 Even before students step into the composition classroom, their varying levels of interest in the subject, their assumptions about college instruction, and their uncertainties create a series of instructional dilemmas. Further complicating the picture are professors’ conceptions of what constitutes appropriate college student behavior, and teachers’ lack of understanding about what prevents students from acting in accordance with those norms. At the same time, when instructors recognize the reasons for students’ disappointing performance—whether in class or on assignments—they are much more likely to respond effectively. By virtue of their professorial authority, instructors have a tremendous influence on students’ sense of competence and willingness to seek help. An instructor’s ability to assuage students’ fears can be the first and most important step toward actively inviting students into the classroom to accomplish what they perceived as challenging but “doable” work.

This chapter presents the instructional perspectives and strategies of two particularly skilled composition instructors at Lake Shore Community College—both of whom have demonstrated success in helping students meet the standards of first-semester composition at the college. Focusing on these two instructors, Beth and Julie, in this chapter I discuss the approach that proved most successful in helping students pass composition. To state it briefly, these instructors expected rigorous work from students, provided both the subject matter content and explicit instructions for approaching each assignment, and convinced students that they had the ability to accomplish the work. It seems a matter of common sense that such strategies would yield positive results, but without the teachers’ understanding and addressing the issues outlined in previous chapters, simply applying these strategies would not produce the same results.

In many ways, Beth and Julie were no different from their colleagues in the English department at Lake Shore Community College. Like the other composition instructors I observed, they provided detailed, explicit instruction. The instructors all agreed that the students enrolled in Comp 1A were academically capable not only of passing the course, but of succeeding. Teachers’ confidence in students’ abilities is critical; research studies suggest that such optimism may be the most fundamental of the factors affecting an instructor’s success with less advantaged students.¹

Moreover, all of the professors in this study described their commitment to teaching community college students as opposed to students at a four-year college. Across the two-year colleges I have visited, instructors have, at times, made references to “four-year wannabes,” faculty members they perceive to be working at the two-year level only because they were unable to find employment at four-year colleges. Such comments presuppose two categories of professors—those who sincerely enjoy working with two-year college students, and those who have “settled” on this path, in order to remain in higher education. In my study, several spoke of the rewards of working with students generally deemed underprepared. Here is one fairly typical statement: “In an environment like this, some of the students don’t have a command of the King’s English and many of them have no idea what college
is all about but, man! they've got some amazing life experiences and viewpoints on things, and it's just a matter of their learning how to put that out in a formal essay.

Through their written feedback to students and during teacher-student conferences, I witnessed the respect and appreciation instructors felt for students' writing. Their comments consistently highlighted the positive features of each student's essay: elements of the writer's style, organizational strategy, and ideas. The instructors' subtle readings illuminated aspects of students' texts that would otherwise have escaped my notice, such as literary flourishes and the intriguing seeds of thought that lay below the prosaic surface. In addition, instructors spoke thoughtfully about their pedagogical philosophies and the kinds of changes they planned to adopt to improve the course and, in turn, students' learning. Optimistic, reflective practitioners, these instructors spent immense time and energy on behalf of their students. And yet despite all the instructors' commitment and hard work, the completion rate varied widely across different sections of Comp 1A: it ranged from 45 percent to 80 percent, with an average rate only slightly higher than the department-wide rate of 60 percent.

The variation in completion rates cannot be attributed to major differences in student abilities or in the course curricula across composition sections. By collegewide policy, enrollment in Comp 1A is limited to students who receive an adequate score on the college's literacy assessment test. Thus, the students who enroll in the course have been judged academically prepared for the course by the college's own assessment policies. Furthermore, the instructors all follow the guidelines and assignment structure of a standardized syllabus, which minimizes curricular variation across composition classrooms.

Regardless of the rate of attrition, the pattern of student participation and withdrawal in Comp 1A was the same from classroom to classroom. Most students who failed or withdrew from the course had gotten stuck on writing assignments at the begin-

ning of the course and either completed none of the required essays or managed to complete only the first essay.

Beth's and Julie's courses were distinctive in that a higher proportion of students submitted the first essay assignment, completed the second assignment, and eventually finished the course with a passing grade. By the end of the semester, not only had a higher percentage of students persisted in Beth's and Julie's classrooms, but those students also described Beth and Julie differently than they did other instructors—not simply with the respect and appreciation accorded most professors, but with adulation.

In fact, the crucial dimension of both Beth's and Julie's approaches hinged on students' perceptions. It was not the classroom dynamics per se that mattered, as much as students' perceptions of the classroom dynamics. Beth's and Julie's success with their composition students had three related dimensions. First, seeing that their instructor possessed expert knowledge and the ability to explain it, students trusted these professors' subject matter mastery. Second, Beth and Julie epitomized a form of authority based on interpersonal relations, which students perceived as more confidence-inspiring than traditional professing. Third, these professors expected rigorous work from students; they also provided enough explicit instruction (from the student point of view) about approaching each assignment. As a whole, this pedagogical approach persuaded students that they were more than capable of accomplishing the work.

Convincing students that they will succeed at college-level work is difficult, particularly because professors' expertise can be immensely intimidating to students. As Colleen explained (in Chapter 2), the professors who inspire the most fear are those to whom she would, if she could gather enough courage, give this advice: "Come down to our level a little bit. I know you have a lot of stuff to teach us, but don't be so high on that pedestal that we can't reach you." Feeling intimidated can easily lead to distancing and disengagement in any classroom; in college class-
rooms where taking initiative is the mark of a "serious" or "motivated" student, students might feel highly motivated to learn without acting in a way that conveys that seriousness to the instructor. This proves even more problematic in composition classrooms where professors, hoping that students will assume the voice of authority in their writing, do not want to tell students what to write. As I argue in the previous chapter in the context of Lori's class, students trusted instructors who clearly demonstrated their subject matter knowledge; thus, Beth and Julie's authority depended on their first demonstrating professorial expertise.

Colleen's interview comments provide the clearest illustration of the consequences of this paradox for the professor. After remarking on what she perceived as her philosophy professor's arrogant demeanor, Colleen explained that she feared the teacher would consider her stupid if she asked him any questions (see Chapter 2). Another student, generalizing about his classmates, asserted that some students are simply intimidated because their professors assign grades. Such students, he contended, "don't want to look like a fool" (Chapter 4). The features that distinguished Beth and Julie's teaching from that of other highly competent and admired professors came through in students' descriptions; students emphasized Beth and Julie's ability to "come down to" students' level and to "relate." The instructional success of these teachers depended first and foremost on their actively encouraging students and assuaging their most debilitating fears.

"COMING DOWN" TO STUDENTS' LEVEL

The analyses in previous chapters indicate that because students are interested in acquiring content knowledge, the presence of "informative" course content is crucial to college teaching and learning in their eyes. Although students saw the traditional au-

Professors who relate

"My composition professor really cares, and she relates. And she tries to help, everywhere she can."

"He's really good at saying like, 'No, that's not right,' without putting anyone down. . . . If there were any questions that I wanted to ask, I don't think I would hesitate to go up and ask him."

"I like her because she gets personal with you. She'll ask things about you, about your life, like with that form that we filled out. What were you doing in college, why were you there, what made you come, things like that. It's a little bit more personal than what my other teachers did. Besides my speech teacher, she's really the only teacher that even cared to get to know the students personally."

Excellent professors

"It seems like he's pretty intelligent; I think he's a pretty good teacher altogether and, you know, everything he's teaching is pretty much right."

"If you notice when he's talking, he is so smart. He knows so many things and you're just like, 'Wow.' Like, I remember about my second week when I got in there, I was like, 'Golly, How can you know so much stuff?'

"I think that he's an excellent teacher. I think he is so thorough in his material—like, a lot of questions that might have been asked don't need to be. . . . I would take him again. I think he requires a lot out of his students."

Table 6.1

authoritative professor who explains the content as the most legitimate model, Beth and Julie, the professors who "related," minimized the distance between their students and themselves, in part by understanding how students perceived the course content and by recognizing and responding to students' lack of confidence. A crucial piece of the two women's pedagogy consisted of their efforts to understand how students were interacting with the course content—both cognitively and emotionally—and to respond accordingly. Beth and Julie were thereby able to close
the gap between their students and the course content, while encouraging those students to persist.

When students attributed their persistence and success to professors, the ability of those teachers to relate or come down to students’ level was at the heart of their account. In contrast, when they spoke of other excellent professors, they focused on the traditional dimension of subject matter expertise. A few representative descriptions illustrate this basic difference.

In the case of Beth, students consistently alluded to her accessibility. Serena highlighted Beth’s friendliness, saying, “She seems real friendly. Like some professors will be like, ‘Oh, I’ll be in my office,’ but you’re real hesitant to go to them, because of the way they are. But she seems like she wouldn’t mind if you went to go ask her questions and stuff.” For Serena, “the way they are” does not include demeaning or belittling behavior; to the contrary, she describes the typical professor as both knowledgeable and helpful. But Serena admits here that even when professors offer extra help during their office hours, she remains hesitant about seeking their assistance.

Serena also observed, “She’s like a teacher who is not that educated, like compared to our other teachers,” and Ryan added, “She brings herself kind of down to our level.” To both of them (and to their classmates), Beth appeared more open and friendly than the typical professor at LSCC. Again, other professors had not acted unfriendly, but Beth had made a conscious effort to meet students at their “level.”

In this way, Beth, with a Ph.D. in English, commanded respect for her subject matter expertise and her ability to explain it to students, but not in a “high and mighty” way. By embodying these key aspects of college teaching (professing), Beth earned her students’ trust in her competence. At the same time, she did not remain in the distant (and distanced) position of the stereotypical professor, many levels above students. In Serena’s terms, Beth comes across to students as highly educated, but much less threatening than a typical professor.

Similarly, Julie’s students spoke in glowing terms about how she encouraged them not to give up when faced with challenging work. Colleen said, “When we did the research paper, that scared the hell out of me. I was freaking out. Julie could tell just by looking at me. She’s like, ‘You’ll do fine. Calm down.’ She encouraged me like nobody has ever encouraged me. I made a very direct point to get her again next semester.”

Furthermore, Colleen attributed her persistence in her philosophy course to Julie’s support. “Because of the way Julie encourages us, it will make a lot more students come back, where they won’t be scared off. Like my philosophy and history classes: if I hadn’t had Julie in my corner, I probably would have dropped most of my classes. They need more teachers like her, ones that encourage the student to try harder and give them better examples on how to go about getting things accomplished, instead of browbeating and scaring them.”

Meeting students at “their level” did not mean that Beth and Julie diluted the course content or decreased their demands on students, for in the expectations for students’ class preparation and for the quality of students’ written work, both instructors maintained a level of rigor that was at least as high as that of other composition instructors. Rather, when students described these professors’ ability to “come down to our level,” they were speaking of the teachers’ friendliness, accessibility, and approachability. These instructors may have made the coursework easier to understand, but it was not unchallenging.

The Comp 1A assignments on the standard syllabus appeared challenging and time-consuming to composition students, regardless of their instructor. But from the start of the semester, both Beth and Julie indicated that in addition to submitting the core paper assignments (and revisions), students would also be responsible for completing reading assignments before every class meeting. Moreover, by requiring students to respond to the assigned reading and “counting” students’ comments, they held students responsible for that work. In addition to facilitating dis-
The college fear factor

Discussions of the reading assignments, for example, Julie often asked that students contribute at least one comment on the reading assignment, which she then counted as students' attendance for the day. Both Beth and Julie incorporated questions about the reading into journal prompts, to which students responded during class and which they submitted as one of the required journal assignments. In these ways, Beth and Julie followed through on the expectations for student participation set out in their respective syllabi. Beth, for one, had noted in her syllabus that students should “prepare to engage in conversation.” She contended, “The class will be greatly enriched if all of our voices are heard.” Similarly, Julie had explained in her syllabus that she hoped to “engage” students during class and that she would expect their preparation for and participation in various classroom activities. In both cases, these expectations implied that students could and would contribute to the curriculum used throughout the semester. This approach served two functions. First, these professors indicated from day one of the course that students had both the responsibility and the capacity to contribute to the class. Second, this approach fostered a mutual relationship based on responsibility. Julie explained in her syllabus, “By enrolling in my course, you and I are entering into a contract whereby you agree to the following stipulations.” Following her list of stipulations (such as active participation in class discussions and group work), she explained how she would reciprocate: “What you can expect from me is fairness in grading and a sincere desire to help those students who honestly want to improve their writing, critical thinking, and research skills.” On the very first day of class, Julie further clarified that her typical standard for assignments submitted would be A- or B-level work. In other words, she clarified that she would expect more than minimal work.

Another crucial dimension of Beth’s and Julie’s instructional approaches was their teachers’ ability to provide enough detailed, explicit instruction that students could attempt each assignment without being crippled by confusion and insecurity. Indeed, students’ self-doubts severely limited their tolerance for confusing or unfamiliar activities and assignments—reflecting the typical attitude of “risk-averse” students. As a result, frustration with the level of difficulty of the coursework or confusion over the instructors’ expectations about graded assignments could quickly push students to the point of quitting.

In discussing the help they had received from Beth or Julie, students consistently mentioned the importance of clear instructions at the outset of the assignment, and of detailed explanations of the instructor’s comments during revision and editing. Eva, for example, who benefited from Julie’s instructions for each assignment, emphasized their role in reducing her anxiety: “And she would give us the outline, like the sheet where she’d say what she wanted in the paragraphs. So, that would help a lot too. She was very clear on what she wanted us to do.”

As for feedback on students’ drafts, Beth marked students’ papers, then audiotaped more detailed comments, which she returned with students’ written drafts. Sarah, one of many students who appreciated this method, explained the advantages:

Beth will tell you what you’ve done—because she pretty much reads the paper with you, on the tape. I should have brought my tape and let you listen to it. But you have the paper in front of you, and she goes error by error, what you’ve done wrong, and explains to you why it’s wrong.

I never had a teacher do that before. You know, it was kind of like, “Well, you did this, this, and this wrong. Why is it wrong? Well, you need to look that up.”

During an interview, Julie described the importance of providing well-elaborated instructions to students, especially for the students she teaches at the Eastside campus, a site with a much higher percentage of nontraditional students.

I think I’ve said this already: I’m a little bit more detailed in the kind of directions that I give now than I was even five years ago. In the past, I was kind of just thinking, “Well, I’m the teacher and you’re
Linda, one of the students in Julie's class that semester, described the course as "grueling" and "rigorous." She said, "At first, I thought I could handle it, but as the semester went on, I realized it was much harder than I expected."

Similarly, John, another student in the class, commented, "I thought I was prepared, but I underestimated how much work was involved." He added, "I wish I had taken more time to study and prepare before class."
According to each of the students in their respective classes, Beth and Julie provided enough positive feedback to convince students to persist and try harder.

Another thing I like about her feedback is that she has a lot of positive feedback, even if you go in there thinking: “This paper, this is just something I wrote. I don’t think she’s going to like it.” But she gives positive feedback, and that gives me more inspiration, like, “I thought it was bad, but she thinks it’s okay.” So I like that—that she’s not negative. (Diego, regarding Julie’s comments)

The best thing about Julie is the way she critiques your papers. The way she puts her comments on there. “Wow.” “Great job.” “Awesome paper.” “I knew you could do it.” “You finally got it.” All these little comments encourage you like you would never believe. (Colleen)

Such encouragement minimizes the sting of making mistakes and being corrected (which is how students seemed to understand most comments from instructors). Over and over, students in Beth’s and Julie’s classes referred to their typical responses to instructors’ feedback as feeling “belittled,” overwhelmed, and demoralized.

Also, she doesn’t tell you this in person. She’ll let you read it. And I think that’s awesome, too, because you don’t have to stand there and feel belittled, if you make a mistake or something. You can get home and read this paper and go, “Wow, she really liked my paper. This is so cool.” Or if you see something negative on there, it’s okay. (Colleen, describing Julie)

I’m glad that she doesn’t write comments in red, because when you see a lot of red, the first thing you think is “Oh, my goodness.” But then I read her comments: “It has potential and it’s wonderful, and I think if you focus, it will be a little bit better.” (Charmanne, describing Julie)

I mean, she’s easy to feel comfortable with, because she’s not a “That’s wrong, that’s wrong” type of person. She can take something wrong and turn it into a positive thing to keep you motivated, and work with you. And I think that’s motivating, instead of saying, “That’s wrong—we don’t do it that way,” she’ll say, “Well, that way is good, but I think this way will be a lot better.” (Sarah, describing Beth)

ACADEMIC VALIDATION AND STUDENT SUCCESS

Beth and Julie filled the role of the authoritative expert in their classrooms, in line with the traditional model of postsecondary instruction; however, they also engaged in strategies aimed at alleviating students’ anxieties and provided students with constant encouragement. In each case, the instructor recognized the potential for the fear students were feeling to impede their success. Students’ appreciation of Beth and Julie’s encouragement echoes Laura Rendon’s 1994 research on Latino students at four-year colleges. In Rendon’s work, the students who persisted attributed their success to being actively invited (even pulled in) to college by key adults—counselors, instructors, or other adults in the academic sphere. “What had transformed nontraditional students into powerful learners and persisters were incidents in which some individual, either inside or outside class, had validated them. . . . Validating agents took an active interest in students. They provided encouragement for students and affirmed them as being capable of doing academic work and supported them in their academic endeavors and social adjustment.” Studies of underrepresented students in math and science programs also point to the importance of validation, reiterating that students who feel like outsiders (in this case, in the “culture of science”) need more than the opportunity to become involved. Such students benefit greatly from interactions that affirm their academic competence and ability to succeed. As Moreno and Muller report in their discussion of first-year calculus, “Direct contact with a faculty member through which their ability as a mathematician or scientist is validated increases the likelihood
that African Americans, Latinos, and women will stay in a quantitative major.  

In employing strategies for minimizing fear, both Beth and Julie narrowed the distance between themselves and their students. By the end of the semester, students in these two classes tended to attribute their success in passing Composition 1A to the supportive relationship developed with the instructor. Significantly, when students discussed their accomplishments in the course, their newly acquired confidence was at the top of the list.

In the case of Comp 1A at LSCC, a mechanism for developing the teacher-student relationship is built into the structure of the course: in the process of submitting drafts and making revisions, students engage in one-on-one conversations with their instructor, who offers positive comments, suggestions for change, and feedback on students' ideas. This relationship depended, however, on students' taking the first step to submit a draft. So when a student like Mara spoke of her instructor's encouragement, she gave this example: "Like, on one paper, he wrote, 'If you have any trouble.' Or if you're having any questions, or something, come contact me. And that was really important." This offer was possible, though, only because Mara had submitted her essays and continued attending the class. Students who did not submit that first graded assignment did not benefit from this kind of interaction.

In this regard, a crucial strategy that both Julie and Beth applied at the start of each semester was to ask students to participate in low-stakes writing exercises during class sessions. This enabled the instructors to provide some positive feedback on students' ideas and writing before the first essay was due. Both instructors, for example, required in-class writing about the reading, in the form of "journal entries" or informal "free writes," to which the teachers responded in writing, with informal conversational remarks. Thus began a one-on-one relationship between professor and student around the students' ideas. In both cases, this journal writing "counted" in the grading scheme for the class, but points were awarded simply for submitting some writing, thereby minimizing anxiety on the part of students about the quality of their work.

From the start of the semester, Beth and Julie also actively reached out to students, establishing encouraging relationships and fostering a comfortable classroom atmosphere. In some instances, they engaged in practices that are not standard in post-secondary contexts, such as calling students who missed class, or sending spontaneous e-mails to individual students from week to week. An interesting result of these strategies was that students were much less likely simply to disappear from the class without letting the instructor know. Most of the time, when students considered withdrawing from Julie's or Beth's classes, they spoke to their instructor about it directly, rather than simply slipping out of class and filling out the paperwork. By the end of the semester, both instructors were able to pinpoint specific, well-elaborated reasons for students' inability to complete the course, information that highlighted the bonds they had established with students since the beginning of the semester.

The dominant view of student success in the four-year college context suggests that student engagement or involvement during the first year of college is a determining factor in the rate of persistence. Furthermore, a student's level of involvement is often framed as a matter of individual choice, but that viewpoint overlooks contextual or situational factors that compound students' transition to college.

The view from inside these classrooms offered evidence that complications in students' lives outside school played a considerable role in attrition. "Life is what happened to these people" was Julie's summary of the attrition in her classroom that semester. Similarly, another instructor attributed the high attrition rate across the department to students' overlapping responsibilities and work schedules. Describing his concern over student attrition, he mused,

I can say, "Well, they have things going on in their lives. They're just not doing the work." And then, on the other hand, I always feel
guilty about it. I always feel responsible for it, at least to a degree. I always think or always ask myself, “What could I have done or said to make it different?” or “What part have I played in their inability to turn in papers?”

You know, they’re getting a clear assignment sheet each time, they’re getting sample papers, we have discussion. I make very thorough comments on their papers, more than most people probably do. So I’m thinking, “Give them plenty of guidance for the paper that they’ve gotten in, plus future papers they might turn in.” And they still don’t succeed.

At the end of the semester, when he spoke of the low completion rate for his class (under 50 percent), he described the dropout rate primarily as a result of students’ simply not handing in papers. At the same time, he voiced a sense of helplessness. In truth, community college students, like many college students at every level of higher education, maintain complicated configurations of school, work, and family responsibilities. And yet, he wondered, was there something else he could do as an instructor? He told me that every semester he inspects the withdrawal slips on which students mark specific reasons for dropping the course, hoping for clues to how to address students’ noncompletion. As he explained, “There’s a reason code in the withdrawal slip. If they drop themselves, they identify the reason why, which is an interesting clue. And in my experience, about half of them say, ‘Conflict between school and work.’ But there are all sorts of things. ‘Class was too hard for me.’ They don’t normally say, ‘The teacher wasn’t as good as I’d hoped.’ But they’ll say, ‘Personal problems,’ or ‘Health.’ Transportation problems are an often-cited reason. So those reason codes for those who drop themselves are somewhat revealing, but not very.” He, like many of his colleagues, has consistently made modifications to his courses, in hopes that the completion rate will also improve. But in the end he remains uncertain what conditions in the classroom, if any, might increase students’ chances of success.

This instructor viewed the high attrition rate in composition as inevitable when students were maintaining overlapping responsibilities and work schedules. He did not, however, identify the fear factor. And although completing Comp 1A was essentially about writing the papers, the fear and confusion that were driving students to quit cannot be overestimated. If we look at Beth’s and Julie’s classes, it becomes clear that strategies intended to minimize fear helped make the class less difficult for students. Linda, the self-acknowledged expert on dropping Comp 1A, explained why she had withdrawn so many times: “The reason I would drop would be if I couldn’t figure out what was going on, and how things should be done.” When I asked her what advice she had for future composition students, she simply said, “Just do the papers—just do it. Don’t give up. I think that’s what happens to most of the students. It’s too much: they just give up.”

And because many of these students enter the course expecting to fail, giving up becomes a very appealing option. To a large extent, each of these students needed the instructor—the authoritative expert (and evaluator) to say, “Don’t give up.” Julie’s perspective in this regard was, “I know in the back of my mind that life happens and things may change, and [students] have to drop for whatever reasons, but my attitude is that everybody who enrolls, everybody, will pass.”

Julie spoke of students who have come to her in the middle of the semester to tell her that they are dropping the course, with explanations about work conflicts, family crises, or other pressures in their personal lives. In those situations, Julie reported, she rarely concedes to students that dropping the course would be a good idea. She offered the example of one such student, whom she had advised not to drop the course midsemester. Later, the student had thanked Julie, saying, “I’m so glad you didn’t let me drop.” Julie concluded, “She just needed somebody to tell her that she could do it. Because if I were to say, ‘Yeah, I guess you might want to drop,’ then she would have felt, I think . . . [She left the thought unfinished.] I think it’s important to hear some-
one say, 'That's really bad and I feel sorry for you, and that's terrible. But you can still do this. You can.' And she did."

Julie described all these efforts as her way of not letting students give up. Especially at Eastside campus, she explained, where students tend to be low-income and African American or Latino, generally first-generation college attendees, the stereotype is that most of them will not complete the course. But, she said, she rejects this position, because she thinks to herself, "Oh yeah? Well watch! I'm going to make sure that they succeed." And in the end, Julie's (and Beth's) more active approach to interacting with students led to higher completion rates in the Comp 1A courses.

According to the students in the two classes, the most significant outcome was pride at completing a difficult course and a new-found confidence about their ability to succeed. In Jenn's case, for example, she definitely learned "a hell of a lot" from the course. "Oh yeah, I definitely learned how to do a lot of things I didn't know how to do before. Like quotations and the works-cited list, and stuff like that. That's probably the only English class I've ever enjoyed in my whole entire life. And I've learned a hell of a lot more than I have in my whole years of school."

Like many other students across the six classes, when Jenn provided examples of what she had learned, she highlighted concrete facts and rules, such as the MLA citation rules, and proper use of punctuation. But the most important part of the course for Jenn, the part she mentioned first, and with most passion, had occurred at the start of the course, when she had teetered on the verge of dropping the class. "Once I got my first paper accepted for English, I was so excited. It made me want to go and write some more. Yeah, it made me want to go and write some more, and like, after my first—no, second—paper my mom just told me, 'I don't think anybody's given you the chance to write. I don't think anybody's given you what you needed, to learn.'"

Through Beth's encouragement, and by working through each assignment, Jenn gained confidence that given future opportunities to learn, she will be able to succeed. For Jenn, success in Comp 1A both depended on and consisted of gaining confidence and believing that she had the ability to succeed in college.

When I asked Charmaine what aspect of the course had been most important to her learning experience, she replied, "Julie's feedback is really important, because a lot of times when I'm writing, I'm thinking, 'Oh man, this is not going to be good.' And then she reads it and she gives it back to me, and she's like, 'Hey, this is great. You did it!' And it's just her feedback, and the one-on-one that I've had with her, that has also made the class."

For Kyra, who had "this total fear factor" about English, doing well in Beth's class provided evidence of writing competence. According to Kyra, "So that kind of in itself indicates that I'm not as bad as I thought I was. And my fear is maybe just in my head, rather than actual fact."

Even the students who had, at the start of the semester, experienced the most fear and loathing of English courses reached similar conclusions by the end of the course.

I actually like writing. I actually like it! It's not as bad as it was in high school. It's not bad at all. It's actually nice. (Sarah)

I hated writing, but now I feel that I know that I can. I feel better now. I'm not afraid like I was before. (Linda)

The reality of mass higher education is that not every student will reach the college classroom with the same knowledge, preparation, and expectations. Whereas selective programs and colleges can avoid addressing the issue, those with more-accessible entry points necessarily face the challenge.

The specific pedagogical strategies that Beth and Julie employed succeeded because they formed a coherent approach: expecting students to accomplish work that they found challenging; inviting them to participate actively as "college" students in the classroom; addressing students' anxiety with step-by-step, transparently clear directions; and offering constant encouragement.

Crucial to the success of their approach was having students
achieve a certain level of comfort in the classroom environment. In other words, success did not result from the use of these specific strategies; success resulted from students’ perceptions of the instructors’ attitude and classroom environment. And for these students, recognizing and addressing the high degree of anxiety they felt was the crucial element in instructors’ approach to shaping their students’ perceptions. As I explored in Chapter 2, the intensity of the fear that students experienced proved overwhelming for many of them; as a result, the students needed a lot of positive comments in order to recognize them as encouragement or validation. Effective instruction clearly depends in part on teachers’ understanding what constitutes “failure” for students, how small mistakes or confusion can confirm students’ feelings of inadequacy, and how difficult it can be for many students to recover from academic mistakes.9

A significant aspect of Beth and Julie’s success stemmed from students’ trust in these instructors’ professorial authority, in conjunction with the teachers’ ability to address the “fear factor.” Both women embodied the traditional professor’s role as expert, authority, transmitter of information, while incorporating strategies that validated students’ sense of belonging and while engaging in a more caring and personal relationship with students. In these ways, Beth and Julie created a learning environment that students perceived as encouraging. In contrast, other highly competent professors may have unknowingly contributed to students’ tendency to avoid seeking help and to disappear quietly from the class. I do not mean to suggest that other instructors did not care about their students or did not demonstrate the same commitment to students’ progress or success. All six LSCC professors in this classroom study, for instance, demonstrated optimism about students’ potential to succeed; however, their optimism did not necessarily penetrate students’ consciousness.

PART 3

GATEKEEPING

What we think of today as the fundamental features of college were institutionalized a century ago. In the midst of the profound social and economic changes at the end of the nineteenth century, the newly established universities in Germany became the model in the reinvention of American higher education.3 The basic structures and processes of previously existing American colleges—from administrative organization to faculty hiring and promotion policies—were transformed. The practice of hiring tutors gave way to the hiring of full-time professors—scientists and scholars in the emerging academic disciplines. Departments formed around these specialized fields of study, managed the course offerings and programs of study, and became autonomous organizational units. This organizational arrangement remains entrenched and exerts a huge influence on the typical undergraduate curriculum, which Gerald Graff accurately describes as “a vast disconnected clutter of subjects, disciplines, and courses.” The result is that students are responsible for finding coherence in what frequently appears to be “an endless series of instructors’ preferences that you psych out, if you can.”2

Official recognition as a postsecondary organization became dependent on new forms of accreditation; meeting or not meeting those regulations, in turn, took on greater consequences.