields.

While adults in this study sometimes struggled to connect their new academic literacies with their out-of-school literacies related to the workplace or their professional backgrounds, one unexpected out-of-school literacy skill emerged as paramount to helping these students navigate academic spaces. The adults in this study displayed high levels of social competence that helped them form relationships with professors and strategically position themselves in the classroom. Three distinct types of relationships

between students and faculty emerged. The first was the student-professor dynamic, in which a more typical power dynamic still existed but being able to share interests and life experiences with the professor helped to break down barriers and create rapport. The second was the colleague dynamic, in which students perceived professors as colleagues working in related fields. In this dynamic, students could help professors and professors could help students, not in direct quid-pro-quos but in ways that colleagues at similar levels often help each other in the workplace. The third was the supervisor dynamic, in which students treated their professors in similar ways as they would supervisors at work. The hierarchical power structure of the student-professor dynamic still existed, but so did elements of the colleague dynamic. In these types of relationships, students kept open lines of communication with their professors, developing rapport and then using that rapport and social savvy to bend professors' expectations and negotiate to achieve mutually agreeable solutions to academic problems.

Perceptions of and Approaches to Academic Challenges

Prior research on the adult undergraduate population suggests that they experience academic and social isolation. Various studies suggest that adults experience tensions between their out-of-school identity and their student identity (Barr, 2016; Stone, 2008), and ostracization from younger students who perceive their enthusiasm as annoying (Mallman & Lee, 2016). The findings of this study add additional nuance to the understanding of the adult experience on campus and their relationships with other students.

All of the AUS in this study reported significant external commitments with which they had to balance going to school. Some had families to care for; almost all had

jobs. All had, simply put, robust lives outside of school. Three students in this study specifically used the phrase “real life” when talking about their out-of-school life as compared to their school life, primarily in the context of how what they were learning in school was or was not applicable to situations outside of school. However, no student expressed ongoing tension between who they were as people outside of school versus inside of school. No one expressed guilt about prioritizing their own education over other priorities. If anything, the students in this study expressed unabashed determination to complete their degrees, no matter what, and a willingness to sacrifice to ensure that all of their commitments were met.

Additionally, the AUS in this study did report feeling disconnected from other students. While prior research suggests that feeling isolated from other students can exacerbate a lack of sense of belonging (Barr, 2016; Kasworm, 2008; Willans & Seary, 2011) and ultimately could affect willingness to persist, this study actually provided evidence that being disconnected from other students can sometimes be a benefit. None of the adults in this study felt any desire or pressure to form relationships, make friends, participate in extracurricular activities, or socialize outside of class. Moreover, because these pressures were removed, these students felt no need to modify their behavior in class. There was no need to worry about looking stupid in front of other students, participating in class discussions, offering different perspectives, or seeming cool. The students in this study were not concerned about forming social relationships with peers because they perceived themselves as having no peers. Without that pressure, they saw themselves as able to be more fully engaged in the classroom in ways in which their

younger classmates, whose attention they sometimes perceived to be split, could or would not.

The findings of this study also add additional nuance to previous research that suggests that AUS feel disconnected from their curricula (Bailey & Marsh, 2010) and, at times, babied by pedagogical techniques that may be more suitable for younger students or otherwise perceived as irrelevant (Cleary, 2012). This study provides further support for these findings, but only in some cases. While the adult undergraduates in this study did report feelings of frustration with younger classmates' perceived disengagement, and with pedagogical strategies that they felt didn't fully serve them, these feelings were reported only in some cases. In many other cases, AUS reported feeling excited about what they were learning, engaged in the classroom, and eager to keep going. Even if they couldn't yet *actually* apply what they were learning in the classroom to their jobs, they could usually imagine a scenario in which they could in the future.

Typically, feelings of frustration were more prevalent in general education classes as opposed to courses related to students' majors. However, even the nature of that frustration varied. Some students enjoyed the opportunity to learn about something unrelated to their major, but sometimes felt held back by other students' disengagement. It is unknown whether they would have experienced less frustration if everyone had been equally engaged. Other students saw general education as taking away from time they could have spent on more in-depth learning about their fields, no matter how engaged or not the other students in their general education classes were.

Significance of the Study

This study makes an important contribution to faculty and administrators' ability to understand, support, and teach a large subset of the undergraduate student population. In the following section, I will discuss the study's significance in terms of its design and its findings.

This study addresses some of the most critical limitations of the prior research conducted on adult undergraduate students and their academic literacy experiences. First, the study details eight diverse cases of adult undergraduate students. Previous studies typically only described one or two cases. By exploring the experiences of a group of adult students who were diverse in terms of race, gender, age, professional background, and life experience, faculty and administrators may be more likely to see the students in their classrooms reflected in one or more of these cases.

Additionally, previous studies tended to focus only on written language, particularly in writing courses. This study moved beyond just written literacy to also consider oral, visual, cultural, digital, and social literacies. Importantly, it also explored how academic literacy expectations varied from field to field.

Finally, the study took place in a four-year institution that was not specifically designed with adult students in mind, whereas many other studies on adult students tend to take place in community colleges or institutions designed for working adults. Moreover, most of the participants in this study (with the exception of the two enrolled in the online bachelor's of business administration program) were enrolled in degree programs that were not specifically designed with adult students in mind. It is important

to consider the experiences of adult undergraduate students in these "fish out of water" situations for several reasons.

First, for higher education institutions seeking to serve more adult students, this study shows that adult undergraduate students can succeed in existing degree programs. While some adjustments could be made to better serve adult students (see "Recommendations for Practice" for more on this), this study helps to make clear that an institution's overall educational mission need not radically change to make the institution itself more amenable to adults.

This study contests some of the common wisdom about who adult undergraduate students are. Many institutions may still believe that the average adult student works during the day, and can only attend school at night after they put their children to bed. However, three of the eight students in this study worked as bartenders or servers, and were able to attend classes during the day with most of the other undergraduate students. One who had a day job had a flexible enough schedule that he too could attend day classes.

Second, the only descriptor in this study that clearly separated adult students from younger students is their numerical age. In reading this study, many administrators and faculty will likely recognize aspects of their younger students' lives reflected back in these participants' stories. Many students age 18 to 24 are also working a significant number of hours. Many have family obligations, including taking care of children. Many do not live on campus. Many feel just as disconnected from academic language as older students do. So much of what makes adult students "nontraditional" is mirrored in large portions of the undergraduate student body as well.

Third, and most importantly, this study highlights some of the assets associated with the adult student identity and contests the deficit perspective commonly associated with adult students. While the students in this study tended to struggle with academic writing, many enjoyed school and were fully dedicated to it in spite of this frustration. Their focus, commitment, and resiliency should be further explored and modeled for younger students. Additionally, the social skills that allowed for productive relationships with faculty, and the perspective that simply seemed to come with time, are key strengths that other student populations may not have and that make adults valuable members of the campus community.

Limitations of the Study

Despite the contributions this study makes to the field, it does have limitations. In the following section, I will discuss the study's limitations on its methodology, analysis, and generalizability.

Limitations in Methodology

This study was designed to recruit a diverse group of AUS who could speak to a variety of experiences with learning and using academic literacies. While I believe a diverse group of cases was ultimately achieved, there were limitations placed on the ways in which I recruited participants that could have affected the composition of the sample. The initial screening survey was designed to help create a purposeful sample of AUS by asking some general questions about age, academic experience, career paths, and other markers (caregiver for children under age 18, military veteran, etc.). The goal was to send this survey out to all AUS at the research institution, thereby achieving the broadest possible reach for participant recruitment and hopefully a more purposeful sample.

However, this was not possible. Instead of contacting students directly to ask them to fill out the screening survey, I needed to access prospective participants through faculty and advisors who may be connected to these students. While I compiled a list of nearly 1,000 faculty and advisors at the research site, I was still dependent on the willingness of those faculty and advisors to forward the survey to their students on my behalf, which undoubtedly affected the number of AUS who had the opportunity to participate and made it impossible to recruit only adult students who were early on in their academic careers.

Additionally, while the screening survey asked about some aspects of AUS' identities—age, parent/guardian status, veteran status, and work experience—it failed to ask for two basic identity markers: race and gender. Initially, my goal was to recruit students with a variety of work experiences and a variety of external demands on their time. However, race and gender are inextricable parts of identity and should have been collected ahead of time, even if they were not actively considered in participant recruitment.

A second limitation in the methodology has to do with the timeframe of the study and the amount of data collected. Participants were interviewed for the first time towards the end of the fall semester, and again at the beginning of the spring semester, with one observation in between. While this sequencing allowed students to talk about academic literacies in the midst of being assessed (end of the fall semester) and as they started to learn new concepts (beginning of spring semester), with the opportunity to reflect, if I could have done the study again, I would have wanted to add a second observation. Many

participants talked about the differences between their courses, but I did not have the opportunity to see it for myself.

Additionally, not every student was able to submit the amount of writing I had hoped for. When initially designing the study, I wanted at least five pieces of academic writing for each student, along with drafts, rubrics, and teacher feedback. This amount of documentation proved difficult to collect, primarily because not every student had this amount of academic writing for each assignment. Many students did not write drafts; the version that was turned in for a grade was the only one they had. Many instructors did not use rubrics, write feedback in the margins of student papers, or write endnotes with summary feedback on student work—or some combination of the three. Many students did not keep the feedback they did receive. Of course, it is also possible that some students did not feel comfortable sharing their writing, especially writing on which they received a poor grade. Asking for documents showed some of my own positionality in this study. As a writing instructor, I often require drafts and I always write extensive comments on student papers. While students in other fields may not be doing the same kinds of assignments that I required of my students, I unconsciously assumed that the overall structure of how those assignments were turned in and assessed would be similar.

Limitations in Analysis

I was the sole collector and interpreter of this study's data. While I triangulated the data, member-checked, and took notes documenting my own feelings and reactions to the data in the moment, this is a study that is underpinned by an understanding of perspective and subjectivity. While steps were taken to employ a consistent methodology in interpreting the data, both within each case and across cases, it must be acknowledged

that true objectivity is impossible and, because this is a dissertation, adding a second coder to confirm interpretations was also not possible.

An additional limitation on the data analysis is that the individual participants in this study have more subject matter expertise in their respective fields than I do. What I interpreted to be students' ease and competence in talking about material they were learning about in their courses, the same language could be interpreted by others with more expertise in these fields as baseline or worse. The same is true for written academic literacy. I was forced to rely on grades and teacher feedback to make assessments on written fluency, because I myself had no frame of reference on, for example, what constituted a successful physics lab report. Additionally, as the literature suggests, academics themselves often cannot agree on what constitutes successful use of academic language in various fields, and I had to keep in mind that the writing samples that these students submitted represented only one professional in the field's interpretation of fluency.

Finally, the biggest limitation on the data analysis was the complexity of the participants themselves, and of literacy itself. While I tried to recruit specific profiles for this study, identity is not a fixed, singular concept. As described in the participation selection process, all students simultaneously hold many identities that they bring with them to the classroom and that may impact the ways they engage (or not) with academic literacies. Participants for this multiple case study were selected based on their identities as parents or employees, but other facets of identity, such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, religion, political beliefs, or personal biography may be much more influential in how these particular students experience the college classroom or life itself. To account

for some of this diversity, the second interview protocol was adjusted after the first interview was completed, and was slightly customized for each participant. Even still, the adult undergraduate population is exceedingly diverse; even if all the facets of identity described here were able to be explored, eight students could never provide enough data to generalize about the AUS population as a whole.

Additionally, the complexity of the participants' identities is directly connected to the complexity of literacy itself. This study primarily prioritizes the exploration and better understanding of academic literacies and their connection with, or disconnection from, what I generally called "out-of-school" literacies. However, the out-of-school literacies that this study prioritized were the functional literacies of the workplace, as opposed to other literacies that each participant undoubtedly is immersed in and uses on a regular basis: the literacies associated with their communities, families, political associations, religious beliefs, interests and hobbies, and more.

Limitations in Generalizability

While achieving a generalizable result was not the purpose of this study, the data from this qualitative study may be useful to others who teach adult students or serve adult students as college administrators. Moreover, the essential concept of this study—that literacy is not neutral and everyone's experience in the classroom is influenced by their perspective—could be useful to anyone studying academic literacies in any student population. Neither older adults nor traditional 18-year-olds come to college as blank slates. Everyone has a complex, multifaceted identity that they developed prior to entering the college classroom, and those identities and perspectives are impossible to leave behind.

Implications for Higher Education Practice

This study highlights some important areas for potential improved practice for higher education administrators, particularly in enrollment management, academic advising, and other student support services.

Implications for Administrators

It is widely understood that certain regions of the United States, including the Northeast (where this study took place) are experiencing enrollment challenges due to the shortfall of eligible recent high school graduates. This study provides in-depth profiles of potential completers that enrollment managers could use to recruit new adult students. The rich description of eight diverse AUS can help admissions and enrollment managers understand the goals and concerns of a potential new market.

While the study cannot generalize about AUS, it is important to note that none of the eight participants in this study indicated that they went to the university's career center. None indicated that they had regular meetings with academic advisors. While some used tutoring support, it was typically only when they had already realized that they were in over their heads academically. One even hired her own tutor at her own expense. These academic support units are all cost centers for any university, and the investment is only worthwhile if students make regular use of these services to improve their academic performance and career outcomes. Administrators should seek to better understand what kinds of students regularly use these services at their own institutions, and more importantly, who is not using these services. More work needs to be done to understand how to make these services work better for nontraditional student populations, including adults.

Implications for Faculty

The AUS in this study often expressed genuine interest and curiosity about what they were learning in class—but just as often, they expressed frustration and anxiety about completing assignments successfully, or seeing the point of those assignments at all. This study highlights important areas of consideration in making university curricula more relevant and engaging to AUS. It is important to note, though, that the recommendations made in this section may not only benefit AUS, but may also benefit many other undergraduate students of all ages and backgrounds. As previously noted, many younger undergraduate students share some of the same characteristics as AUS.

Faculty should consistently look for ways to incorporate students' prior knowledge into lessons and discussions. It is true for students of any age that new knowledge is often retained more easily when it can be situated and contextualized alongside something the student already knows well.

While finding ways to incorporate students' prior knowledge into classroom teaching may not always be instinctual, making consistent effort to do so will likely lead to more creative and engaging pedagogy. Doing so will also encourage faculty to continually consider their own positionality in the classroom. Will every student follow in your path to graduate school? If not, what skills will they need to succeed in other areas of your field? How can you as a faculty member give them opportunities to practice in class? Are there opportunities to be flexible and offer students a choice of equally rigorous assignments of different types?

Most importantly, finding ways to acknowledge the lives that students have lived before college—and *during* college, but outside the classroom—will help students of all

backgrounds to feel more welcome in college classrooms. Sacrificing academic rigor and quality is not required to help promote greater accessibility to academic material and acquiring new knowledge.

These questions lead to important considerations on who should teach certain courses. Depending on the type and goals of a particular course, it may benefit students more to have someone with a lot of directly-related professional experience—even if they do not have an advanced degree—as their instructor. I am the beneficiary of a robust liberal arts education. I strongly disagree with the line of thinking that universities should exist only to prepare students for jobs, and that intellectual curiosity, debate, and discovery are somehow less important. However, I do think that in an era of access and affordability challenges, faculty and administrators owe it to students to try to give them both.

Recommendations for Future Research

The AUS population is ripe for study, not only because little is known about their holistic academic literacies and literacy practices, but also because other studies have demonstrated that they perform well academically even in environments where they feel out of place or that are not responsive to their needs. If we can learn more about the AUS experience in the classroom, we as university instructors and administrators can not only provide better support services and more engaging classroom experiences to them, but we can also take that understanding of how AUS are socialized into academic social languages and apply it to other student populations. This is particularly important when one considers that many traditional-age undergraduate students now share some of the same characteristics as AUS. Like AUS, TAUS may also work full-time and study part-

time, have children or significant family responsibilities, and/or live away from campus. They too are bringing various out-of-school literacies to the college classroom. As Halx (2010) argues, many traditional-age undergraduate students would benefit from being treated (and taught) like adults.

While this exploratory study provides some important new insights, more research needs to be done to better understand this population and their academic aspirations and challenges. Additional qualitative studies could be undertaken to isolate specific variables that were not isolated in this study, for the purpose of better understanding specific subsets of the adult undergraduate population. For example, a study that focused only on AUS enrolled in the liberal arts or business or the sciences could help understand more about the academic literacies required in those fields, and more about specific types of collisions with out-of-school literacies.

Additionally, a study that focused only on AUS in their first semester as new or returning students could help understand more about students' experiences with the general academic literacy of the university setting (e.g. communicating with faculty, using learning management systems, registering for courses, etc.), something that did not emerge strongly in this study because most students were already highly experienced and nearing the end of their degree programs. Moreover, future studies could also focus specifically on career changers, i.e. those students who may not have had any prior exposure to a new discipline-specific academic literacy.

Finally, many AUS pursue higher education at community colleges or for-profit institutions. Because these institution types see larger numbers of AUS, they may be more adept at serving them than a four-year public institution, like the research site, may

be. Further research could compare the experiences of AUS at different types of institutions.

This study, and those prospective studies referenced above, prioritizes the identity of “adult learner” in exploring academic literacy experiences of AUS. However, as previously noted, identity is extremely complex. Areas for future research could also incorporate other social identities of adult learners that were not explored in this study. It would be important to explore the intersectionality of adult learners with other aspects of their identities, including but not limited to race, gender, and socioeconomic status.

Along these lines, this study applies the concept of community cultural wealth—originally explored in terms of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status—to adult students in terms of their age. However, a future study could explore the concept of community cultural wealth in its original terms to AUS. For example, future studies in a qualitative or quantitative approach could seek to understand or measure how AUS, especially in communities of color, leverage their community cultural wealth in higher education institutions.

While all of these proposed avenues for future research are targeted towards AUS, other avenues for further research include applying the concepts of academic literacies and out-of-school literacies—framed through an understanding of cultural capital versus community cultural wealth—to other student populations not traditionally served in higher education. While several existing studies examine community cultural wealth among traditional-age undergraduate students of color and first-generation students, I could only find one study (Hungerford-Kresser, 2010) that specifically looks at this tension in a first-generation student population through the lens of academic literacies.

Finally, while all of these prospective studies assume qualitative approaches, there are additional prospective studies that could take a mixed methods approach. While literacies are difficult to quantify and measure, success indicators like GPA, persistence, and retention are not. Moreover, existing models to predict these indicators are typically reliable for younger students but not for AUS. Additional quantitative studies are needed to develop better models to predict academic success indicators for the AUS population, and a mixed methods approach would still allow for the nuances of academic literacies and the diversity of student experiences to emerge. Ultimately, if suspected best practices begin to emerge in qualitative studies, they could be tested through larger quantitative studies.

Reflection

For a year, I took time off from my second job as an adjunct English instructor so I could focus on completing this dissertation. Still, I kept my primary job as a pre-college program director. As I got to know the eight AUS who participated in this study, I could not help but think of things I wanted to change in my own practice, both as an instructor and as an administrator.

Listening to these students provided me with more genuine insight into the student experience than course evaluations ever could. Hearing students describe how frustrated they were about their writing experiences made me actively consider what I as a writing instructor could do better. How could the assignments I required be adjusted or even eliminated to better serve the learning objectives I ultimately wanted students to achieve? How could I help my students bring their whole selves to my classroom to more meaningfully engage with the material and to hopefully find a place for it in their own

lives? How could I expand my own definition of what academic writing is and give my students more opportunities to practice the writing that resonates most with them? How can I be a more inclusive literacy sponsor? I am excited to return to the classroom with redesigned syllabi and more committed than ever to listening and to continuous improvement.

Additionally, considering the findings of this study in light of my primary job as a pre-college program director has helped me to re-think what my responsibilities are to these high school students who will likely become traditional undergraduates immediately after high school. What are the literacies that they will bring with them to campus? How can I introduce them to the academic literacies of the university and of the fields they are most interested in studying? How can I help them try on the college student Discourse, and find ways to demystify it? How can we as a program be more conscious of the barriers that exist, but may have faded into our subconscious because we have become so accustomed to their existence?

Summary

This exploratory, qualitative study provides a nuanced understanding of the academic literacy experiences of AUS in a four-year, public institution. Instead of highlighting the deficits that these students may face in coming back to school and completing their degrees, it presents profiles of highly motivated, engaged, and determined students who exhibit joyful learning and passionate interest in their chosen fields of study. High levels of interest helped them to perceive the experience of learning and using the academic literacies of those fields to be a joyful, albeit sometimes stressful, one. This stress was primarily attributed to developing written fluency in their fields, and

exacerbated by the knowledge that they would likely not write in these ways once they left school.

Despite some frustration, the study highlighted some assets that adults may bring to the classroom that help them do academic work and navigate academic challenges. While in several cases, academic work bore little to no relation to prior professional work, every adult in this study was interested in the academic work anyway. Even when no connection existed, they could often enjoy learning for learning's sake. Moreover, prior experience with developing and utilizing soft skills—forming meaningful relationships with supervisors, knowing yourself, being willing to ask for help (and knowing who and how to ask), understanding when to fight versus when to cut your losses—helped them address academic challenges.

Colleges and universities across the United States are looking for creative ways to mitigate enrollment shortfalls, and enroll new populations of students in undergraduate study. This study shows that adult students can thrive, even in environments that are not explicitly designed for them. While the adults in this study developed their confidence, resilience, and drive over time, colleges and universities may consider ways in which they can help all students build these skills and ways in which all students can bring their identities into the classroom.

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APPENDIX A

OUTREACH EMAIL TO FACULTY

Dear FACULTY NAME,

My name is Maureen Saraco and I am a graduate student at Temple University's College of Education. I am reaching out to you to invite the students enrolled in your introductory courses this semester to participate in a study I am conducting on the academic experiences of adult undergraduate students at Temple University. **This study is specifically for adult students who are age 25 or older**.

I am interested in learning more about adult undergraduates' thoughts and experiences in higher education, and would welcome their participation in this project. Any information these students share via interviews, observations, or other documentation will be kept confidential.

While there is no compensation for participating, these students' participation will be a valuable addition to my research. I hope that my project help the higher education community to better understand and serve adult students.

If you are willing to do so, please forward this information to all students enrolled in your introductory courses this semester. Students who are interested in learning more can click the link below to answer a few initial questions about themselves and qualify by age. This short survey should take approximately 3-4 minutes to complete.

https://survey.sogosurvey.com/r/euY9um

Once I receive these students' surveys, I will then follow up with them to share more information about the study, and they can decide at that time whether they would like to participate.

If you or your students have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask! Any questions can be directed to me at the email address below.

Thank you,
Maureen Saraco
Ed.D. Candidate, Higher Education Administration
Temple University
tuadultstudentstudy@temple.edu

APPENDIX B

OUTREACH EMAIL TO ADVISORS

Dear ADVISOR NAME,

My name is Maureen Saraco and I am a graduate student at Temple University's College of Education. I am reaching out to you to invite your advisees to participate in a study I am conducting on the academic experiences of adult undergraduate students at Temple University. **This study is specifically for adult students who are age 25 or older**.

I am interested in learning more about adult undergraduates' thoughts and experiences in higher education, and would welcome their participation in this project. Any information these students share via interviews, observations, or other documentation will be kept confidential.

While there is no compensation for participating, these students' participation will be a valuable addition to my research. I hope that my project help the higher education community to better understand and serve adult students.

If you are willing to do so, please forward this information to your advisees. Students who are interested in learning more can click the link below to answer a few initial questions about themselves and qualify by age. This short survey should take approximately 3-4 minutes to complete.

https://survey.sogosurvey.com/r/euY9um

Once I receive these students' surveys, I will then follow up with them to share more information about the study, and they can decide at that time whether they would like to participate.

If you or your advisees have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask! Any questions can be directed to me at the email address below.

Thank you,
Maureen Saraco
Ed.D. Candidate, Higher Education Administration
Temple University
tuadultstudentstudy@temple.edu

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT SCREENING SURVEY

Thank you for your interest in participating in a study about the academic experiences of adult undergraduate students at [Research Site]. Please answer the questions below to get started. If you are a fit for the study and are interested in participating further, the researcher will contact you via email with more information about the study.

1. **Age**
   - 18-24 *(This is a screening question to weed out prospective subjects who do not fit the criteria of being an adult undergraduate.)*
   - 25-34
   - 35-44
   - 45-54
   - 55+

2. **Is the fall 2019 semester your first semester of college-level study?**
   - Yes
   - No

3. **[If no to #2] How many semesters of college-level study have you previously attempted or completed? These semesters do not need to be consecutive.**
   [short answer]

4. **Which of [the Research Site's] schools or colleges are you currently studying in?**
   - [Multiple choice list of all undergraduate schools and colleges]
   - No declared major yet
   - Other [please specify]
   - Not sure

5. **What is your academic major?**
   [short answer]

6. **Are you a veteran or are you currently serving in the military?**
   - Veteran
   - Active duty
   - Neither

7. **[If yes to #6] If you are a veteran or are currently serving in the military, in which branch have you served or are you currently serving?**
   - Air Force
   - Army

- Coast Guard
- Marine Corps
- Navy

8. Are you a primary caregiver for children under age 18?
- Yes
- No

9. Have you ever worked outside the home?
- Yes, I have worked outside the home in the past
- Yes, I am currently working outside the home
- No, I have never worked outside the home

10. [If yes to #8] For how many years have you worked outside the home?
- 0-2 years
- 3-5 years
- 6-8 years
- 8-10 years
- 10+ years

11. [If yes to #8] In which industr(ies) have you previously worked, or are currently working? Check all that apply.
- Accommodation and Food Services
- Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation
- Broadcasting, Telecommunications, or Data Processing/Hosting
- Construction
- Educational Services
- Finance and Insurance
- Health Care and Social Assistance
- Manufacturing
- Natural Resources and Mining
- Professional and Business Services
- Real Estate and Rental and Leasing
- Religious, Grantmaking, Civic, Professional, and Similar Organizations
- Retail or Wholesale Trade
- Transportation and Warehousing
- Utilities
- Other (please specify)

12. Are you interested in possibly participating in a study about the academic experiences of adult undergraduate students? If you choose "yes" below, please also share your name and email address. If you are a fit for the study, you will be contacted by the researcher so you can learn more about the study and decide whether or not you want to participate.
- Yes
- No

13. **First Name**
    [short answer]

14. **Last Name**
    [short answer]

15. **Preferred Email Address**
    [short answer]

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey! Please click the "Submit" button to record your answers. If you have any questions, please contact the researcher, Maureen Saraco, at tuadultstudentstudent@temple.edu.

APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title: Understanding the academic literacy experiences of adult undergraduate students at a four-year public institution
Protocol No.: 26094
Investigator: Maureen Saraco
Phone Number: 215-385-1500

You are being asked for your consent to take part in research study on academic experiences of adult undergraduate students at [Research Site]. This document provides a concise summary of this research. It describes the key information that we believe most people need to decide whether to take part in this research.

The study is being conducted by Maureen Saraco, an Ed.D. candidate in higher education administration at Temple University's College of Education. The purpose of this research is to better understand the classroom experiences of adult undergraduate students, and how those students approach and complete academic writing assignments.

The study includes the following components:

- Participating in two (2) interviews of approximately one hour each. Interviews will be scheduled at your convenience and will take place on campus. The first interview will take place in October or November, and will seek to understand your educational history and your academic experiences at [Research Site] thus far. The second interview will take place in December or January and will ask you to reflect on your experiences during the fall semester.
- Allowing one (1) or more classroom observations. You will work with the researcher to identify a class meeting where the researcher can visit to learn more about your classroom experience. The researcher will secure instructor permission, but will not speak with your instructor or classmates about you.
- Providing five (5) graded writing assignments with instructions from your fall semester courses. These can be essay exams, response papers, discussion boards, term papers, lab reports, or other assignments that involve writing. You will not be asked to write anything additional for the study, but may be asked to provide the syllabi for your courses.

Please read this form and sign below to certify that you approve the following.

1. This research study will be explained to be prior to my decision to participate or not.

2. My participation in this study is completely voluntary. It is not expected that I will personally benefit from this research.

3. I can refuse to participate or discontinue my participation at any time without penalty.

4. I will not be identified by name in this study. All interview responses, observation notes, academic writing samples, and feedback will be kept confidential. I will choose a pseudonym. The researcher will use my pseudonym to disguise any of my direct quotes or identifying information.

5. Interviews and observations will be audio recorded and the researcher may take notes during both. Copies of the interview transcripts and observation notes will be provided to me to ensure accuracy and allow for correction. Copies of my recorded interviews will not be distributed.

6. Transcripts, recordings, and notes will be kept in a secure location away from Temple University.

7. I can ask questions about this research at any time.

8. The researcher anticipates no significant risks or discomforts to me as a result of taking part in this research. However, it is possible that I may feel some anxiety during interviews if I discuss my personal experiences. I understand that I can decline to answer any question at any time if I feel uncomfortable.

Who can answer my questions about this research?
If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think this research has hurt you or made you sick, talk to the research team at the phone number listed above on the first page.

This research is being overseen by an Institutional Review Board ("IRB"). An IRB is a group of people who perform independent review of research studies. You may talk to them at (215) 707-3390 or irb@temple.edu if:

- You have questions, concerns, or complaints that are not being answered by the research team.
- You are not getting answers from the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone else about the research.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.

I have read and understood the information provided to me about this study. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction and I agree to participate in this study.

Name of Participant	Date	Signature
Name of Researcher	Date	Signature

Copies: Once this form has been signed by all parties, the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated form.

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW 1 PROTOCOL

N.B. This is the protocol for the first interview that every study subject participated in. First interviews took place in November-December 2019. Interviews were semi-structured, so although the questions below were asked in this order, some additional follow-up or probing questions were asked based on the subject's responses. Because qualitative research is exploratory, interview questions were added, removed, or adjusted slightly based on subject responses—but the overall protocol did not deviate significantly from what is presented here.

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today. This interview is for a study I'm doing in which I'm trying to better understand the academic experiences of adult undergraduate students, particularly as they relate to the transition to higher education. I'd like to talk to you today about your previous educational experiences and your time at [Research Site] so far. Is it ok if I record our conversation? Thank you!

First, I'd like to ask you to tell me a little bit about your experience coming to college.

1. What factors went into you deciding to return to college?
2. How did you choose which field you wanted to study?
3. What factors went into you choosing this particular institution?

Great! Now, I'd like you to look back a little bit to think more about your experience with formal education so far.

4. What do you remember thinking and feeling about school when you were younger?
    a. What was your experience in the classroom?
    b. What were some of the things you liked about school? Disliked?
    c. What were some of the subjects that you were interested in or did well in? What about subjects that were a struggle for you?
5. What was your experience immediately following high school? How did you make the decision about what your next step was going to be, whether it was going to college or something else?
6. [If they have worked outside the home] How did you begin working in the field(s) that you have worked in? What memories or experiences come to mind when thinking about doing this work?
7. [If they have served in the military] What went into your decision to enlist in the military? What memories or experiences come to mind when thinking about your service?

Ok, great! Thank you for sharing that. Now, I have a few questions about your classroom experiences in the university. Something I'm interested in understanding more about are

the languages that students need to learn when they become college students. By this, I mean the languages and rules and customs of how to be a college student—like admissions, financial aid, choosing courses, etc.—but I also mean learning the languages of the various fields of study that you might pursue—like how to talk or write like a businessperson, scientist, historian, or whatever it is that you're studying. Sometimes learning these kinds of languages can be challenging for students. Does that make sense? Great!

8. Tell me about what the transition to college has been like for you. I'm most interested in your classroom experiences, but am also interested in your overall experience as a student.
    a. What, if anything, has been challenging or stressful?
    b. What, if anything, has been easy?
    c. What, if anything, has surprised you?
9. Tell me about the courses you're taking now.
    a. How did you choose these courses?
    b. Thinking about the course you like best, what are some of the things you like about it?
    c. Thinking about the course you like least, what are some of the things you do not like about it?
10. One of the things that research shows about adult students is that they have a lot of life experiences that can influence how they engage in college courses. What experiences come to mind where the things you have learned outside of school have helped you—or made things harder—in the classroom?

Excellent. Just a few more questions now.

11. How would you define academic success?
12. Can you describe the strategies you've put in place so far to help you be academically successful?
    a. How do you plan out and complete your writing assignments?
    b. How do you study for tests?
    c. How do you prepare for class each day?
    d. How do you engage with your professors if and when you need help?
13. What barriers, if any, do you feel you face to be academically successful?
14. What are your goals for after college?

That concludes all the questions I have for today. Is there anything else I did not ask that you think would be important for me to know?

Thank you so much for your willingness to participate in this interview! I will share a copy of it with you once I transcribe it so you can always feel free to add or clarify anything if you would like to.

To help learn more about your experiences in college, I would like to be able to observe one of your classes so I can get a better picture of some of the things you talked about. I will reach out to you to schedule a good time to visit one of your classes.

Additionally, as you complete writing assignments this semester, I would like to read over what you've written. Part of what I'm trying to better understand is how adult students respond to writing assignments. I will reach out to you via email to see if you can send me some of your writing throughout the semester from some of your classes.

Finally, I hope you'll be willing to talk to me again at the end of the semester. I really am hoping that things go well for you this semester and would love to hear how everything turns out at the end! Would that be ok? Great! Thank you again!

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW 2 PROTOCOL

It's nice to see you again! Thank you for taking some time to talk to me one more time. During our first conversation, we talked about your academic history and your transition to [Research Site]. Now that the fall semester is over, I'm hoping to hear more about your experiences here on campus, especially now that you have the benefit of hindsight. Is it ok if I record our conversation again? Thank you!

First, I'd like to go back to some of the things you talked about when we met a few months ago.

1. You mentioned that you found ________________________ to be challenging or stressful for you. Is there anything you'd like to add as a stressor or challenge? What strategies did you use to deal with these stressors last semester?
2. You mentioned that you found ________________________ surprising. What else, if anything, has been unexpected or surprising?
3. You mentioned that ________________________ was your favorite course and ___________________ was your least favorite course. Has this changed at all? If so, what are some of the reasons for the change? If not, what else would you like to add as to why these are courses that you felt strongly about?

Ok, great. Thank you for sharing that! Moving on to think about the semester as a whole, I want to ask a few questions about your academic experiences overall last semester.

1. The end of the semester can be a very stressful time for most students. Tell me about your experience wrapping up your courses.
    a. How did you approach your final exams and papers?
    b. What was some of the feedback you got on your final assignments?
2. Thinking about all your courses, can you tell me about one or two times when you felt particularly proud of one of your accomplishments? Tell me about what the accomplishment was, and how you felt.
3. What assignments felt most helpful or enjoyable or fulfilling to complete? What assignments did you find to be tedious or not enjoyable?
4. Last time we talked, you defined "academic success" as ________________________________. Thinking about the fall semester, in what ways do you feel like you were academically successful or not?
5. How, if at all, would you change your definition of academic success?
6. Thinking about the strategies you used to complete your work last semester,
    a. Which do you feel helped you the most? What are some of the reasons you felt like they were helpful?
    b. Which will you reevaluate or not use again? What are some of the reasons for you felt like they were not as helpful?
7. What are some of the concerns or hopes you have for this semester?

Thank you for sharing that. A few more questions about your experiences last semester before we move on to some questions about this semester. Let's look at the writing assignment from last semester that you brought with you.

1. What was the goal of this assignment?
2. How was it explained to you by the professor? In class? Via email or Canvas? Some other way? Not at all?
3. How did you come up with the idea for what to write about?
4. Describe your writing process. What strategies did you use to brainstorm, organize your thoughts, and actually complete the assignment?
5. Did you have the opportunity to draft and revise? Describe what that experience was like in terms of getting feedback from the professor, understanding their feedback, and acting on it.
6. How did you feel about the grade you got on the assignment and the feedback the teacher gave you?
7. In what ways do you feel like this was a successful or unsuccessful paper?

That's great. Thank you. I appreciate you showing me your work and talking me through it. Now, I'd like to move on to talking about the work you're doing this semester.

1. Can you confirm that these are the correct classes you're taking this semester? [Recall list from previous semester]
    a. What is the reason for any changes, if applicable?
2. How do you think the courses you're taking now are similar to or different from the ones you've already taken?
3. Tell me about one of the new things you're learning now.
    a. Easy, challenging, frame of reference?
    b. If challenging, how are you trying to understand?

I got a chance to sit in on one of your classes in [subject]. Let's talk for a few minutes about that.

4. How would you describe this course and what it's about?
5. How do you see this course relating to your degree?
6. In what ways have you encountered any of this material before, either in school or elsewhere?
7. Thinking about the in-class experience specifically, how would you describe the professor's teaching style?
8. What do you remember about the concepts that were covered that day?
9. In what ways was this a typical or atypical class day for you?
10. Tell me more about [as applicable]:
    a. Your oral participation
    b. Your notetaking
    c. Your work in small groups
11. How well do you think you're understanding this material so far?
12. What are your feelings about this class going forward?

Were you able to bring an assignment that you're working on now or will have to complete soon? Great, thank you. Let's go through that together.

1. Tell me more about this assignment. What is expected of you?
2. How are you feeling about this assignment?
3. Has this been explained to you in more detail yet? If so, how?
4. Have you started it yet? If so, describe your writing process for completing the assignment. If not, how will you plan to get started?
5. What strategies will you use to ensure that the assignment meets the requirements?

Ok, just a few more questions and then we can wrap up. Most universities provide some academic support services for their students.

1. Have you ever gone to office hours?
    a. If no, what are some of the reasons why not?
    b. If yes, how often? Tell me about a particular experience you may be able to remember of going to office hours.
        i. What did you want to discuss with the professor?
        i. How do you remember feeling during the conversation?
        ii. How do you remember feeling afterwards?
2. Have you ever gone to the writing center?
    a. If no, what are some of the reasons why not?
    b. If yes, how often? Tell me about a particular experience you may be able to remember of going to the writing center.
        iii. What assignment were you seeking help with?
        iv. How do you remember feeling during the session?
        v. How do you remember feeling afterwards?
3. Have you ever used any other tutoring or support services, like peer tutoring, academic coaching, etc.?
    a. If no, what are some of the reasons why not?
    b. If yes, how often? Tell me about a particular experience you may be able to remember of using these services.
        vi. What assignment were you seeking help with?
        vii. How do you remember feeling during the session?
        viii. How do you remember feeling afterwards?

Before we finish, I’d like to just ask you to reflect on your experience as an adult student on campus.

1. Tell me about the advantages and/or disadvantages you’ve experienced in getting your degree while a little older than a traditional student.
2. What would you say to another adult who was considering going back to school?

[Only if the student has indicated they will be graduating this year]

1. Last time we talked, you let me know that you are on schedule to graduate soon. Tell me about how you’re feeling about the end of your undergraduate experience.
2. What do you plan to do after college?
    a. If looking for a job
        i. Tell me about the job search.

   ii. What kinds of positions are you looking for? How will these positions be similar to or different from the kind of work you've done in the past?
      1. Type of work
      2. The identity you'll have there
   iii. What are you most looking forward to?
   iv. What are you nervous about?

b. If continuing in same job
   i. Tell me about what you think will come next.
   ii. In what ways do you think anything will change at work now that you'll have your bachelor's degree?
c. If going to grad school
   i. What went into your decision to go to grad school?
   ii. In what ways do you think grad school will be similar to or different from undergraduate study?

Thank you so much for this. This was really helpful. That concludes all the questions I have for today. Is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you would like to share?

Ok, thank you again. This concludes your participation in the study. As I did before, I will share a copy of this interview with you once I transcribe it, and you can always add or clarify anything via email.