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Identity-Based Assignments and Student Disinterest in FYC

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Identity-Based Assignments and Student Disinterest in FYC

By

Benjamin F. Pearce

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
Professional Writing in the Department of English

In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of
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Kennesaw, Georgia

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Chapter 1 - Introduction & Literature Review

The Problem

In 2005, I arrived as a freshman at Mercer University with a lack of interest in any type of academic writing. I had skated through high school English classes at North Atlanta High School with apathy toward both the subject and writing itself. The classes were just unimportant and uninteresting requirements to me. As a senior, I wrote my four-page persuasive essay on *The Great Gatsby* the night before it was due, was happy to receive my B+ the next week, and then moved on with my life. I remember treating academic reading and writing as if they were chores to be completed and forgotten, and unfortunately these traits went with me to college.

My experience arriving at college with zero interest in academic writing is not unique. In my own brief time as a first year composition tutor and teacher (at a two-year access institution as well as a large comprehensive state university), I have found a lack of interest in academic writing to be widespread among students. Despite my efforts to keep the ENGL 1101 and ENGL 1102 classes that I taught entertaining and stimulating (with video clips, non-traditional readings, and competitive group activities) students often responded by showing little effort or concern for the academic writing process. I also found poor attendance to be an issue, with many students missing the maximum number of class periods allowed by the English department. Obviously, there are students who enjoy reading and writing and find pleasure in their FYC courses, but those students often seem hidden by the group who shows almost no effort at all.

The Chronicle of Higher Education's official website published a short commentary from Isaac Sweeny, English instructor at Richard Bland College, about

student apathy. Sweeny gives his own account of a normal, scheduled class period where he had zero students attend. He canceled class, went to his office, and wrote of his frustration. His brief blog post received an immense response. Over fifty instructors, many of them also teaching freshman composition classes, have contributed stories (in the comment section below the initial account) about their own students not showing up for class, giving little effort when they do show up, and generally not caring much at all about FYC coursework.

Student apathy toward academic writing is not limited to a few freshmen who do not like to write. Research suggests that there are much deeper roots. Jason Fertig, professor at the University of Southern Indiana, details his view of the problem in the piece, “Student Apathy – Public Enemy Number One.” He outlines larger societal problems, such as a longer adolescence period and intellectual immaturity that may have led to the lack of interest from FYC students. Studies have found that “a large portion of students that make up our college classes are more concerned with comic books and video games” than increasing their knowledge (“Student Apathy”). These studies are showing that learning to write well is just not a priority to many students entering FYC today. Twenty years ago students arrived on campus more prepared for the academic rigors of being a college freshman (“Student Apathy”). A recent article from *The Boston Globe* approaches the issue of growing student apathy toward academic writing through the lens of student study habits. Keith O’Brien writes:

There are many students today who appear to be doing very little whatsoever. In one CIRP survey subset last year, analyzing predominantly private institutions considered to be mid-level or high-achieving colleges, some 32 percent of college

freshmen somehow managed to study less than six hours a week — not even an hour a day.

O'Brien goes on to detail just how little current students are studying compared to students from twenty years ago. This shrinking study time is a symptom of the larger problem. Traditional freshmen are arriving at college, and more specifically FYC classrooms, with low academic interest and expectations from their professors and themselves.

Teaching Assistants at numerous universities have also found a lack of concentration from students in FYC courses. A 2005 study from the WPA describes a general apathy among freshmen with several of the teaching assistants, who participated in the study, citing an “I don't care” attitude” among FYC students (Dufflemeyer 37). Though not everyone in the composition community recognizes student disinterest in FYC as a major problem, my experience as a student coming out of high school was not and still is not unique. However, it seems that the solution that worked for me as a student – assignments that focused on my own identity – has not been widely discussed as a potential answer to this larger problem.

Key Terms & Assignment Descriptions

Before I provide more of my story and a possible solution to the problem outlined above, I am going to provide some definitions of the key terms that I will use in this project. For the purpose of this project, identity-based assignments are defined as high-stakes writing assignments that ask students to write about themselves and/or their place in the world. Admittedly, a writing assignment can really only catch a snapshot of where

a person is at that moment, but that snapshot can often be helpful in positioning one's sense of self. I understand that helping students *find themselves* does not align with the goals of FYC, but I believe that through these types of assignments FYC programs can begin to solve the problem of student disinterest while also achieving the traditionally desired FYC outcomes. As I will explain later in this chapter, the outcomes of identity-based assignments can often mirror the desired outcomes from The Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA).

Some examples of identity-based assignments that I found in use in FYC classes at Georgia Perimeter College and Kennesaw State University include personal reflections, literacy narratives, and “This I Believe...” essays. Personal reflections are flexible assignments that are often molded to fit the specific goals of the teacher who writes the guidelines while literacy narratives and “This I Believe...” essays often follow guidelines that are more standard. I will detail some possibilities for the guidelines and goals of these assignments later in this section. I also want to note here that within the composition community, the types of assignments I will be discussing are not always referred to with just the single keyword *identity*. Whether I use the phrase personal writing, composing the self, character building, or one of many others, I believe the same goal should still be in focus: increasing student interest in academic writing by asking students to think and write about themselves and/or their place in the world. Because these assignments share enough common traits pertaining to personal writing, I will move forward using the phrase identity-based for all assignments on which this project focuses.

Many composition and rhetoric scholars have written about identity-based academic writing even though they approach the topic with different viewpoints and use

different terms to write about the work. Ken Macrorie writes of the stiff academic writing that many English courses seemed to encourage, and wonders about ways to move students toward more *personal* or *alive* writing. Robert Brooke wrote his first article on student identity, using the term *underlife*, in 1987. Neither Macrorie nor Brooke uses the specific term identity to discuss the concept of a student writing about themselves and who they are, but they are both approaching a very similar idea.

Another key term in this project is the word *assignment*. I am using assignment to cover any high-stakes writing done in FYC. Of course, many low-stakes assignments and class discussions also make up a first year composition course, and I understand that these activities can be important for expanding students' sense of self and also increasing interest in academic writing. Nevertheless, because of the limited scope of a project such as this one, I am unable to cover low-stakes writing or classroom discussions in detail. I will briefly mention lower-stakes writing in the upcoming chapters, but overall this project focuses on the larger, high-stakes writing assignments that appear in first year composition courses.

"This I Believe" essays are an excellent representation of the assignments that I consider identity-based. This is an assignment that asks students to think about identity-related issues as well as the student's larger community ("This I Believe in the Classroom"). The assignments often require students to tell a story about themselves and list some specific beliefs that have helped shape them. According to the official website run by the non-profit organization *This I Believe Inc.*, the assignment is given in thousands of classrooms across the country, and it is often designed to prompt students to think deeply about what is important to them ("This I Believe in the Classroom"). One of

the goals outlined by This I Believe Inc. is to have students place themselves as part of a community and continue to build on their ideas throughout the writing process. In my experience, there is also often a collaborative aspect to this assignment, with students sharing their work as they progress.

Another example of an assignment that fits into the category is a literacy narrative. These are typically high-stakes writing assignments that ask students to reflect upon their personal experiences with reading and writing. A literacy narrative, often given as the first major writing assignment of the semester, is a good way for an instructor to gauge where students are in their development as an academic writer (Williams 342). The assignment also connects to student identity because of the way it asks students to think about their own personal story. Bronwyn T. Williams writes about the connection between student identities and literacy narratives in the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*.

Many students, when writing such assignments, tend to adopt one of several recurring narrative structures. To adopt a particular structure, then, requires that students adopt a particular identity within that narrative. Often they construct a particular identity for teachers in the narrative as well. By looking more carefully at the identities students gravitate toward in their literacy narratives, and by responding overtly to this part of their text in our work with literacy narratives, we can uncover another layer for students about how literacy has influenced their lives and how they might alter such patterns in the future. (343)

Williams advocates assigning literacy narratives not only to help students explore their personal identities and increase student interest, but also to help professors understand the

student's connection to writing (342). Ideally, when professors are aware of this connection they will be able to lean the course towards students' strengths and also construct later assignments that teach the specific academic writing skills that the professors find are needed.

Despite the sources above that detail the positive aspects of identity-based assignments, further inquiry is needed to find out if any of these assignments actually do affect student interest in academic writing. This project attempts to investigate the position of identity-based assignments in FYC and identify the student response to these assignments. If those of us teaching and studying FYC can determine that identity-based assignments raise first-year student interest in academic writing, as they did for me, then we should intensify the study and use of these assignments.

My Experience and The Emergence of A Possible Solution

Along with a lack of interest in academic writing, I arrived as a freshman at Mercer with an unconscious but important connection to my hometown. My identity was tightly linked to the city of Atlanta. I remember working my hometown into almost every conversation I had. "Real Atlanta" or "Zone-3 Atlanta," I would say. Looking back at this situation ten years later, I realize that this concept of *place* as a central part of my identity was so embedded in me that I did not even know it was there. This ignorance would start to fade as I worked through my FYC course.

At Mercer in 2005, the FYC course required in the fall was titled *Composing the Self*. The course is now, ten years later, named *Understanding Self and Others*. As the titles suggest, identity-based writing has always been an important part of the FYC

program at Mercer. In my class, all of the high-stakes writing assignments asked for some sort of personal introspection. Whenever asked to write about myself, I instinctively wrote about Atlanta. Writing about place, more importantly, *my place* was my focus. In a piece of feedback on an early assignment in my first semester course, my professor casually mentioned how important my city and more specifically my neighborhood was for me. He then questioned how long would I continue to associate so closely with my hometown. In his comments, he wondered if this was a lifelong connection or just a temporary bond formed because of my roots and the task of adjusting to a different environment. I remember being surprised after reading his comments for the first time. I had never really thought about how much I identified with my neighborhood. My professor's feedback opened my eyes and helped me begin to place myself not only as a young man figuring out his place in the world but also as a writer in an academic environment. Between the assignment and the feedback from my professor, I became heavily invested in both my FYC course and specifically the writing process. My interest level grew dramatically over the semester.

This experience with identity-based assignments in FYC changed the entire direction of my academic experience. I came to Mercer University as a high school student with no interest in any kind of writing, and I left with a B. A. in media studies and a true passion for writing in an academic setting. After graduation, I spent five years writing and editing in the journalism field before returning to an environment that focused on teaching academic writing. I first worked as a writing tutor at Georgia Perimeter College and later as a graduate teaching assistant at Kennesaw State University while earning my M. A. in professional writing with a concentration on composition and

rhetoric. There is no way that I would have ever returned to teach writing in an FYC setting without the increased interest that arose from my own FYC experience writing identity-based assignments.

In a broad sense, identity-based assignments raised my interest in academic writing by making me more comfortable with the idea of writing as a whole. The assignments allowed me to approach academic writing through topics with which I was connected. I was able to write without feeling *bored* or *stifled* and I was still guided to fit my writing into academic conventions. Being able to write about my neighborhood, my city, or other things that were important to me drew me in, and much of that apathy toward academic writing began to disappear. I believe that if I had been given rigid, assigned topics (similar to those I was given in high school) that did not allow me to explore the personal, my disinterest in composition would have continued. Again, these assignments served as an entry point for academic writing, and I believe that later when I was assigned writing projects in future classes that are considered more traditional (such as a rhetorical analysis or a persuasive essay) I was more interested, more comfortable, and better prepared to work through the entire writing process.

While this project is focused on raising student interest in FYC, it is important that the identity-based work also answer the traditional FYC desired outcomes. The WPA lists several outcomes in the area of process that fit with identity-based assignments. This paragraph highlights several of the WPA's outcomes found in their "Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition" and then explains how these process-based outcomes can fit with the goals of identity-based assignments. The WPA states that by the end of FYC students should "use composing processes and tools as a means to discover and

reconsider ideas.” Identity-based assignments often focus on the process of discovery of personal feelings or beliefs. For example, the standard “This I Believe...” essay requires students to look closely at an important element of their lives and then work their connection to the topic through the writing process. The WPA also states that students should “develop a writing project through multiple drafts” and “review work-in-progress for the purpose of developing ideas before surface-level editing.” This focus on writing as a process also fits with identity-based assignments. All of the sample assignments that I found for this project asked students to fully engage in the entire process of writing. For example, the literacy narratives described by Bronwyn T. Williams in the previous section are filled with requirements of outlines and multiple drafts. Finally, there are two process-based outcomes from the WPA that deal with the collaborative aspect of writing. Both “learn to give and to act on productive feedback to works in progress” and “experience the collaborative and social aspects of writing processes” mirror the sentiments of identity-based work. Peer-review sessions and group sharing are not exclusive to identity-based assignments, but they are featured in almost all of the assignments studied for this project. In my own FYC course at Mercer, students were placed into groups and required to share their identity-based writing and support one another along the academic writing process.

In addition to an increased comfort with the specific skills listed above, I believe that identity-based assignments also helped me achieve other goals. My analytical and critical thinking skills grew during my time in FYC. I understand that these skills would have likely grown had I been given other assignments as well, but it is important to note

that identity-based assignments do not inhibit the growth of other critical abilities that should be learned in FYC.

The assignments I wrote at Mercer also helped me begin to learn how to analyze my own situation. For example, writing about my neighborhood helped me step back and look at it from an outside perspective. These analytical skills were beneficial for me when I later had to examine other elements in academic writing such as literature or rhetorical arguments. Learning how to analyze a piece of writing is a skill with which I have seen many current FYC students struggle. Understanding the difference between analysis and summary is an important part of academic writing and is a skill that can be taught and reinforced through identity-based assignments.

I appreciate that my personal experiences serve as a limited example of how FYC programs can actually increase interest and introduce important skills, but again I believe that my experience could provide a blueprint for how to help current students. My history writing identity-based assignments in FYC at Mercer is what prompted me to begin the examination that drives this project. This experience has led me to believe that FYC assignments that require students to think and write about their identity (who they think they are at that moment and/or their own place in the world) can begin to reverse student disinterest in academic writing while still achieving more traditional FYC goals, such as those outlined by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA).

Current FYC Programs

This section provides some examples of how Mercer and two other FYC programs are connecting to the identity-based discussion. What does a program that could use these identity-based assignments sound like? The statements coming from the

following programs show how they are approaching the idea on a program-wide level and not necessarily on a classroom or assignment level. The discussion of programs here is a bit of a departure from the precise focus of the project, but providing a broader view (a step up from assignments to overall directions of programs) helps provide context to the larger significance surrounding the goal to curb student disinterest in FYC.

Mercer's FYC program embraces the primary goal of teaching students to express their ideas in written English while also introducing them to the world of academic writing ("Writing Program Curriculum"). However, in the last twenty years, Mercer has moved toward the goal of helping form students into well-rounded human beings. Programs such as Mercer's are interested in making students more than just good writers; they are interested in making them good people. Mercer's official department website states that their writing program is "designed to introduce students to the knowledge, skills, and perspectives needed to engage self, community, and an interconnected, yet diversified world" ("Writing Program Curriculum"). Because Mercer is a private institution, it has a more flexibility in what it can require of students in its core courses, but there are many large public universities with similar ideas.

The University of Tennessee's stated goal of their FYC program includes the idea that FYC "can help students become better informed, more active members of our society and our world" ("First-Year Composition"). Tennessee's FYC program also focuses on the communities in which students will need to learn to thrive. UT offers some service-based learning as well. In addition, the program website specifically mentions academic, business, personal, and international communities ("First-Year Composition"). More than just presenting the prescriptive rules of academic writing, The University Tennessee is

interested in creating young people who are ready to positively affect their community and the world.

California State University at Northridge, the largest school in the California State University system, also mentions aspirations beyond an introduction to academic writing. CSUN's FYC statement of goals indicates that the program "seeks to foster connections among students, faculty, and various cultural, academic, and community-based organizations for mutual enrichment through service, shared knowledge, and creative activity" ("Welcome"). Similar to the University of Tennessee, CSUN is embracing the idea that FYC can use elements like the identity-based assignments that I was given at Mercer as part of the program.

As illustrated by the examples above, there are FYC programs that now explicitly state that their goals have moved beyond just teaching students how to write an academic paper. Identity-based academic writing is a part of this expansion, and though none of the schools specifically mention the goal of curbing FYC student disinterest, the expansion in the identity-based direction is possibly part of the solution. Another example of the development of FYC's goals, found at schools like UT and CSUN, is the idea of service learning. Service learning connects to the larger discussion of this project because of how it requires students to think about the ways in which they fit into the world around them. Service learning could be another tool to use in the battle with student disinterest. Later in the literature review, I will detail some of the specific strategies that professors are using to link the idea of service learning to the goals of FYC.

Literature Review

The purpose of this review is to study some of the history of identity-based work in composition classrooms and begin to discuss this work as a possible solution to the student apathy problem outlined above. How have identity-based assignments been developed by scholars in the field? How have they been used? In what ways can they possibly help with student apathy in FYC?

Later in the chapter, I will touch on some of the conversation that is coming from the FYC programs similar to the ones mentioned earlier, but much of that current discussion has shifted to a focus on specific assignments and away from the more abstract discussion of the ideas. Nevertheless, I think it is important to establish the *recent* history (much of it comes out of the 1980s) of the topic before moving into details about assignments. Another focus of this literature review is to begin to assess some attributes of several identity-based assignments that are currently being given in FYC. Finally, I will begin to connect how they may actually help curb the growing tide of student disinterest.

My examination of the composition/rhetoric literature dealing with student identity begins with scholars who point to some of the problems that should be avoided when asking students to write about identity. In “What Do We Mean When We Talk About Voice in Texts?”, Peter Elbow tries to frame the conversation regarding the term *voice* within the composition community. Elbow’s ideas can support teachers in their understanding of exactly how this type of writing can be helpful for students while also understanding the limits of its effectiveness. In an excerpt from Elbow’s work in *Voices*, he gets to the heart of the parameters of personal, identity-based writing:

For a discourse can never *fully* express or articulate a whole person. A person is usually too complex and has too many facets, parts, roles, voices, identities. But at certain lucky or achieved moments, writers or speakers *do* manage to find words which seem to capture the rich complexity of the unconscious; or words which, though they don't *express* or *articulate* everything that is in the unconscious, nevertheless somehow seem to *resonate with* or *have behind them* the unconscious as well as the conscious (or at least much larger portions than usual). It is words of this sort that we experience as resonant and through them we have a sense of presence with the writer. (18)

In this passage, Elbow explains why instructors should have realistic expectations of identity-based student writing. He articulates just how difficult it is to communicate true emotion and personal feeling through writing. However, despite the difficulties, he still sees value in the writing (18). Elbow does not mention the possibility of raising student interest through this type of writing; he is focused more on students producing “authentic” work (20). Despite his focus on the more personal merits of identity-based work, he still is able to communicate the potential for students to be fully engaged when they write about themselves.

Most experienced instructors of FYC classes who already assign identity-based work would already admit that they do not expect most of their students to come to huge, life-altering conclusions in their FYC writing. Nevertheless, if the goal (in addition to all the stated traditional FYC outcomes) is simply to reduce student apathy with academic writing, then allowing students to write about themselves can be a helpful tool. Just as Elbow claims, it is smart to have the proper perspective on what personal writing from

students will be and outlining the limits of identity-based writing can help instructors develop good assignments and proper expectations that will grab the interest of students as well as satisfy the more conventional FYC goals.

Similar to Elbow, Donald Murray begins to outline possible problems with identity-based assignments. In *Crafting a Life in Essay, Story, Poem*, Murray discusses how personal writing can connect with an audience. However, he is wary of creating problems for students who are uncomfortable sharing their identity-based work. The sharing can happen either during the writing process (possibly during a peer review) or after the assignments have been completed. Students reading their own work aloud in small groups or to the class will ideally foster a real community of thinkers in the FYC classroom. Nevertheless, professors must be aware of the possible discomfort that can come from reading personal identity-based writing aloud and work with students to find ways around it. Murray's idea of *uncomfortable exposure* can be added to the list of possible pitfalls that need to be explained to students before and during the process of identity-based writing (47).

Another idea that comes from multiple well-known composition scholars on the topic of identity-based writing is the goal of helping students create more stimulating final products that would in-turn increase their own interest in what they are writing. In "The Poison Fish" section of his work *Telling Writing*, Ken Macrorie writes of the stages of free-writing and explains how these stages can start to prevent students from producing the boring writing that can often deepen student disinterest in academic writing (302).

Macrorie also champions the use of personal writing, though in a different way

from the other scholars cited in this project (304). He writes, “Telling our truths is hard. We all slip easily into deception - both of ourselves and others. But a continuing effort to tell truth when writing can become an exciting habit, and often one truth breeds another. On both the lowest and highest plane, try to be honest” (306). Helping students find that truth when writing about themselves can be an objective for instructors when they start to consider and create assignments that deal specifically with identity. Ideally, instructors already have the goal of procuring honest writing from their students in mind when creating assignments.

David Bartholomae’s work deconstructs a similar idea of improving student writing through identity-based work. He writes of a student working through first-person academic writing: “the writer has located himself (he has located the self that is represented by the I on the page) in a context that is, finally, beyond him, not his own and not available to his immediate procedures for inventing and arranging text” (8). Here, he outlines just how difficult it can be for students to embrace their own voice and write from their own perspective in a text. It makes sense that students new to academic writing would have trouble seeing themselves in a fresh context, especially, in a context that challenges or changes their identity. This concept connects well to my personal experience. In my FYC course at Mercer, an identity-based assignment caused me to examine personal connections that I had never questioned before. In the process of doing so, I became much more invested in the academic writing process. My interest level in academic writing grew and I became, as Bartholomae puts it, more “active and engaged” (10).

Later in the same article, Bartholomae describes a student who, when carrying out

identity-based writing, “defines as his own that which is a commonplace” (13). This is a common problem with first year student writing. Many students fall into the trap of using clichés like ‘Webster’s defines ‘ ___ ’ as...’ Macrorie would call this writing *Engfish*. The problem here is that these students are missing the analysis of their own specific situations (their lives) that can often produce stronger identity-based academic writing. Ideally, this stronger or maybe even more interesting (to the students) writing will also increase student interest in academic writing as a whole.

Bartholomae later writes about another collection of student writing which he reviewed. He believes that these samples missed the point of assignments that ask students for personal writing:

There were many essays in the set that told only a story, where the writer's established presence was as a musician or a skier or someone who painted designs on a van, but not as a person removed from that experience interpreting it, treating it as a metaphor for something else (creativity). Unless those stories were long, detailed, and very well told (unless the writer was doing more than saying, "I am a skier or a musician or a van-painter"), those writers were all given low ratings.

(13)

Here, Bartholomae provides us with another idea that should be in the foreground when instructors are thinking about assignments that ask students to think about identity. From his findings, specifically regarding the reasons students received low ratings, it is clear that identity-based assignments should have instructions/guidelines that help steer students away from writing of their own situation as if it is one that is found everywhere. Even if their situation is common, it is helpful for them and their writing for them to see

it as unique and as personal. Students need to think about what it means to be who they are. To continue Bartholomae's example from above, what does being a skier say about you personally? What separates you as a skier from all the other skiers out there? How does your music shape who you are? What makes you as singer unique from all the other musicians in your class? Helping students understand that there are distinctive elements of their own stories can help them produce higher quality identity-based writing and also separate good identity-based assignments from the more traditional assignments that students may classify as boring.

In his article, "Underlife And Writing Instruction," Robert Brooke focuses on expectations in the classroom and how students can use their writing to express themselves and subvert the assumptions of the world outside of the classroom (142). Although Brooke does not specifically mention identity or student assignments in this article, he still touches on some helpful elements in the larger discussion of the topic. Specifically, Brooke's ideas fit in with the topic of identity-based work because he also is thinking about students' personal growth through writing. He writes, "But writing teachers would have students go further – they would have students see themselves as writers, as people who use the processes writing offers to explore, question, and change elements of their social lives" (151). By moving outside of traditional expectations of college students and into the *underlife* (the place where people can be their true selves), students and instructors start to get into the real exploration of how writing can assist with productive, introspective thought. Brooke believes this process happens if students are able to shed the self-conscious and traditional discomfort that students often have when first encountering academic writing.

Joy Ritchie joins the conversation and even references Bartholomae in the opening paragraphs of her work “Beginning Writers: Diverse Voices and Individual Identity.” Here, she tells the stories of several students in a first year writing course. Her aim is to reveal the student discovery process (155). Ritchie also provides specific information on the writing process from several students and their professor, a colleague of Ritchie’s. As the students in the study, who are prompted to think about identity, move forward with their writing, they begin to become more comfortable with the idea of writing about themselves. At this point, even the most *basic* writers in the study begin to show improvement *with* as well as interest *in* their academic writing. In this study, class discussions, free-writes, and identity-based assignments all combine to help FYC students produce more connected, thoughtful paragraphs (170). Regarding these FYC students, Ritchie notes, “Their comments at the end of the semester indicate that they had begun to see themselves and their values in relation to those of people around them” (170). This is a significant finding; it shows a clear example of a professor who, when armed with the proper experience and assignments, can begin to help students recognize their place in the world while also helping them become more interested in academic writing. Because this study was done in a much smaller classroom (roughly half the size) than most FYC programs require, it was likely easier to provide students with more individual time and feedback. Reproducing the study at a school with larger class sizes could help provide further information on the topic.

In a more recent study, Maria Rankin-Brown looks at individual students and their understanding of writing as a self-exploratory process. Rankin-Brown administered a survey in 2007 that, among other questions, asked: *How does the act of writing enhance*

one's identity development? The results show that most students understood how thinking/writing about identity could help them find more meaning in their search for self (7). This article also discusses how identity-based writing can improve student interest in academic writing by allowing students to write about themselves. Nevertheless, the missing elements from Rankin-Brown's survey are questions about specific assignments and student interest. She did not ask the students if they thought an assignment or any specific work in their college English class helped them think about themselves or their place in the world in a new way or what specific assignments brought about the increase in interest in academic writing.

Another category that FYC programs have embraced to help promote introspective thought and student interest is the area of service learning. This technique fits right into the effort to curb the lack of student interest in academic writing. Service learning is described as “a teaching strategy that offers students opportunities to learn both in the classroom and in the wider world” (Levesque-Bristol, Knapp, and Fisher 208). Examples of service learning include class-wide community service projects and writing assignments grouped around a local issue in which the students feel they have a stake. While this approach is different from the assignment-based conversation that this project has focused on, service learning is an important part of the way many FYC programs are evolving. This way of teaching is similar to identity-based writing because it pushes students to think about where and who they are and it also can be used as a tool to increase student interest in academic writing.

Multiple researchers have found success with this developing pedagogy. In a 2010 article in the *Journal of Experiential Education*, Karen G. Johnson found that

“Professors who teach composition with service-learning requirements have reported that students in these courses write higher quality papers and tend to be more actively engaged, motivated, and satisfied” (Johnson 1). This is an encouraging outcome that could seemingly apply to identity-based assignments as well. Again, I understand that the broader approach of service learning is a bit of a departure from the specific assignment-based conversation in which this project has been engaged, but it is helpful to think about other approaches that have succeeded in both assisting with identity exploration and improving student interest in FYC.

The recent literature on the topic brings out another important question: How can instructors carry students to an increased interest in academic writing through identity-based assignments in the most efficient way possible? In “Who, Me?’ Four Pedagogical Approaches to Exploring Student Identity through Composition, Literature, and Rhetoric,” Michael Given, Jean A. Wagner, Leisa Belleau, and Martha Smith try to answer this question as they each outline assignments they designed. Given and his colleagues describe these four assignments that have been, in their opinions, successful at helping students begin to think about personal identity and raise student interest in academic writing. This article provides student guidelines for the assignments as well as the professors’ reflections on how each assignment works to promote introspective thought and possibly improve interest. The following paragraphs provide some details of the assignments that appear in the “Who Me?” article. These practices are illustrative of the literature that demonstrates the importance of this line of study. These assignments are specific examples of the work that professors think is succeeding at improving student interest as well as traditional FYC outcomes.

The first assignment is from Martha K. Smith, a professor at the University of Southern Indiana. In addition to the traditional FYC learning outcome of “using standard written English effectively,” Smith mentions “discovering one’s own ideas” and “discovering and dealing with the thoughts of others” (2). The unit begins with readings and class discussions that concern personal and societal values. Smith then assigns an essay where she asks students to describe a belief that they hold and its effects on their lives. The unit also utilizes several prewriting sessions in which students are challenged to think about groups that they belong to and how their membership in these groups affects who they are. This stage helps students begin to connect their personal experience with the larger world. Why are they members of this specific group? Does their membership come with a choice? This project could be the first of several that build on one another. The assignment that follows this one could continue on the same topic or group but have a more traditional academic angle. For example, if a student wrote the first essay in a course about being a certain race or religion then the following work could be a persuasive essay on racism or freedom of religion. Building on assignments such as the one presented by Smith could be quite beneficial not only in helping students understand their place in the world but also increasing interest in the academic writing process. Smith explains how she found success with this approach:

Many students stress how much they have learned about themselves in the process of writing these essays. By using their own life experiences, they seem able to find the voices to engage in critical self-analysis. I have frequently received mature self-examinations of topics such as religion; parental expectations; pressures from peers and the media; self-image; materialism; patriotism; racism;

homophobia; stereotyping; and relationships with friends, families, teachers, and employers. Examining identity, I feel, is an ideal vehicle to launch the college writing experience. (3)

The next assignment outlined in this article comes from Michael Given, a professor at Stephen F. Austin State University. In order to push students to as much introspective thought as possible thought, Given employs a more traditionally academic technique. He asks his students to fully enter into discourse communities (3). He has them read nuanced, thought provoking texts around a specific subject, such as gender discrimination. Then he asks the students to write a response in which they explain why they agree or disagree with these readings. Later, students must defend their views in a full-class discussion. Given has found success with this unit; he seems to fully embrace the idea that FYC can do much more for students than just introduce them to academic writing (3). He writes that the goal of this assignment is to “help young men and women at a transitional stage in their lives to gain more confidence in their abilities to marshal an argument based not only upon their own opinions, but also by synthesizing their opinions with those of others” (4). He is interested in his students not only being better citizens of the world, but also more interested in academic writing when they leave his class.

The third assignment comes from Jean A. Wagner, also at the University of Southern Indiana. Her unit is a much more specific assignment; it has less room for students to choose their own topics and therefore take the assignments in directions that personally interest them. For this reason, it fits within the discussion of this project less than the other assignments listed. Nevertheless, there are still some interesting ideas here that show how professors can help students deal with topics that many find difficult to

discuss. Wagner's unit requires students to respond to and write about their personal feelings on homosexuality. The student population at her school, and specifically in the FYC program there, is mostly small-town conservative teenagers, and homosexuality is a difficult subject for many of them (6-7). Students are initially asked to present their opinion on gay rights. Then after several sessions of group discussions and mini-lectures, the students are required to write an argument from the opposite perspective of their original opinions. Wagner asks the students to think deeply about the topic and then debate against their ingrained beliefs. She notes that, "this oppositional stance engages the students in a process of better understanding others' viewpoints and a respect for a sense of otherness is often forthcoming" (7). These results seem to line up well with the goals of such an assignment including working a high-stakes assignment through several drafts, experiencing the social aspects of writing, and exercising critical thinking skills. In addition, the assignments and subsequent class discussions also work to get students more engaged in the entire academic writing process.

The final assignment in the "Who Me?" piece comes from Leisa Belleau, another professor in the English department at The University of Southern Indiana. Belleau focuses on exploring identity through literature, and asks her students to examine their own lives through the lenses of the characters from the texts. She asks students to, "select a character from our text assignments and handouts whose identity is in conflict, and discuss in a short essay (three to five pages) how your reading of the piece empowers you as a student and a person" (7). Ideally, the strategies outlined by Belleau will help students understand that their situation in life is not unique and that the students are part of a larger community of thinkers.

Some of the prominent shared elements of these assignments ask students to engage in prewriting activities, share/discuss their ideas (with both small groups and full class discussion), and finally, to understand that each student's own personal story is sometimes unique, sometimes common, but always important. These assignments also rely heavily on peer review to allow students to respond to each other's ideas. The outcomes of the assignments listed in this article include students claiming to have learned much about themselves and students showing more interest in writing (3, 5).

Regarding the outcomes, Wagner writes:

There are also some who come closer to realizations of who and what they are, and that is the reward for this effort. I have had student comments ranging from "I hate you for making me think about this." to "This has been a horrible, unpleasant time for me. You made me face myself. Thank you for that." The range of comments indicates the difficulties, and also the possible rewards, of this particular unit. (7)

Again, this list of assignments is significant because it shows a sample of exactly what is working well for instructors in FYC classrooms right now. The outcomes from these assignments as well as the outcomes from the service learning projects begin to emphasize how much opportunity there is for identity-based assignments in general to help the FYC community deal with the growing student apathy toward academic writing.

The rest of the project will unfold as follows: Chapter 2 covers the research questions as well as the methods that describe the research and survey process of this project. Chapter 3 will present the findings and provide some analysis of the student surveys. Finally, Chapter 4 will provide closing thoughts and some insight on

possibilities for future research. The works cited and appendices appear at the end of the project.

Chapter 2 –Research Questions and Survey Methodology

Despite this ongoing discussion regarding identity-based assignments, a precise conception of student responses to these specific assignments remains unclear. The existing scholarship on this topic seems to come from the instructor and scholar's point of view. Essentially, student response to identity-based assignments amounts to a gap in the research. Do students agree that these assignments help them become more comfortable with college composition work or raise their own interest in academic writing? There have been case studies done by scholars, such as the article from Ritchie outlined above, that follow specific students and their journey within first-year-composition. However, these studies are only providing the student's point of view on FYC classes as a whole, not the specific units or assignments that prompt introspective thought. The student's point of view is important because it can show how and why identity-based assignments may be effective in helping cure student apathy in FYC.

My research and analysis has led me to the following questions: What do students think of identity-based assignments after they complete them? Do students think these assignments help their writing at all? Can they affect student interest in academic writing? What kinds of identity-based assignments gather the most positive responses from students? What do those assignments have in common? Finally, what about such assignments was helpful?

Mary Sue MacNealy, author of *Strategies for Empirical Research in Writing*, points out that surveys are the most effective “tool available to obtain... opinions, preferences, beliefs, feelings, and other personal information” (148). An online survey was the method best suited to finding the information needed to answer the questions

posed in this study. I also chose to use surveys because they can provide the opportunity to use short answer questions to procure information that is more specific. Approval to conduct this study was received from Kennesaw State University's Institutional Review Board.

This student survey was completed by a sample of one hundred eight students in second-semester first year writing courses at Kennesaw State University. FYC at Kennesaw State begins with the required ENGL 1101: Composition I. This course is a rhetorically based general education requirement that focuses on argument and introducing students to academic writing. The ENGL 1102: Composition II course at Kennesaw State is a research/writing-from-sources based class that strives to take students beyond what they learned in ENGL 1101. Regarding ENGL 1102, the official program website states:

Students write from sources. That is, students continue to attend closely to the conventions of integrating source material, building on an understanding first developed in English 1101 of how and when to use source material. Teachers in our program generally take one of two approaches. The first might be called field research—that is, students are asked to do some primary research and then write about it. Many people who take this approach either use or have used Ballenger's *The Curious Researcher*. The second approach is more text-based—where in students carry out research on their own topic or on a topic around which the class is organized. Teachers new to our program should be aware that the field research people send students to the databases and sometimes the text-based people tell students to go count things or to interview a person. In other words, our terms are

broad, and there is more overlap than our short explanations indicate.

(Expectations for ENGL 1102: Composition II)

I chose to administer the survey to ENGL 1102 students because the majority of them (though some students are exempt because of high school AP courses) have already completed a full semester of ENGL 1101. ENGL 1101 at KSU is not taught with a standard syllabus; there are expectations that instructors should meet (e.g. students should write between 7,000 and 11,000 words) but there are no *required* assignments that professors must use. Some instructors choose to assign identity-based essays while others choose to assign other assignments. ENGL 1102 students work better for this survey because they have already had more opportunities to be assigned the essays (in ENGL 1101) on which this project is focused.

The following passage comes from the guidelines on the official KSU FYC website and provides a some information on some goals of ENGL 1102:

The course thus reinforces and extends lessons on rhetoric—purpose, audience, genre, style, and voice. Perhaps the most important lesson we can teach in 1102 is that the student counts in this enterprise—her voice, his curiosity, the answers she finds, his relationship with the audience, the topic she selects, the research question he formulates, the thesis she composes over time. That is, we help students to do their own intellectual work rather than merely to hand in assignments. Thus, we use class time to discuss explicitly the ethics of language use and academic integrity, and we teach them how to construct texts in ways that will uphold their integrity. (KSU Guidelines for ENGL 1102: Composition II)

KSU's goals are significant for this project because of the way they focus on *the student*. Identity-based assignments fit well within this student-centered way of thinking because of how many of the assignments ask students to place themselves in the forefront of their writing.

The survey utilized Kennesaw State's *Qualtrics* account and was constructed/administered through *Qualtrics*' web-based platform. The link to the survey was given to five KSU FYC professors that were teaching a total of twelve ENGL 1102 sections and then passed to students through the online learning tool BrightSpace by D2L. These instructors were a mix of new and veteran instructors all teaching face-to-face classes at KSU. The class meeting times of the sections were spread equally throughout the day with several taking place in the morning, several in the afternoon, and some in the evening as well. Also, a Friday-only course was given the survey in addition to the several traditional Monday-Wednesday and Tuesday-Thursday sections. These decisions were made in order to get responses from as wide a population of students as possible.

As required by the IRB, the opening page on the survey included my contact information, a brief description of the project, an explanation of the procedures, the time required from students, any risks/discomforts, and a description of the benefits. This opening page also explained the rationale for the survey and informed students that none of their personal information would be collected at any point. I also asked the instructors who supervised the survey process to remind students that this survey was not connected to their name or student identification numbers at all. This was to prevent any students from feeling as if they could not be honest in answering any questions on the survey. I

structured the survey to then move to a question that asked students if they wrote a paper/essay that dealt with identity in their first year composition course. I mentioned on the survey that both ENGL 1101 and ENGL 1102 are covered here. I also structured the question with examples (“This I Believe...” papers, Literacy Narratives, Personal Reflections, or an essay/paper that asked you in any way, to reflect on yourself or your life) to help students understand exactly what type of assignment I was referencing. See Appendix A for exact wording of the complete survey.

If students selected *No* on this first question, the survey automatically ended and thanked the student for their time. If students answered *Yes*, the survey moved on to ask the remainder of the questions that asked the students to provide some details about their experience with these assignments. The questions, a mix of multiple choice and short-answer, were structured to allow students to provide their genuine reactions to both the assignments and their own identity-based writing.

Several of the questions, such as “How helpful was this assignment in the process of thinking about your place in the world?” and “How helpful was this assignment in your progress as a writer?” used the term *helpful*. I understand it is an imprecise term, but I felt it was necessary in this situation. In trying to encourage student response in these surveys, I did not want to deter students from providing information just because they did not feel like their experience fit in to the precise wording of the survey. So ideally, the broad nature of the term *helpful* encouraged students to respond and provide information that they might otherwise withhold if I attempted to be more precise. I wanted students to be able to define and operationalize the term *helpful* for themselves.

The survey alternated between asking students about how the writing helped them as a person and how it helped them as an academic writer. This was a way to push students to connect the two ideas in their mind and ideally provide ideas that would be more thoughtful. Finally, the survey also asked students for suggestions on how the identity-based assignment that they wrote could be improved. The exact survey appears in Appendix A and a detailed description of the answers to these questions appears in Chapter 3.

At the end of the survey I included a space for students to indicate if they had more information they would like to contribute to the project. I did not anticipate that I would have many students who would choose this option but I think it was important for students who felt strongly about the topic of the survey to have an opportunity to share more if they felt led to do so.

If they chose to further participate in the project, I would contact them for an interview, which would be conducted through email. This method was a way to work through the large number of students needed for a survey of this kind as well as a way to help me find students who felt like they had something important to share about the topic. Per IRB guidelines, I included another note at this point in the survey informing the students that giving any contact information, just like the survey itself, is purely optional and no personal information will be shared with outside parties or included in the finished product.

Finally, I understand that this project, with one hundred eight student responses, is limited in scope, and that this is only the beginning of the search for an answer to the problem of student apathy in FYC. This line of inquiry is still in its infancy, but the

results here can begin to provide some context in the larger discussion regarding how assignments that deal with identity in FYC may increase student interest in academic writing.

Chapter 3 – Findings & Analysis

Of the initial 108 students who completed the survey, 81% (88 out of 108) indicated that they did write an identity-based assignment during their first-year composition experience. As stated in the chapter above, the survey listed specific examples to aid students who could not quickly recall the name of every assignment from their ENGL 1101 and ENGL 1102 courses. Almost nine out of every ten students answering that they did write an identity-based essay is a higher proportion than I expected, but my speculation is that this is the first of several responses that are slightly skewed by the population that completed the survey. The link to the survey was given to over 250 students, and responses came from a number of different sections of ENGL 1102. Again, because of the anonymity of the process (required by IRB), there is no way to discern which students in which sections completed the survey. However, a mix of FYC sections was given the opportunity. It makes sense that if one of these identity-based assignments were given to all students in that ENGL 1102 section, then all the students would have written the same assignment and responded “yes” to the opening question. While the ENGL 1102 students were enrolled in different ENGL 1101 sections (with different professors), the groupings of the students who were given the survey (by class section) still could account for the higher than expected result here. In other words, a truly random sample (a survey not administered only by sections) of all ENGL 1102 students may have brought a lower percentage of positive answers to the opening question. While I do not believe that eight or nine out of every ten FYC students throughout all of KSU or other major public universities have been assigned an identity-

based writing assignment, the unexpectedly high number does begin to show the popularity of these types of assignments.

After finding out how many students had written an identity-based assignment in FYC, the survey focused on what specific assignment they wrote. This question was significant because not only did it provide insight into what assignments are popular in KSU's FYC courses right now, but it also allowed for a deeper examination of later student responses. Separating survey results by assignment also allowed me to compare the answers of students who wrote a certain essay to those who wrote a different assignment. This comparison is important because it helps determine how students responded to the different types of assignments. The following discussion is organized by assignment to help point out those issues as well as to begin the overall examination of students' interest. Did a group who wrote one assignment indicate more of an interest in academic writing than the group who wrote another?

The results show that more than half of the students (59%) wrote an assignment labeled as a "personal reflection" during their FYC experience. Personal reflection works as the title for different specific assignments that all deal with similar overarching ideas of the author's personal response to a specific topic. This is the broadest answer, but I did not intend for it to be a default answer. Students who knew they wrote an identity-based assignment but did not know the name of the paper were given the option of selecting "other." I provided this choice so that "personal reflection" did not become the answer for students who were not sure of the name their assignment.

I have included an example of a personal reflection assignment sheet as Appendix B. These guidelines were given to ENGL 1102 students in one of the surveyed sections.

The instructor of this section created these guidelines and gave me a copy as well as full permission to include them in this project. I added it as Appendix B to not only provide an example of the work as students receive it, but also to offer some context to the upcoming student responses. Some of the students who completed the survey did write this specific assignment but because of the confidential nature of the surveys, there is no way to know how many.

The guidelines for the personal reflection provided state that “the purpose is to think deeply and carefully about an experience or text, and analyze how that experience or text has changed your thinking and/or practice.” Students are asked to use the outside stimuli (such as an experience or text) to think about their own personal situation. The instructor who created the assignment explained to me that an anticipated outcome for the assignment is “to increase students’ comfort and familiarity with the conventions of academic writing.” The instructor also mentioned another outcome is “to use critical thinking in a rhetorical context.” These goals align well with the desired outcomes from KSU FYC listed in the previous chapter as the program’s official site (First-Year Composition).

Among students who wrote a personal reflection, more than half (27 out of 44) of them reported that the assignment was “helpful” or “very helpful” for them in the process of thinking about their place in the world. (As I mentioned in Chapter 2, these terms are admittedly vague, but it may help to think of the answers on a scaled – 1 though 4 – basis.) As outlined in the literature review, students with this positive connection toward personal writing often become more interested in all types of academic writing, and students who wrote personal reflections gravitated toward the higher end of the scale

when answering the questions about how helpful they found the process of identity-based writing. Over sixty percent (the highest of any assignment) answered that they found the assignment “helpful” or “very helpful.” Based on the students’ written responses (some of which I include below) on the survey, I attribute much of the high comfort and interest level of the students who wrote these assignments to the flexibility that students have when choosing a topic. While the guidelines may ask students to write within a specific framework, students are still allowed to choose the aspect of the personal about which they write. When asked how personal reflections improved their academic writing, students mentioned being able to produce more content. I believe that producing more content is a direct result of an increased interest. One student wrote that it is “easier to write three pages on a personal topic” and another noted “since it was a topic that I knew a lot about it was a lot easier to write about in which encouraged me to write more.” In my own experience teaching FYC, many students approached me about their discomfort with page length requirements. I have had at least two or three students complain about page length requirements on every assignment that I have given. Even shorter essays (three or four pages) were a struggle for some students. I understand that writing more does not equate directly to reduced student apathy, but these survey results show that writing *more* makes some students feel further connected and engaged to academic writing. Some students are generating a connection to academic writing through identity-based assignments. These limited surveys show that personal reflections can help some students embrace academic writing and help alleviate student apathy.

Continuing the discussion of students who indicated they wrote a personal reflection in FYC, more than half (26 out of 41) of this group selected that writing this

paper was “helpful” or “very helpful” in their progression in academic writing. Students also stated that writing about personal topics encouraged them to engage more in the writing process, an element that shows increased interest and also connects with the outcomes from the WPA. In their outcome statement, the WPA mentions that students should “Develop a writing project through multiple drafts” and later “Develop flexible strategies for reading, drafting, reviewing, collaborating, revising, rewriting, rereading, and editing” (WPA).

One individual mentioned an investment in the proofreading process in a paper with which they felt more connected: “Which caused me to go back and review my mistakes because it is a paper I enjoyed to write.” Another student wrote of the feeling of freedom with the assignment: “I did not feel as restricted as I normally do with academic writing; therefore, I was able to have more fun with the assignment and utilize my creativity even with research involved.” Statements such as these show that personal reflection assignments are helping students better connect with academic writing. In many of the comments, students mentioned positive feelings about the assignment and almost half of the comments from students who wrote this paper indicated some sort of increased confidence or interest in academic writing. Other examples of positive student responses include “it allowed me to work my way into college and academic writing” and “practicing with kind of writing helped with future writing too.” I believe these results begin to show the potential of identity-based work as a possible solution to the problem of student apathy in FYC.

The second most frequently selected assignment from the survey is a literacy narrative. This result is no surprise, as these assignments remain popular in FYC classes

across the country (Williams 342). I have also included, as appendix C, an example of a literacy narrative assignment that was given in one of the surveyed sections. These guidelines were given to me, along with full permission to use them in the project, from an instructor in the program. Again, while some of the students who indicated that they wrote a literacy narrative certainly wrote this specific paper, because of the confidential nature of the survey there is no way to report how many. These sample guidelines serve as an example of the instructions students are receiving in FYC classrooms and, again, begin to provide some context for the conclusions that are drawn ahead.

Writing about one's own journey with literacy can absolutely foster a connection with academic writing as it can prompt many students to realize the importance of reading and writing in their lives (Williams 343). However, more students reported that the assignment was "unhelpful" or "somewhat helpful" than "helpful" or "very helpful" for both of the major questions on the survey. Looking at the comments from students who wrote these assignments, most did not believe that literacy narratives were beneficial for prompting them to think about their place in the world or helping them progress as an academic writer. There was not a distinct feeling of increased interest from students who wrote assignments like there was from the students who reported that they wrote a personal reflection. This outcome is somewhat surprising, especially when considering that the literacy narrative is the only assignment that received more negative responses than positive. The complaints from students did not seem to be specific to this type of assignment, but still may be seen as an indictment on the task. Students mentioned that the literacy narratives had unreasonable page/word count requirements and that the guidelines themselves were too broad or too narrow. There were also several students

who mentioned their confusion with exactly what the professor wanted from the work. Again, these complaints could be applied to any assignment, but they did not appear from students who wrote the personal reflection or “This is Believe...” assignments. From the sentiment of the student written responses, I believe that students did not connect to (or feel they benefited as much from) literacy narratives as much as the other assignments because of the way the assignments required them to write about a specific topic. Literacy narratives have a bit less flexibility than the others when it comes students’ choice of the writing topic. While these assignments still may have had an effect on student interest, the responses on the survey certainly do not give the same impression as those from a personal reflection. A possible reason for this poorer response comes from students’ inability to choose their own topic. The freedom that comes from personal reflections but is limited in literacy narratives seems to be an important element of identity-based assignments that help with student apathy in FYC. When students are given the opportunity to choose the focus of their work, while remaining in the framework dictated by the FYC program, I believe there is the most potential for helping with student apathy.

The next assignment, the “This I Believe...” essay, was written by a much smaller percentage of students. Only eight percent of students indicated that they wrote one during FYC. This number is lower than expected, but may be representative of a drop in popularity of the assignment in colleges as it becomes more prominent in high schools (“This I Believe in Classroom”). Further reading, including assignment guidelines and sample essays, on “This I Believe...” essays can be found at the official website (thisibelieve.org) run by the non-profit organization *This I Believe, Inc.* Before I proceed

to detail some of the information that came out of the surveys, I want to point out a key difference between “This I Believe...” essays and personal reflections. “This I Believe...” essays ask students to focus on the core values that shape their lives while personal reflections usually ask students to personally respond to outside stimuli.

The majority of students who wrote “This I Believe...” essays found the assignment to be “helpful” with both their progress as an academic writer and the process of thinking about their place in the world. An equally small number of students answered “somewhat helpful” and “very helpful” to both questions. In other words, students responded down the middle to this assignment. Similar to the literacy narrative, the comments from students who wrote “This I Believe...” essays were not specific to this exact assignment. Students also mentioned that this paper helped them gain experience that would be beneficial in their future academic writing. One student wrote, “I am more comfortable with college writing after this assignment.” There were more positive comments from students who wrote “This I Believe...” papers than there were from students who wrote literacy narratives, but as a percentage, still not as many as those who wrote a personal reflection. Once again, based on student comments on the “This I Believe...” guidelines, this positive reaction could be because of the more open-ended nature of the assignment. Most students who wrote “This I Believe...” essays are allowed to choose any topic in which they ‘believe’ to write about. In their positive comments about the assignment, they mention things like “enjoying the freedom” and feeling a “connection to the topic.” I understand that these statements do not prove an interest in academic writing or a reduced amount of student apathy in FYC, but I believe that the students who wrote these comments found a real comfort with writing. Further study is

needed to find baseline (or FYC entry-level) interest and make more concrete connections between identity-based assignments and reduced apathy. However, I believe the responses that I found for this project begin to point in that direction.

The final option allowed students to select “Other” and write-in the name of the assignment that they were given. Four students chose this option. Two students mentioned an argumentative paper with a personal element, and single students specified a visual analysis and a research paper, both with personal components in the assignment guidelines. Of all the papers written by students who completed the survey, over 95% of them fit into the four categories that were provided on the questionnaire. This statistic shows just how limited the types of identity-based assignments are right now. There is some margin for error here because of the likelihood that some students would rather fit the assignment into one of the given categories than have to type in their own. Nevertheless, it is still interesting to note the limited number of examples of identity-based assignments based on the survey. As I mentioned during the methods section in Chapter 2, in the last question on the survey students were given a space to write their email address if they wanted to contribute further to the project. No students took advantage of this opportunity. I am not surprised by this outcome, but a bit disappointed that I was unable to engage individual students with targeted questions about their experiences.

Moving from the individual assignment-based results to the bigger picture shows that 92% of students felt that the identity-based assignment that they wrote was at least “somewhat helpful” in the process of thinking about their place in the world. The total number of students who chose one of the top two responses “helpful” or very “helpful” is

56%. The numbers are similar when looking at how helpful the students found these assignments in their progress as an academic writer. Also, 94% found them at least “somewhat helpful,” while 54% found them “helpful” or “very helpful.” The relative similarity of these numbers (92% and 94% as well as 56% and 54%) is meaningful. It suggests a connection between assignments asking students to think and write about their own identity and these students’ feelings about their own interest in academic writing.

Continuing the examination of the larger picture of results shows that there are several elements that appeared in a number of student written responses across all the assignments that show ways that students connect to identity-based assignments. These elements also align with some of the WPA outcomes that I mentioned earlier in this project. One common thread is that identity-based writing gave students a better understanding of others through the collaborative nature of the writing process. One student responded that the identity-based assignments aided them in, “understanding other perspectives.” Another stated that identity-based assignments “showed the connection between you and all the others and how they had the same or a similar experience with writing.” There are also several examples in the comments from students mentioning research and credibility. One student wrote that writing the essay “taught me that using personal experiences in your writing can tremendously impact your writing and help you seem more credible.” Other students wrote about how these papers helped expand their sense of self as well while still improving their connection to writing: “Every time I write a paper like this one, I discover a little bit more about myself. Though I do not fully know my ‘place’ in the world, I feel like I am getting closer.” Finally, there were students who specifically mentioned an increasing interest in both the topic of their

writing and the writing itself: “It made me more interested in... (the topic)... and made me want to be part of a research team.” Another student wrote that the identity-based assignment “helped me with organization and sparked my interest because it was personal.” Answers like the ones above show that there are students who are connecting to the assignments that are described in this project.

The optimistic position of the majority of the written responses, combined with the fact that over 90% of the students found identity-based assignments at least “somewhat helpful” with their progress in academic writing, show that the idea outlined in this project could absolutely begin to solve the problem FYC student disinterest. I understand that these results are limited and that further research is imperative, but the answer to the most basic inquiry of this project is that the majority of students surveyed responded well to identity-based assignments and that the assignments may work as tool to begin to solve the problem of student apathy in FYC. Students find these assignments helpful in the process of thinking about their place in the world, and they find them even more helpful in their own personal progress as an academic writer. Because of the way many students who completed the survey connected to these types of assignments, I believe that identity-based work can raise student interest in academic writing and help FYC programs achieve desired outcomes.

Chapter 4 – Opportunities for Future Research & Conclusion

After analyzing the student surveys and coming to the preliminary conclusions laid out in Chapter 3, I will now point out some specific avenues for future research. Where could these lines of inquiry go from here? The most basic answer to that question is to find more answers through an expansion of the student surveys. More students (first-generation, high achieving, low-income, non-traditional) at a variety of schools (private, public, large, access-schools) could be given revised surveys. These surveys could move in several different directions. The first direction could place a priority on finding out the interest level in academic writing for students upon their entry to FYC. This idea is a limitation of my project because there was no baseline to measure the “after-assignment” response against. However, future studies could focus in on this starting-point interest level and could provide a baseline to measure later interest against. Are students who enter with no interest leaving with middling interest? Are students who enter with middling or high interest maintaining those levels or also having their interest levels increased even further? In addition, future surveys should be more explicit in asking students about the significance they see in academic writing. The survey I used for this project relied too much on short answer questions to fill those gaps. The answers to the questions above could be used to help FYC teachers understand what they need to emphasize for students and how far they need to bring students to accomplish the goals set by the FYC programs. Another new line of questions could surround how much students are *aware* of their own possible growing interest. Do they feel their interest growing or do they just enjoy these identity-based assignments more than others? These

answers could, again, help instructors with understanding goals and building assignments.

The surveys could also be broken down demographically. Do males and females respond similarly to identity-based assignments or are there some distinctions? What about high performing students vs. average or lower performing students? How do online or hybrid classes fit in vs. traditional face-to-face classes? Which of these groups feels more connected to identity-based assignments? The answers to these questions could further help FYC instructors by allowing them to begin to understand where to focus instruction.

Another advantage to the expansion of the student surveys is that when a modified version is presented to larger audience there would more likely be students who felt strongly enough about the subject to share their story. Personal stories from students about how identity-based assignments changed the way they think about academic writing could provide some much needed context and a possible emotional connection to the line of study. Future research could also be conducted on ways to expand on the connection between identity-based assignments, student interest in academic writing, and FYC outcomes. In what ways can future assignments be crafted to fit even more FYC desired outcomes while still influencing student interest?

The questions above further emphasize the significance of this line of scholarship. Student disinterest in academic writing is a growing problem now, but it may not have to continue to grow. As I described in the introduction, I enrolled in a FYC course in 2005 as a freshman at Mercer University with a complete disinterest in academic writing. Through assignments that asked me to write about who I was and where I came from, my

interest began to grow. My apathy toward writing was diminished through identity-based assignments, and this transformation led to my current situation as an FYC instructor. This project was an examination into whether or not my experience could provide an example through which the composition community could begin to discuss larger solutions to the problem. Through my research and a sample of student surveys, I have learned that current students have also found an interest in academic writing through identity-based assignments. These assignments also have the benefit of giving students an opportunity to place themselves in the world while still fitting in with some of the stated goals from the WPA. Identity-based assignments absolutely should be further investigated as a solution to the problem of student apathy in FYC.

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Appendix A – Student Survey

1. In your first year composition courses (ENG 1101 & ENG 1102), did you write a major assignment where your own personal opinions, life experiences, or values were the focus of the paper?
(Note: Some examples of these assignments are “This I Believe...” papers, Literacy Narratives, or a paper that asked you in any way, to reflect on yourself or your life.)
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

(Note: Students who answer A here will continue with the rest of the survey. Students who answer B will be thanked for the time.)

2. Was this assignment a...
 - a. literacy narrative (an account of your own connection to reading/writing)
 - b. personal reflection (your response to a specific topic)
 - c. personal exploration
 - d. “This I Believe” essay
 - e. Other - Please describe the assignment below.

3. How helpful was this assignment in the process of thinking about your place in the world?
 - a. Not helpful
 - b. Somewhat helpful
 - c. Helpful
 - d. Very Helpful

4. (Note: Students who answer C or D will be presented with 4A and students who answer A or B will be presented with 4B.)
 - A. In what ways was the assignment helpful in the process of thinking about your place in the world?
 - B. How could the assignment have been improved?

5. How helpful was this assignment in your progress in academic writing?
 - a. Not helpful
 - b. Somewhat helpful
 - c. Helpful
 - d. Very helpful

6. What are the ways, if any, that these assignments helped you become a better writer?
7. Do you have more to share on this topic? If yes, can we contact you about your responses above? Please your provide and name & email.

Appendix B – Personal Reflection Assignment Guidelines Sample

A reflection paper is neither a reaction paper nor a review. The purpose is to think deeply and carefully about an experience or text, and analyze how that experience or text has changed your thinking and/or practice. A reflection paper does not focus on summary or quotes, **but on how the readings/experience may challenge/cause you to reevaluate your thinking.** Reflection does not mean stream of consciousness. **Basic conventions of form, style, and rhetoric still apply.**

Think about dishonesty in our larger society and write a personal reflection on the subject. You may use ideas/information from the video (http://youtu.be/XBmJay_qdNc) that we viewed in class (one element from the video that you may be interested in is the information on illegal downloading/file sharing) OR ideas/information from Chapter 20 (Plagiarism and Academic Integrity) in our textbook as beginning points. However, do not feel limited to those ideas, you can take the discussion in any direction that interests you, as long as there is a clear connection to the larger topic of dishonesty in modern society.

You are the expert on your opinions and reactions. Be sure to keep in mind your own credibility as the **author** of your own reflection. Your **audience** for this assignment consists of your classmates and me, your professor. Make this paper an entertaining and enlightening read. Also, keep in mind the **context** of the video, textbook, and class discussions.

As a personal reflection, this paper will be less formal than most papers, but do not interpret that as "sloppy." It should still use correct grammar and punctuation. You can use "I." However, while it is more informal, it should still be a focused, smooth-flowing, description of your thoughts on the topic. It should be confident and clear.

While research is not required for this paper, any outside sources must be properly documented.

At least 3 full pages but no more than 4 pages - MLA format (See your handbook to ensure proper formatting)

Appendix C – Literacy Narrative Assignment Guidelines Sample

The basic idea behind a literacy narrative is to write an essay that explains some aspect of how you learned to read, learned to love reading, etc. The goal here is for you to communicate to me the relationship between books/reading/learning, and your life and aspirations. What was your early relationship to the written word like? How was reading emphasized in your family? Who or what text prompted a positive experience with reading for you? What about a negative experience? You probably can't cover all of these questions, but they seem to be good starting points to think on.

Remember, this is a personal essay. You want to write formally enough to seem like an informed person adding their voice to the ongoing conversation of academia, but casually enough to come across as likeable. Strive to be candid and to make the reader enjoy their journey into your narrative. Long, third person discursions on the history of reading or the social impact of the written word are discouraged unless they somehow relate to your story. Likewise, I probably don't need to know about what scripture the preacher read at your cousin's wedding unless it somehow sparked a transformative experience in your life and its relationship to literacy. The point is, keep things casual, narrative, and relevant. And remember: A narrative consists of a series of events leading to a main idea, or thesis. Your best bet is probably to tell me about this chronologically, and please use "I."

Rough drafts are required and will be graded not on content, but on completion. A finished draft will receive full credit, regardless of how much work still needs to be done. Times New Roman, Cambria, etc... Let's stay away from Comic Sans or anything goofy. Example: If you get the citation mostly correct, but forget to italicize a title, that's fine. If you fail to cite a source in anything resembling MLA format, that's points off. A couple of paragraphs will warrant partial credit. Failure to bring a draft will result in a zero. Final drafts are due two weeks (to the day) after rough drafts are reviewed/workshopped in class. Missing workshop robs you of the chance to catch grammatical/formatting errors.

This is a college course and, as such, requires some research. If you are using a book to illustrate your first positive reading experience, tell me a bit about the book. Was it well reviewed? Critically ignored? Deemed socially important? How do these facts inform your experience with it? If there was a passage that really spoke to you, quote it, cite it, and comment on it. I want this essay to develop you as a writer, researcher, reader, and reflective individual and so along with the other criteria, I want at least one source, properly cited.